TRANSCRIPT

OPERATIONALIZING ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT: WHAT IT TAKES, WHY IT MATTERS

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Tony Pryor: This is Tony Pryor in PPL/SPP, and I'm joined by Stacey Young of PPL/LER, who you all know and love, of course and also from Mercy Corps, Emma Proud, and Christopher Maclay, and we will be doing a presentation of some of their experiences.

Let me give you an idea of what this is about, and the series that we're doing here. We're trying to do a series of webinars and discussions about adaptive management from all points of view. From the point of view of our missions, from the point of view of our programs here in Washington, from the point of view of our partners, and from the point of view of Contracting Officers and Assistance Officers. So this is our first of our forays into learning more on Program Net anyway about approaches that partners are doing.

Of course, it's in a much broader context of what work is going on in the specific missions, and in this case, I'm going to use a couple of examples from Liberia and Uganda, but the issue here really is how these partners are managing adaptation or their programs in general. Not necessarily country-specific. So let me pass this now to Stacey, and we'll start.

Stacey Young: Thank you, Tony. Thanks very much. Good afternoon everybody, and evening and morning wherever you are. Thank you so much for joining us, and yeah, we're really excited to have this discussion this morning.

As Tony mentioned, it's a great opportunity to learn from the partner side what it means to implement adaptively. So Tony gave a little bit of context in terms of the webinar series that we're doing around adaptive management. I wanted to mention just very briefly that this also fits into work that Tony and I and many others in our respective offices are engaged in here in PPL around looking at the Program Cycle and the guidance that we provide around the Program Cycle in the ADS, and really trying to make the whole cycle more adaptive. So this is a great opportunity to think it through from the partner side, and one of the many benefits of this webinar that we anticipate is that it will help us think through what needs to be in guidance for missions to enable adaptive implementation among our implementing partners.

We've undertaken this effort around a Program Cycle really in recognition of the fact that there is still a lot that we don't understand about international development, and that being able to both design and implement programs in an adaptive fashion enables us to learn as we go to adapt what we're doing as contexts change, and as we learn more about what works and what doesn't in a given context.

So I think this is an issue that is seizing the international development community at large. It's not specific to USAID. But it is a really important way to think through how we can make our programs more effective. For those of you who are engaged in collaborating learning and adapting work among your missions, or those of you who are among partners who are, this is also a really good example of operationalizing the A in CLA. So we're really glad to be having this webinar.

And I did just want to also mention that one of the things that we are talking through is the way that adaptive implementation and adaptive design are appropriate really in pretty much any context that we work in. Not only in conflict contexts, or contexts of radical near-term change such as disaster and post-disaster and so on, but really most of the contexts that we work in are dynamic in some complex way that really could benefit from these kinds of adaptive approaches.

So as you listen to our presenters today, just be thinking about what it means to adapt to changes in the context, to you learning that's evolving in the work that we're doing, and also ways to use adaptive approaches to make our engagement with our stakeholder community a lot more meaningful than that engagement is when we come with a predetermined plan.

Okay, so that's it for the intro. I want to just pass it to Emma Proud, and she'll begin the presentation.

Emma Proud: Lovely, thank you, Stacy and Tony. I'm going to start by talking a little bit about why adaptive management is important to us at all. And then outline a framework that Mercy Corps put together to help us do a little bit more adaptive management, and then we're going to use a couple of examples from the field.

Just to start with, I'll say a little bit about who we are. So as an agency, Mercy Corps works in forty-five countries, and these are countries where people are facing some of the toughest challenges, like crisis, conflict, and economic collapse.

So we're working in emergencies and development across a wide range of really complex contexts. And we're finding that within these environments really the best way that we can be a catalyst for locally driven change is by using adaptive management. And as Stacy was mentioning, we’ve really found that adaptive management resonates and improves our impact across all of the contexts that we’re working, and across sectors, and across stage.

So we’re going to start by looking at why that is. Why it’s important. As you all know, the world is changing at an unprecedented pace and scale. In the new normal of a vulnerable unpredictable world that’s more prone to shocks and stresses, our work is also increasingly complex, fluid and uncertain.

To be effective in complex environments we need to better understand the dynamics of a given situation so we can anticipate how they might evolve, and be sufficiently agile to adapt to changes in context and need. If we think we know what we’re looking at, we might only see this, and in this example we see a crowd of tightly packed people. But to really understand what’s happening we need to zoom out to challenge our assumptions and really understand the broader context so we can see the full picture, understand what’s affecting the part we’re interested in, and then what might change as a result.

So as you see here, we’ve zoomed out. We see something going on in this bottom left-hand corner here. Some of the crowd have formed a circle and they’re starting to dance. The people that we were looking at in the last slide aren’t aware of it yet, but others are becoming interested. What’s going to happen to this crowd? How will the whole crowd be influenced by the action of a few?

So this is obviously a trivial example, but in reality there are multiplicity of intertwined variables that affect both contexts and programs. And this means that when we do similar interventions in different places, or at different times even, will have different affects. And we have the benefit of knowing that making small strategic changes to design or implementation can have disproportionate affects.

So understanding and responding to the context really matters. But while we need to be able to respond to the contexts, we sometimes find that our flexibility is constrained by our industry’s current structures. Our incentives and approaches. Whether it’s rigid funding mechanisms, expectations about deliverables that were described in a proposal, or simply our own assumptions about what is possible to change.

We often end up designing and managing programs hoping that if we deliver, if we implement well laid plans we'll deliver impactful programs. But as we've said, the world is too unpredictable for that really to be true.

So adaptive management is a response to this. It's a recognition in complex environments there is no clear evolution of systems, which means that the big upfront planning model of Gantt is inappropriate. Instead, adaptive management teaches us that we can't know everything about the context at the start of a program. Experimentation is a must, and our strategies have to evolve over time in response to the local environment.

So what do we mean by adaptive management? Let's have a quick poll. Which of these statements do you think apply to adaptive management? You should be able to see the poll pop up there.

Okay. So I think as most of you have said there, all three of these are key.

So the first point that we see there recognizes that we don't always know what's going to work so we build prototypes. We're testing ideas and activities recognizing that some will work and these are the ones that should be scaled up, while others won't, and these should maybe be changed or phased out. But how do we know which are which? Well, by the second point. Making sure that we are constantly collecting information on what's happening, and feeding it back into our programming to base our decisions on.

So M&E becomes as M&E was intended. To improve our programs, not just to prove our results. And of course, as we learn more both about the context and about the effect of our interventions, where appropriate we should change our strategies, our plans, and activities. The end goal is the same, but the tactics to get there are going to evolve as we go.

So here's a quote that defines adaptive management. It's by Holling, and was written describing adaptive environmental management in 1978. So you can see we've got a lot to learn from other disciplines.

Now while all programs adapt in response to barriers and opportunities, what sets adaptive management apart is its intention to learn. Experiment and find that best fit for the local context. So we're not talking about just changing a program in a panic because something went wrong. We're really talking about building our programs to look for where and how we should change in a really timely manner that's going to improve our impact. So is this something that resonates with you? Perhaps you can just fill out this poll quickly and say whether you're already using adaptive management in the intentional data-driven decision-making sense.

Okay, so we see that there's not actually a very clear cut answer, so that's actually brilliant for us for this presentation also because at Mercy Corps we've been doing quite a lot of work on this, and we've identified four key elements that we feel we really have to concentrate on to try and dig into this, and to try and do more of this. So hopefully some of this will be useful.

These are the four elements that we're going to run through quickly, and then we're going to illustrate with a couple of examples. So what we've found that really sets adaptive management apart is not just the people or the tools. It's the very internal culture and the organizational environment that's really important. And obviously the frame for culture comes from leadership, because it seems culture isn't just natural. It's the culture and the behavior and the habits of a team that are learned in response to the expectations of the leader. So it's up to them to set and signal which culture the team has.

We know that teamwork is always important, and in complex contexts where change is unpredictable, teamwork is even more important. So we need to set up our teams to capitalize on the knowledge, the creativity, and responsiveness of everyone on the team across departments. This means that we want to get everyone's ideas and perspectives, create a culture of peer review, and make sure that decision-making power lies with those who are closest to the ground.

There was a really interesting study done recently started by Owen Barder that looked at 10,000 aid projects over ten years, and it found that greater autonomy was actually the leading factor of improved effectiveness in complex contexts. And there's a really nice quote that I'd like to share with you here from that. "The more likely it is that things will change in unexpected ways the more important it is to have power and decision-making sit with the people who can see that change coming and respond to it."

So I guess one of the questions I would have for you on the culture side is what it is in USAID culture that would really enhance or impinge on adaptive management? How can we set up our kind of donor-service provider relationship to enable adaptive management? Just a couple of questions for you to think about as we go through.

So the next slide, the next key elements that we found was people and skills. So how we structure, recruit and equip our teams really has a big impact on our ability to manage adaptively. And the skills for adaptive management are often soft skills. We want leaders who can deal with ambiguity, admit failure, and take risks. So they need soft staff coaching skills perhaps even over technical and donor experience. Teams need curiosity and critical thinking. Both of these have implications for hiring.

We need to make sure that our teams are structured as well for the cross fertilization of ideas to encourage learning and sharing, and to make sure that those feedback loops of turning the information into action are easy. What we don't want is a silo off to one side of the M&E people. In adaptive management monitoring and evaluation is everyone's job. We know that turnover can also lead to adaptation more as a kneejerk reaction than something intentional, so we need to be much better prepared to manage that process.

Now we found that tools and processes can support learning behavior, but they don't create it. But we need to make sure that people have access to the tools that support adaptive management. We want to avoid people reinventing the wheel every time they want to do good adaptive programming. So we're trying to make sure we've got both the technical and the managerial tools available to teams, both to help them understand the context and to adapt. And we're making sure that existing tools are used well.

Now I love the idea of this proved-improved continuum of M&E or data collection. Historically we've perhaps ended up collecting data to prove our impact, but now we're shifting to focus on using it to improve our programming. But as my M&E colleagues keep reminding me, this is of course, how M&E was really intended. So we also need though as we're doing this exploration on deeper understanding to be able to change our indicators as we find out more about the context, and as our program adapts.

Another thing that we've really found useful in terms of a kind of tool is trying to help teams carve out space for reflection. All too often we're running almost like a Guinea pig in a wheel, making sure that the activities we do we do well, but actually taking that space for reflection encourages us to ask if we're looking at the right activities, the most impactful activities. Under this we're also really taking a look at our internal systems and processes to see if they undermine or enable adaptability.

At the donor level, again I would encourage you to ask which tools or mechanisms you've got at hand to actually encourage or inhibit adaptive management. We've seen some great examples from USAID to ourselves of things like budgets or line flexibility and contingency plans that have really helped programs adapt to the context to meet unplanned needs and to respond to emergencies without derailing development gains. This flash stop here is a great case study from the rain program in Ethiopia which is a USAID/OFDA funded program that had some of those mechanisms. And it's got some really good tips in there for how the team did adapt and use adaptive management and the USAID processes that really enabled it.

But to do adaptive management and to work on the changes needed in the first three components often goes beyond the vision of an agency. We really need to find that room to move, that wiggle room that this person here just obviously doesn't have that comes from the enabling environment such as donors, like yourselves, and host governments, for example. So this is at both the initial stage of donor program design, and then in support for implementation.

There are many ways that donors, for example, can support adaptive program management. We're going to pull some of those out in detail at the end, but just a couple of questions. You know, which funding mechanisms can actually support adaptive management? Is there budget for M&E and learning incorporated into programs? How can expectations of program review and redesign be built into programs? How do experience requirements that we often see in a sort of long list affect the skills or mindsets of the candidates that we're getting?

As I say, we'll look into those in more detail in a moment, but for now I'm going to pass over to Chris. This was an overview of the four elements that we see as being fundamental. There's a document that will pop up again at the end which kind of actually goes into detail on each of these four components with ideas about how we see them being practically implemented and used which you might find useful as well.

Now thank you and over to Chris for his example.

Chris Maclay: Thanks a lot, Emma. I'm going to talk about the first of the case studies, but just before doing so, it's worth following on what Stacy was saying earlier with this poll. Which of the following programs would be appropriate for an adaptive management response? I'll just give you a few seconds to fill that out. Maybe one of my USAID based colleagues to help me out with the Jeopardy music.

Alright, we seem to be getting most of the people taking in. I think most people are taking one and then realizing that one of the options at the bottom is all of the above and are switching over for that because they're absolutely right. It was a trick question as Emma did earlier. Really adaptive management approaches can be used in any program. They've often being seen to be something as fundamental to market systems development programs, but really an adaptive management approach can be used in any type of program. And we'll be presenting two small case studies here, one of which is on an OFDA funded emergency program in Liberia, and the second is on GHG, a Food For Peace program in northern Uganda that weaves together components of livelihoods, health, and conflict.

So introducing E-CAP. E-CAP stands for the Ebola Community Action Platform, and was part of Mercy Corps' Ebola response here in Liberia, and was set up to respond to the lack of reach, coordination, and accuracy in health messaging. At the time in mid-September when it was designed your average Liberian knew little about Ebola, even what it was and not to mention how to protect themselves. This was largely because information was not reaching the community level through the trusted channels that people are likely to believe. Moreover, that information was not being updated as the situation evolved, and it was evolving on almost a daily basis at that time. Therefore, the E-CAP program was set up with $12 million from OFDA as a sub-granting plus program.

Now what do I mean by sub-granting plus? It means that more than just funding and coordination between partners across the country. It provided training on the latest health messages as the situation evolved for all of the partners so it could feed down to the community, and a structure for learning across the portfolio, not just about what was happening on the ground, but what was working and what was not as parts of the response.

In the end, we brought together seventy-six partners, seventy-one of whom were local, working in every county in the country reaching about two million people in roughly 3,000 communities. That's about half of the population.

Now as I mentioned at the start, this program is designed at the point where the situation was evolving extremely rapidly. This means that adaptive management is not just something that would be nice to do, but is absolutely necessary and fundamental to the response. We didn't know how the context would change in the next two weeks, let alone over the course of the six-month program.

Not to ruin the punchline, but what we were able to do through our adaptive management approach was firstly to revise the messaging as the situation evolved. Using our learning tools we're able to recognize where was the information, knowledge, and practice gaps of the community level, so that our messages can change initially from things about protecting one's self and how to avoid getting Ebola, then moving to issues like stigma as that became more and more relevant. We laterally focused on school re-openings and just recently were able to respond to a measles outbreak as people had not been attending health services for vaccinations.

In addition to changing the themes of our messaging, we're also able to change the way of doing things itself. We noticed with time that door-to-door messaging got boring. People got sick of it. So we needed to support our partners to be more creative. And then to talk about the four elements that Emma mentioned specifically saying how we were able to relate them to our program.

Emma ended with this, but I'm going to start with this. The enabling environment of E-CAP was fundamental to how we're able to set up. Namely that we had buy-in from the donor from the outset. Adaptive management was written into our contract with USAID/OFDA. We said we knew what we would do in the proposal, but we also explained that we knew we would need to adapt. We knew that the situation would evolve, and we knew that we needed to respond accordingly. There was this expectation of responsiveness built into our agreement.

This meant that learning was, in fact, one of only two objectives in the whole program. The first one was to eradicate Ebola through effective health messaging, and the second one was to learn from that. And it's worth emphasizing a challenge in part in terms of this enabling environment as well in that some of the same advanced administrative and compliance systems which make Mercy Corps a trusted and accountable organization also can create challenges for adaptation, and we really needed to creatively respond in order to be able to both be adaptive and be compliant and accountable.

Moving on to the tools and systems of E-CAP. This is something that was really fundamental to our adaptive management response. We had quite a sophisticated monitoring evaluation and learning system which involved five different tools to promote in-house learning in Mercy Corps and across the portfolio. Each partner bought into this system in their contract, and they were required to use these tools as part of their requirements. I'm not going to go into each of these tools in detail. They included quantitative surveys as well as qualitative research. But I will just bring up the thing that's relevant to the image you see in front of you.

This came from the rapids KAPs that we did. KAP stands for knowledge, attitudes, and practices. This was a short survey conducted by each field staff member in each partner in each community that we worked in. This meant that over 800 enumerators from seventy-six organizations were feeding in 14,000 short surveys to one system each month. This enabled us to see how knowledge, attitudes, and practices were changing with time, and you can see this example of the percent of people who would feel comfortable visiting the house of an Ebola survivor. You can see real change over the course of four months.

Now the tools and systems were just not based on data collection, but on analysis and reflection. We have this dashboard which is available at Dashboard.E-CAPLiberia.org, which was available at this meta-level, but also with individualized dashboards for each partner so they could look just at their data.

Initially we used partner-by-partner reflection workshops to support each partner to look at their own data to see what they needed to change. To see how the situation was evolving. We also had learning workshops bringing together all of the partners to see what's working and what is not working both individually and collectively, and how we needed to adapt.

Now it's obvious that this is a huge endeavor to set up, particularly in an emergency. It took about six weeks to set up this system which some would say is a remarkably short amount of time for such a thing, but six weeks in the length of a six-month program is actually quite long. There were tech challenges, but they were not crippling so I'm not going to go into them, but they did naturally create an extra set of problems in an already quite complex program.

Going into the culture, I'll start with the obvious challenge here, which is that fostering an adaptive evidence-based decision-making culture takes time. Not just within Mercy Corps, but across seventy-six partners. We tried to promote this culture through doing it organically through a focus on participation over perfection in data collection. And what I mean by that, for example, in the last slide we showed, we used 800 different enumerators to collect information on KAP. Now we could have gotten the same quality of data or possibly even better quality data with a smaller sample survey, but we wanted to focus on supporting every person to be involved in this process so that they're looking at outcomes and looking at the situation on an ongoing basis at the field level so it doesn't require Mercy Corps as the all-seeing eye to decide what we do, but field staff can adapt in their own communities. We also tried to promote this participation through the individualized dashboard log-ins that you can see here as well as self review workshops that I've already mentioned.

If we're being honest with ourselves, ultimately we don't think that we really created a truly organic culture of adaptive management across Mercy Corps and its partners in a six-month period, and we've really relied on the reinforcement of formal mechanisms that Emma talked about. The fact that partners were contractually obliged to use _____ and this adaptive management approach was crucial to ensuring their continued use of it.

Moving on to people and skills it's worth noting that the importance of individuals and that the lead author and program director were not hired based on their years of experience in health programs, but their experience in adaptive management in complex sub-grants programs not typically on a major DFID sub-grants program in Bangladesh. Additionally, the hiring priority for one of the key males' roles was not the years of experience, but rather an inquisitive approach; their ability to focus not just on the proved, but the improve piece that Emma was talking about.

It's worth emphasizing the importance at the full staff level of training, not just on the _____ system, but on a reorientation towards outcomes. I always use this story of two farmers to help people understand what we're really trying to do in M&E is to be the farmer that looks at his crops when they're growing. That can see when the crops become sick, and when you need to adjust or adapt your response, for example, and the application of pesticides in order to get stronger outcome.

Now obviously this can be a challenging thing to train new staff on, particularly when they're new to an organization. And it's also worth noticing that the same individuals that are crucial to the adaptive management setup in Phase 1 are unlikely to be there in Phase 2 which we're hoping to agree with over the coming months. So identifying a new set of leaders with similar characteristics will be a crucial and challenging task.

So this was a little example of adaptive management in practice in E-CAP in Liberia. I'll hand it back to Emma to talk about the GHG program in Uganda.

Emma Proud: Thank you, Chris. So this is the cover of a case study done by Engineers without Borders of Mercy Corps on adaptive management. It's looking at a USA Food for Peace program in Karamoja in northern Uganda where Mercy Corps is, of course, just one of the actors that the mission is supporting.

So the example I'm using is from the livelihoods component which took a market system's development approach, but bear in mind that this is a really complex program in a context region, so the program also includes strategic objectives on the maternal health and peace so it's doubly complex. But the lessons that we've pulled out in this case study are brilliant I think, and really practical. But the reality is obviously very difficult. This is another case study that you can find in the documents window at the end.

So I think it's a really easy read with some good examples, so I'm going to start with just one of the examples that are in there. The aim of this component of the program was to deliver quality up-todate and affordable veterinary products and services to the poor in northern Karamoja.

Now this is vital because Karamoja is primarily a pastoralist area, so goats and cows are a crucial source of livelihood, and of course, an bulwark against food insecurity. And disease is really the leading factor of livestock mortality in this area.

So we started off by working with community animal health workers, the cows that you can see on the left there. So this was an existing network of cows that had been trained by government and NGOs for quite some time. But when we started working, we actually found that the cows that we wanted to work with were dispirits. They weren't at all well trained. And actually the fact that they'd been trained by government and NGOs for so long meant that they'd been giving things away for free which had eroded trust, and eroded the willingness of communities to pay for their services.

So after sort of working on this component for a few months, we realized that when we're looking at the context, there were a couple of high capacity local drug shops. One was formed of an association of cows. Now these drug shops were stable, they were run by vets, and they were very keen to expand. So the adaptation that this component took was rather than being beholden to working with the community health workers, we switched over to work with the drug shops that would be able to employ community animal health workers over time.

So the idea was that making this shift gave us a better leverage point, and an opportunity to reach much greater scale and these shops can actually provide the cows with ongoing support, both technical and financial longer term. So the improved service quality is there, but also the drug prices in the area have actually been reduced by 20-30% as a result of this intervention and change.

Now the case study notes the importance of messaging to build the culture. The leaders need to message consistently. In this case they're talking about repeating messages on flexibility, on concentrating the outcome level rather than outputs, and on trying to create system change.

But as the case study notes, messaging alone is not enough. As well as talking the talk, the program needs a leader who can walk the walk. So this means that leaders have to role model the behavior, the skills, and the mindsets they expect such as admitting failure, critical thinking, and a real engagement with the program and the context.

The case study found that a really engaged, inquisitive, and curious team with a great interest in their work was really important. It found the idea in this team that M&E was everyone's job. It wasn't something that was seen as independent. The idea of accumulating information and then acting on it was key.

The program goes into a range of managerial tools that we used flexibly in the program. So you see down the left-hand side there, you can see a few of them. So things like after-action reviews have been really key to the way that this program was managed. In-house studies have been fundamental.

You know, when we sometimes come across things that are challenging us all that we're inquisitive about in the local context, that's often when we bring in a consultant. But what this case study is talking about is how when you do that, you get your twenty-page reports if you're lucky, otherwise you might get fifty-page reports, but that only contains so much, and there's a lot of nuanced information that might come in useful later in the program that walks out of the door with the consultant. So how can you really try and keep that knowledge and information in-house so that you can reference it again later?

In terms of the enabling environment, as shown in the example I've just described, there's a lot of flexibility allowed within this program. So the program could stay accountable to their goal, that top level of increased availability of and access to high quality inputs, while changing the tactics that they wanted to take to get there. So that's just a very brief overview of that example. There's much more detail in there.

Let's just touch quickly on some of the lessons for replication that come out of this. So in terms of culture, how can donors promote a failure friendly culture, and a spirit of outcome orientation? In what ways can you actively signal to your service providers that you expect their programs to change? Or at least that you're open to hearing about ways it could.

In terms of people and skills, if we ask the people with twenty-five years of development experience in a particular field, can we really expect a new way of doing business? How can we seek out, amplify and reward the soft skills that are required for adaptive management? Is there sufficient budget for learning both within teams and within positions of programs? Do the donor mechanisms for a particular program promote or perhaps stymie the opportunity for adaptation? Innovation and investment funds have been seen a particularly effective here.

And we need to be clear that adaptive management is expected, and that the scope for it is clear and supported. Make sure that M&E is geared towards outcomes with the flexibility at the activity level. I wonder how we can do a better job of encouraging this sort of communication between donors and service providers that's really vital for adaptive management.

Now we've only had time obviously to skim over the surface of this today, but I hope it gives you just a flavor of what we mean by adaptive management and how we're trying to do more. For a more detailed commentary and some of the more practical suggestions for doing adaptive management, I would refer you to the first couple of documents that you see. The first document here and then the next is the case study that we've just talked about. And at the bottom there you see Chris who's just given us the overview of E-CAP, his paper, and a range of other great resources on a similar topic. And then here are our contact details.

Thank you.

Tony Pryor: Thank you very much, Emma. By the way, I forgot to mention the obvious which is Emma and Chris are not sitting right next to me, although I feel they are, but Chris is calling in from Monrovia, and Emma is in London. So thank you very much. Very good presentation.

So we're going to move to questions. I just wanted to flag a couple of quick things. One is it's amazing how similar a lot of these dialogues have been. Ben Ramalingam in his presentation on a program about a month or so ago mentioned what I thought was a brilliant thought, which is that you know, one could be flexible adaptable in tactics, and flexible in adaptable on objectives, but if you're flexible and adaptable or locked in on both, you're in trouble. If you are locked in on both, you have no maneuverability, and if you're flexible on the other you don't know where you're going. So I think Emma's presentation really called that very much upfront. We have some questions on that, too.

The other thing I wanted to mention is something that actually has been bothering me a little bit, which is that we want to promote adaptability for a reason. Not because you are a part of – this is your next two-year tour and you want to make a name for yourself. It may be that when you look at the situation, you want to stay the course. So it's adaptation for a purpose if you will. Not just adaptation because you want to adapt because that looks good. Again, it's a question of knowing what the objective is, what the end state is. Whether it's Ebola or whether it's resiliency in Karamoja.

So then let's move to some of the questions. Yes, I think we posted the – Steven, I think we posted the information on the study of 10,000 projects. My first thought was the 10K run, but that's not what you were asking. The 10,000 projects. We have posted that. Right? Not yet? Okay, we've just posted it right now? And why don't we go to that one.

I think going back to what I was just mentioning, Morgan's point is very interesting. Can you kindly address how adaptive management is different from being reactive? Presumably being adaptive is guided by a stable, long-term objective rather than simply responding to change. Who wants it? Emma or Chris? Hello, Emma or Chris?

Chris Maclay: Sorry. I think we were at a little standoff there. I think it's really good question, and I think what really makes adaptive management different from just being reactive with its negative connotations is that adaptive management involves a conscious and active effort to learn and adapt. You know, there's one thing as just sort of walking blindly along the road until a car hits you, or you know, comes towards you and you need to swerve directions, but it's different to have an approach which is constantly scanning the road, constantly scanning the situation, and making plans to respond. So it's a lot I think about the conscious effort for adaptation and for responding for the ultimate outcome rather than just responding to an incident.

Emma Proud: I think just to repeat what you said, Tony—kind of having that overall goal or vision in mind, and then intentionally and in a timely manner trying to adapt to get there. So this idea of prototyping, which I think is interesting, and sometimes quite controversial, but it doesn't mean just pulling you know, a bunch of ideas out of the air and trying all of them, but recognizing that you can't have all of the information at once. You're going to try something, and then because you've got those feedback loops, you can keep honing it, and understanding how you should make it better. I think that's another key component.

Tony Pryor: Excellent.

Emma Proud: And dropping things, of course.

Tony Pryor: Yes, I think it's much easier for us to add than to drop, but I think that's a good point. Let me move on to a cluster of questions that really I think Sophia's question I think is the initial one. Do you think if it were a requirement, would implementers use adaptive management? And a number of people had comments on this in terms of is it a question of requirement, is it a question of culture, is it a question of what the implementer is thinking? Is it a question of what the donor is thinking? Emma, do you want to start with this? We have about ten minutes by the way, and then we'll close.

Emma Proud: I think there are two sides. I think there's the requirement piece. One of the examples that I've seen from DFID actually which has been quite interesting is that DFID had started introducing or have introduced what they call their smart rules, which actually give people a lot more flexibility than historically. So there's much more freedom for implementers to change things like their log frames and their indicators. And a lot more flexibility to their equivalent to their AOR.

But what they said was in some ways this has actually inhibited DFID's ability to be flexible because people have become very nervous. The weight of that responsibility now rests on their shoulders so they're actually trying to almost enforce more rules than they have to, to try and protect themselves.

So I think there really is – the shift has to be multiple, like we were talking about with those multiple pillars. Yes, it needs to come from the reinforcing mechanisms, the formal systems, but the culture also needs to really be there. I think that's really fundamental.

Chris Maclay: And I might just add to that, because I think the question came in part with regards to the E-CAP and the implementing partners of Mercy Corps as well as Mercy Corps itself.

I mean you just sort of – if you think about if there was a non-adaptive law frame written into it which just said the exact number of door-to-door visits that was required that really went down to that activity level, you know, if you were to take an optimistic view you could say that even if the partner really wanted to, they would have little scope to, because a different plan had been written for them. If you were to take a pessimistic view, you'd say well, it's easy to deliver the activities and the output. Let's not put ourselves through the trouble of adapting.

So it's about you know, if you can create that, as Emma says, the structure and if you can have the leadership that's pushing it, I think that's essential to making sure that adaptive management with this focus on outcomes means we're always working towards it rather than just the activities.

Tony Pryor: Let me go to these two. I've put them together. Ask these two questions to different people. One is so this works well in a disaster high visibility program such as with the flexibility that OFDA offers. But what about more normal programs? And of course, your other example was more normal in a way, but it was also still Food For Peace. So there are some flexibilities that come with that modality if you will.

And then added to that, why don't you also address this issue of this sounds really neat, but it sounds like an awful lot of work. It sounds like more work than normal, and you know, we're busy as it is. What can we do?

Chris, do you want to take this first, these two?

Chris Maclay: I'll just briefly say that you know, we've presented a couple of different examples, and really adaptive management can be done in extremely low-fi manner. And one of the questions was saying you know, is it just adaptive management, and what was the focus upon your ultimate goal and your outcomes? And I think that that's really essential. In my day job when we're not in the center of an Ebola crisis, I manage the youth portfolio. And on our cycle social program, the adaptive management approach in the systems that we set up in our M&E programs to make it possible was very simple. It was the questions that we asked when we went to the field was not what did you do. It was how was the situation changed? And something as simple as that can enable low-fi adaptation.

Tony Pryor: Emma, you want to address these two very quickly?

Emma Proud: Yeah. I think in terms of normal programs, what we're seeing is that actually this really resonates in the more complex environments, but most of the environments that we're operating in are complex where things are changing. Where you know, we can't make a plan at the beginning of a three-year program and expect that to still be valid throughout. So really we're finding it very useful across contexts.

When you ask about you know, is it a lot of work, it can be a lot of work. But it's much more valuable to actually take that reflection time and make sure that we're all busy anyway. If we're going to be crazy busy, we might as well be busy doing the right kind of activities that are going to have the most impact rather than just running headlong into a plan that we've you know, drafted however long ago.

Tony Pryor: Going back to a conversation I had yesterday. You can be crazy busy gathering data, but the question is whether the data allows you to learn or whether you're just feeding a beast somewhere. It doesn't necessarily reduce the amount of work, but it's a question of whether or not it helps you. I think that's sort of what we're talking about.

Let me go this one and pass it to Stacey to respond. From an M&E standpoint, we're supposed to be adapting continuously. How is this different? Is it more of a flexible mechanism angle to allow for course change?

Stacey Young: Thanks. I was actually just typing a response. I'm glad to have an opportunity to more efficiently articulate my thoughts about that. I think that's an excellent question. So first of all, I think Mercy Corps has done a great job of articulating a number of elements that are required to make adaptive management work effectively. And I really like this framework, Emma and Chris, that you've put in of those various elements.

I think that M&E is intended to enable us to adapt and monitoring, of course, enabling us to adapt more frequently, evaluation enabling us to learn in and adapt sort of in maybe larger, less frequent feedback loops. In practice, I think we often don't use our monitoring data to adapt, and there are a lot of reasons for that; a lot of disincentives for doing that.

And I think that looking at some of the design elements, so here we're talking about flexible mechanisms, but also other aspects of design that's a part of that, and design can enable or inhibit adapting as the presenters mentioned. Obviously the culture and the people skills that go into that, and the levels of engagement are important to that as well.

I think though, that you know, your earlier question, Emma, about system thinking really underscores what is distinct from straight-up M&E enables us to adapt even in sort of relatively traditional mode versus the ways that we use M&E and the ways that we complement them with some of these other elements that Chris and Emma have been discussing this morning, to get a truly systemic approach.

So it's the way that all of those elements come together to enable adaptive management that is systemic in nature that I think is quite compelling about these examples. I hope that that answers your question, but if not, please feel free to —

Tony Pryor: And let me say, we're going to take two more questions and then wrap up. We have many more questions here, though, and also further dialogue and the answer to these questions will be posted on Program Net. We'll show you a link in a minute, but we're very anxious for you to continue this dialogue. And of course, we'll be doing more blogs, more webinars, and a lot of this is going to be integrated in one way or the other into the redesign of parts of the ADS, so stay tuned.

You'll note by the way Mahbub has put down the Survey Monkey address for the survey. Please do that before you sign off. But at the end let's deal with two questions here, and I think they're related. One is, how can we donors or actually also in the case of the Ebola one, for instance, the lead entity, do a better job at encouraging service providers to talk about failures, or to set boundaries of what's acceptable?

One of the issues I have with the failure issue is it's failure of what? Is it a failure of I got the objective wrong? Is it a failure of I got the tactic wrong? Is it a failure that I didn't have enough money, or I picked the wrong person? And often they're so conflated that people are scared to say anything because it probably will impinge on them. Also too, it's the old trust me it won't harm your chances next time. Most people inherently are distressful of that line.

So I'd like to hear from your point of view, Mercy Corps' point of view. And then second of all, which is related to this, what are the challenges facing you on the ground that inhibit your programs from being adaptive? Particularly the ones not in totally conflict situations like the Ebola example. I know for instance, you're working on climate change in urban areas and other things. Why don't we give this to Emma first.

Emma Proud: Thank you. I think these are also questions that, like you say, very much come to the donor. One of the challenges that we struggle with, of course, is that as we have service providers or partners, it's hard enough to bring some of these adaptive approaches to our own teams, so the question comes, how do we kind of make sure that we get our partners onboard with a similar approach?

And one of the things that we're really working on is just this communication, and I think setting the framing for it, which goes a bit to Amena's question of how this fits with systems thinking and complexity, because as Stacy says, this very much comes from that lens. The idea that we're in a complex adaptive system. If things are changing and evolving, of course, our response needs to do the same.

So trying to kind of flip that switch with people that we're working with so that they understand the incentives for using monitoring and evaluation information and data for adjusting their programs.

The challenges we're facing on the ground are multiple. You know, from some of our internal systems sometimes struggle, and when I talk about communication we really need to make sure that the communication between all of the departments is smooth so that everyone understands why we would change, and the fact that we might change.

Some of the difficulties I think go also Tony, to your idea of sometimes the fact that we change people and then get a kneejerk change rather than something which is thoughtfully adaptive. Both when the person changes, but also just perhaps there's a tipping point in terms of the effect of our interventions. We have to give it a certain length of time before we change our response. Perhaps the system change was just about to happen and then we've adapted to a different form of activity. So we really need both the time to understand, and also patience to wait and see whether our interventions are having any effect.

Tony Pryor: Chris, you have a final word on this? By the way, I loved your phrase in the note of – which of course, now I've totally forgotten. Failure friendly. I thought that's great. Chris, you want to say one final word?

Chris Maclay: Just to the effect, I mean on that first question. Because we, of course, have a circumstance where we're seen as a donor and in turn we report to our donor. So in terms of talking about failure, there's always this instinctive fear of the donor, our partners being scared of us and us in cases being scared of our donors. And I think Emma mentioned the importance of communication so that everyone understands that we're focused around outcomes and we accept that not everything will work.

You know, this failure friendliness or sort of accepting that failure is possible and is not always a disaster as long as we're able to adapt is really important. And as long as the communication is really geared towards, of course, you need to do your activities and achieve outputs, but we're really geared towards outcomes rather than hiding behind outputs or hiding behind an activity plan I think is really important in that communication.

Tony Pryor: Thank you both very, very much. This has been a really interesting discussion. As I said, we would like to continue this both online, but also any further comments you might have.

Many of the people who've been listening in have added information and documents. We've been trying to keep up, but when we send out a thank you note to all of you we'll try and flag some of these. And again, make sure you get onto Survey Monkey with that address right there and give us your thoughts.

This has been a very stimulating conversation. I did want to mention as a final going, we are having another visit from Ben Ramalingam later on in mid-June, and we'll get back to you later, but there will some opportunities to discuss some of this with him at that time.

Again, thank you again. Thank you, Stacy. And thank you, team, and we'll talk to you all later. Bye-bye.

[End of Audio]