



# Society for International Development

Washington, D.C. Chapter

SID-Washington's Knowledge Management Workgroup Presents:

## **Adaptive Management: Thoughts about USAID's Evolving Program Cycle**

**Date:** Wednesday, July 22, 2015

**Time:** 9:00 – 10:30 a.m.

**Location:** Engility, Center for Learning and Performance Improvement (CLPI)  
1250 H Street NW, Suite 510  
Washington, DC

**Moderator:** **Lauren Leigh Hinthorne**, Knowledge Management & Organizational Learning Advisor,  
Bureau of Policy, Planning and Learning, U.S. Agency for International Development  
(USAID)

**Speakers:** **Alicia Dinerstein**, Office Director, Bureau for Policy, Planning, and Learning (PPL), USAID  
**Ben Ramalingam**, Research Associate, Overseas Development Institute (ODI)

**Knowledge Management Workgroup Co-Chairs:**

**Tony Pryor**, Senior Programming Adviser, USAID

**Stacey Young**, Senior Learning Adviser, USAID

This event began with a brief overview of how USAID's Program Cycle is evolving, followed by reflections from Ben Ramalingam, a leading complexity thinker in international development and author of *Aid on the Edge of Chaos* (2013). The session then focused on shifting expectations and approaches throughout the broader international development community, as well as on questions and challenges that accompany the transition toward more adaptive and complexity-aware development practices.

**Lauren Leigh Hinthorne**, USAID, began by thanking everyone for coming to the rescheduled event. She noted that, due to scheduling issues, neither Tony Pryor nor Stacey Young could attend. Ms. Hinthorne would serve as the moderator and Alicia Dinerstein would be speaking alongside Mr. Ramalingam.

**Ben Ramalingam**, ODI, speaking remotely from London, focused on the shifting expectations and approaches throughout the broader international development community. He also addressed the questions and challenges that accompany the transition toward more adaptive and complexity-

aware development practices. Mr. Ramalingam explained that this can be achieved through adaptive management, which differs from traditional management because it is centered on interaction and change that is contextual and emergent in uncontrolled settings. Adaptive management implements a system that generates the answers it seeks when needed, rather than traditional management which is a top-down approach and assumes development professionals have all the answers from the start.

He stated that development management should be adaptive due to the complex and interactive processes of development, which are fundamentally shaped by multi-level systems, networks, and dynamics of change. In this environment, traditional management is inadequate as it is based on predictable responses to foreseeable problems, neither of which exist in development work. Adaptive management also puts more trust on those who are closer to the problem, and therefore places them in a better position to understand and resolve it. Using adaptive management, organizations would be better able to anticipate and respond to emerging needs, in addition to fostering new networks and partnerships to achieve goals in a highly collaborative fashion. However, according to Mr. Ramalingam, most organizations continue to use a traditional management model for projects because they suit the needs for most development contracts.

Mr. Ramalingam provided examples for the application of both models to illustrate the nuances in each approach. He first discussed the usage of traditional management in Uganda from 2012-2013. He described how mobile health efforts in this country were developed in a top-down fashion and lacked coordination and collaboration between one another, leading to a great deal of overlap and confusion. Ultimately, at the community level, this led to disengagement with numerous activities and projects in the area. In efforts to show how this traditional approach can be made more attuned to context, Mr. Ramalingam provided the example of rural Somali farmers painting their mobile numbers on the sides of their goats. This practice was initially intended for identification and theft prevention, but was adapted into a way of marketing one's agricultural services. He argued that this local adaptation was therefore a much more user-led empowering system.

While many advocates for adaptive management suggest leaving traditional management behind, Mr. Ramalingam suggested that the most sensible solution is to incorporate aspects of both models and be an ambidextrous organization. He noted that this is beyond an either/or approach because too much emphasis on innovation can lead to a lack of core competencies, just as too much of a traditional approach can lead an organization to a stable equilibrium that makes little real change. In order to move towards a better balance of these two approaches, Mr. Ramalingam said that organizations need to look towards the positive deviants who are doing remarkable things within the same traditional constraints as everyone else. These positive deviants must be found through networks, supported through evidence, and enabled through leadership.

**Alicia Dinerstein**, USAID, discussed how USAID's Program Cycle is evolving and shared reflections on the realities of implementing adaptive management into USAID's operational policies. She stated that while some of USAID's activities may not directly reflect the high tolerance for ambiguity that

comes with Mr. Ramalingam's ambidextrous organization model, USAID is trying to learn from the positive deviants that exist within USAID and is trying to see how their actions can be replicated.

She explained that the Office of Strategic and Program Planning is partnering with the Office of Learning, Evaluation and Research to revise USAID's operational policies on how the agency conducts its M&E and core business activities. She described USAID's current Program Cycle, which covers how USAID responds to international development problems. She states that, in practice, this Cycle diagram is not as iterative as it directly seems, and the Program Cycle Revision aims to change this.

The Program Cycle Revision is taking place because Country Development Cooperation Strategies (CDCS's) are ending, and many countries have been viewed as too complex to follow the program. In addition, the Agency recognizes that there are more effective adaptability and sustainability processes it can utilize. Ms. Dinerstein then reported lessons learned from working on the Program Cycle: 1) the diagram and the cycle it represents are far too oversimplified, and needs to be more flexible; 2) time demands should be reduced so that Program Officers can accomplish more during their time in the field; 3) learning must be built into planning and implementation; and, 4) USAID needs to facilitate changes to activities if they turn out to be ineffective. In addition, while USAID's new M&E policies may have improved the quality of evaluations, they still could be improved through evaluating situations above the level of individual activity. In a similar vein, Ms. Dinerstein mentioned that it is necessary to ensure the Agency is using the findings from the evaluations to implement efficient practices.

She then discussed five principles that are leading her team through the process of revising the Program Cycle: 1) increase the Cycle's flexibility in order to better accommodate local contexts; 2) promote iterative and adaptive planning and implementation in a manner that balances accountability and adaptability by maintaining consistent targets with adaptable mechanisms for achieving them; 3) improve the coherence of the Agency and Washington's priorities with local priorities; 4) support the achievement of sustainable results; and, 5) achieve operational efficiency by streamlining and pruning any currently inefficient procedures. While these five principles are not all encompassing, they will help USAID move closer to the model that Mr. Ramalingam proposed.

Ms. Dinerstein concluded her presentation by noting that this change towards a more balanced model in USAID requires the support of many actors, policy changes, and changes in actual implementation. She mentioned that while they are working towards a balanced system, it will take time for that system to be implemented successfully.

Ms. Hinthorne then thanked the speakers and began the Q&A session before concluding the event.

To see pictures from this event, please click [here](#).

To view the PowerPoint from this event, please click [here](#).

To see a recording of this event, please click [here](#).

### **Speaker Biography**

**Ben Ramalingam** is an internationally known development thought leader working on issues of complexity and systems thinking. A consultant for the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), Ben has been instrumental in helping DFID in their recent redesign of their approach to development programming, and has helped USAID in the past in complexity-driven monitoring and evaluation, as well as learning and knowledge management. Ben was deputy director of the Humanitarian Futures Programme at Kings College and led the knowledge and learning programme at ODI. Prior to joining the development sector, he worked in strategy consulting and investment banking. Ben currently holds honorary positions at the London School of Economics, and the Overseas Development Institute, and the Institute of Development Studies.