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# Applying Adaptive Management in a Fragile Context – Case Study

October 2021, updated July 2023

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# Executive Summary

Because I am from Myanmar, adaptive management is more like real life. Our whole lives are about adaptation! No one trusts the political stability of the country, so we can't plan our lives like people in the West.

National staff member

This paper explores how a program in Myanmar implemented by DT Global from 2017–2021 used adaptive management practices. Details of the program name, donor, and activities that the program undertook are anonymised and minimised to protect the national staff in Myanmar.

The paper discusses how the program fared on essential elements of adaptive management and in responding to two episodes that triggered critical junctures: the global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic from March 2020 onwards and the military coup of February 2021. Based on the program's accomplishments and challenges, the paper highlights insights and recommendations for donors and implementing partners.

Adaptive management aims to address the complexities in program and policy environments. It recognises that, in complex settings, clarity may exist in the overall program goal but not in the pathway to achieving it. Therefore, rather than a predetermined project 'map', adaptive management argues for a 'project compass' – a process that charts an evolving course through a structured, iterative process of testing, monitoring, feedback and decision making. Such a process allows regular assessment and revision of investments and priorities.

This paper assesses the program's experience first against three core elements of adaptive management developed by DT Global and others: flexibility, responsiveness and purposive learning.<sup>1</sup> Based on the program's experiences and reflections, culture was added as a fourth core element of adaptive management. Definitions and an analysis of how the program moved across these four core elements throughout the life of the program are as follows:

- **Flexibility** is defined as the 'capacity to adjust resources, activities, partners and outputs if needed ... [plus] the absence of constraints that force teams to stick to predetermined plans'. The program proved highly flexible in important areas such as management systems, resource allocation, operations, and staffing structures.
- **Responsiveness** is defined as 'proactively reading the external environment, tracking the politics around a particular issue or taking in feedback from people participating in your program'. The program was able to be highly responsive to a difficult context. The program's responsiveness was driven by its contribution to an agreed set of principles, namely openness, efficiency, inclusion, and consensus.
- **Purposive learning** is defined as the 'degree to which learning takes place in a way that is structured, systematic and able to shape programming'. The program's purposive learning was intentional from the start and improved in structure over time. High levels of purposive learning revolved around testing and learning from different approaches and ways of working.
- **Culture** is defined as the 'degree to which the team are creating an enabling environment for adaptive management by overcoming inherent asymmetries of power and building levels of deep mutual trust and respect'. The program's leadership developed an empowering culture with external stakeholders, aid machinery and the team despite the constantly evolving context.

This paper evaluates the program's overall design, its power structures and learnings on the relationships between donors and implementers. It outlines various insights on adaptive management in each of these three overarching areas, summarised as follows:

**People and power:** the program found that individuals are vital to the success of adaptive management. Therefore, finding and supporting talented, experienced leaders was central to the approach, as was creating the incentives for them to be experimental. Having strong leaders within the national staff was particularly important as they had the respect and trust of the funders and were able to withstand pressure from internationals while acting as a vital bridge for the voices of other national staff.

Entrepreneurial, independent-minded, and unorthodox leadership may be essential for the success of adaptive management, aiding in overcoming aid system inertia and using creativity to approach old problems from new angles. However, the team should comprise a mix of personalities and backgrounds to allow such mavericks to

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<sup>1</sup> DT Global, Allen & Clarke and ODI, 'Towards More Adaptive Approaches to Managing the New Zealand Aid program phase 2 report June', 2021.

have a sturdy, flexible foundation of support staff. Among the various team members, a culture of both power and trust is vital for the project to persevere. Combining this culture with strategy and flexible processes is what allows the program to be creative and, therefore, responsive.

**Program design:** Insights on the project design reveal that adaptive management is fitting, if not obligatory, for fragile settings defined by instability and a lack of predictability. Because of the nature of adaptive management programs, which lack an initial strategy or plan, a phase of exploration is both inevitable and desirable to analyse problems and determine entry points for the project. Flexibility and responsiveness to the immediate circumstances are key to the project's long-term success, and they necessitate a unique operation process among the people working on the project.

However, there is no single way to implement adaptive management. Rather, the project design depends on a process of improvisation, strategy testing, failure and learning to arrive at something that works for the context, team and donor. Balancing the pace of the project and its responsiveness to constantly changing contexts can also hinge on instinct stemming from experience and discussion among the members of the team.

**Donors and implementers:** The program's implementation of adaptive management has shown that a close relationship between donor and implementer can have both advantages and disadvantages. For example, the joint work helped create the space for a fully adaptive program with the ability to reset its strategy easily and achieve results. However, the relationship required a significant time commitment and limited the program's ability to set its own agenda. All parties entering an adaptive management project should agree on clear roles, responsibilities and expectations upfront.

Several factors can affect the success of adaptive management, including the efficiency, attitude and size of the implementing agency. Because the program had a relatively small budget and was not subject to government memoranda of understanding, it was able to operate largely 'under the radar'. At the same time, it benefited from significant operational support from DT Global without technical interference, allowing the team to shape the project to the context. Therefore, replicability of the adaptive management process as implemented by the program would vary depending on the context, implementing agency, donor, and team capacity and culture.

Section 4 of this paper provides further recommendations to donors and implementing partners considering adaptive management in a fragile setting, summarised here:

- Invest in finding the right mix of individuals and building an empowering culture upfront.
- Ensure operational budgets are sufficiently generous.
- Review the process of donor accountability mechanisms for adaptive management projects.
- Include a 12-month inception and design phase.
- Adapt operational procedures rather than working around them, where possible.
- Work through the balance and trade-off between strategy and experimentation.
- Agree on timelines for the initial strategy upfront.
- Request the naming of only key positions in tender applications.
- Agree on the donor's level of involvement in delivery upfront, where possible.
- Avoid prescriptive monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) tools; take what is useful to the core project mission and adapt.

# 1 Introducing the program

## 1.1 Origins, purpose and evolution of the program

The program was an adaptive local governance program in Myanmar for:

- Understanding problems around local governance
- Testing and convening approaches to working on local governance
- Generating and communicating learning to governance and development actors.

The program aimed to help people articulate their needs from their local government authorities, monitor their actions and hold them accountable. The team worked on reforms that it felt had the potential for systemic change, albeit within the constraints of the policy environment. The intention was to prepare to contribute to the more fundamental political, constitutional and peace settlements required in Myanmar.

The program initially took an area-based approach to improving local governance to maximise synergies with other local development investments being made through other components. After a six-month inception phase commencing in 2017, the program began to develop its understanding of 'what works' regarding governance problems and the team's partnerships, mandate, and capacity to operate effectively in the local contexts.

Starting in mid-2019, the expanded its work to the national level and began engaging with a major government ministry as well as nonstate governance actors.

The program's work then changed fundamentally in response to two shocks. First, in March 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic struck, resulting in a significant shift in the program's portfolio and operational setup, but still allowing progress with local governance actors. Then, the military coup in February 2021 halted the program's engagement with government. In response, the team shifted to supporting civil society and development partners.

The program implemented 40 pilots and 59 research and policy pieces over four years through a combination of direct delivery and contracts with 23 partners.

## 1.2 What does adaptive program design look like?

The donor set up and contracted the program purposefully as a flexible model, building on other successful programs.

Key elements that set the contract apart from a traditional development project were:

- There was no initial strategy or work plan.
- It used a principles-based approach to drive the overall direction.
- The main parameters were two specific geographic locations (not mentioned for security) for learning and testing local governance systemic improvements.
- The only logframe requirement was to deliver against one output and report on several output indicators in a higher-level governance logframe.
- There was a six-month inception period for learning, scoping at the local level, developing and funding partnerships, and agreeing on core local governance problems.
- It had a relatively small budget at approximately A\$10 million over four years.
- The budget was split between fixed costs and a flexible drawdown fund for pilots.

The donor had high expectations that this design would allow the program to adapt to the context without some of the aid sector's usual funding and program management constraints.

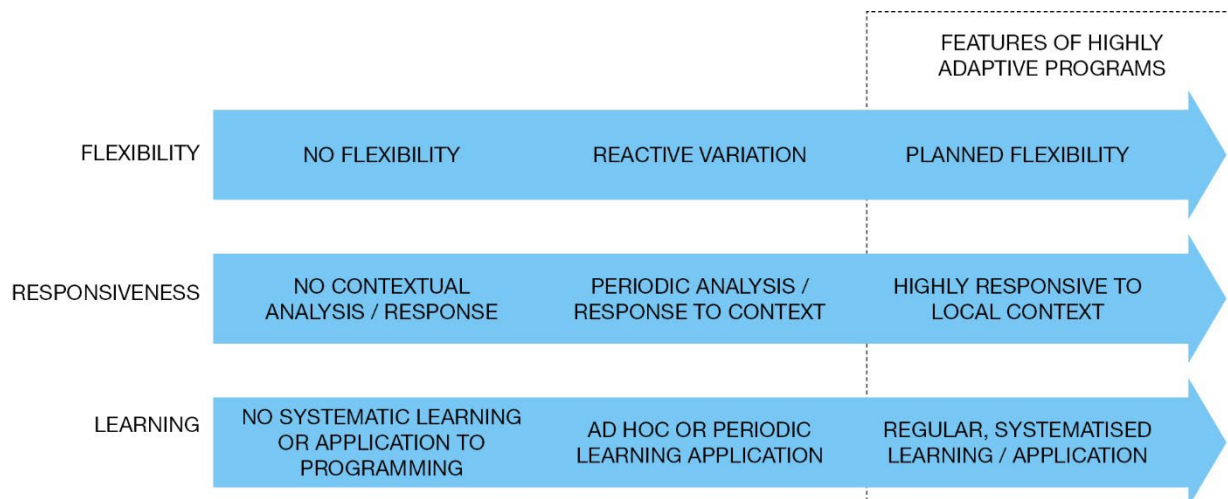
# 2 Exploring Adaptive Management

## 2.1 Conceptual understandings and the core elements

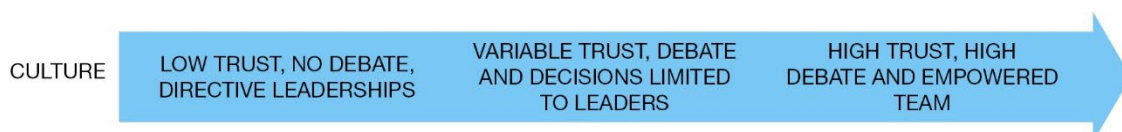
Adaptive management aims to address complexities in program and policy environments. It recognises that, in complex settings, clarity may exist in the overall program goal, but the evolving context and a lack of testing make it difficult to plan a pathway to achieving it. Therefore, rather than a predetermined 'project map', adaptive management argues for a 'project compass' – a process that charts an evolving course through a structured, iterative process of monitoring, feedback and decision making. This process allows organisations to regularly

assess and revise investment allocations and reconsider priorities, not least in response to changes in the world around them.

Adaptive management is an evolving subject with no agreed definition. For the purposes of this reflection, several conceptual frameworks were considered to describe the program experience. The framework selected is a three-part model developed by DT Global, Allen & Clarke and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in their assessment of the New Zealand Government’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade portfolio of development programs. The assessment looked at the variables of adaptive management and identified its three core elements: flexibility, responsiveness and purposive learning:



Based on the program’s experiences and reflections, it recognises one additional core element of adaptive management – culture.

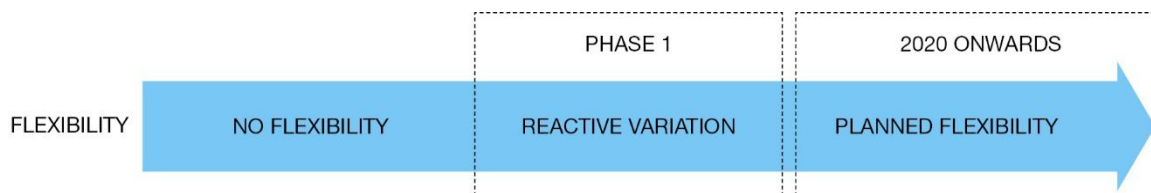


The program’s definition of culture refers to the creation of a work culture that acknowledges and redresses imbalances of power within the aid system and its organisations. Such an environment creates a ‘safe space’ of trust and cooperation that allows the deep local knowledge of national staff to come to the fore – a critical factor in adapting and responding to a constantly shifting context.

Based on this ‘essence of adaptive management’ framework, the following sections self-assess the program during its lifetime and highlight the nuances of what did and did not support adaptive approaches.

## 2.2 Flexibility

DT Global and others<sup>1</sup> define flexibility as the ‘capacity to adjust things (resources, activities, partners, outputs, etc.) if needed ... [plus] the absence of constraints that force teams to stick to predetermined plans’.



The program proved highly flexible in important areas such as management systems, resource allocation and operations, detailed below.

### 2.2.1 Flexible management systems

As there was no set strategy or work plan at the beginning of implementation, regular political context analysis and a set of principles and problems led the program rather than traditional outcomes and results.<sup>2</sup> The donor and program worked closely to generate ideas and entry points<sup>3</sup> to tackle local governance problems, but the lack of a strategy to guide decision making resulted in a lack of cohesion and direction in the work plan for the first phase of implementation.

To better guide program investments, the team developed a more detailed program-level theory of change (TOC) in September 2019, and all new pilots were expected to support its implementation. As the problems and entry points gained definition, the TOC was articulated as a new strategy for guiding decisions in late 2020, ready for the program extension.

The development of the program-level TOC and later strategies provided more structure around the program's 'planned flexibility', as it helped guide investment choices while ensuring there was room to fail, scale up, adapt, or drop pilots as needed. This enhanced structure was central to the program's ability to pivot and adapt in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the coup. However, the program's ability to pivot was stretched during the coup due to the significant risks it posed to national staff members and consultants. Therefore, risk assessments on security and safety provided more significant guidance on the choice of post-coup activities.

The team detailed an overall work plan based on as many certainties as possible. For management purposes, a rolling line of sight of three months into the future helped ensure the project responded to emerging entry points. This method corresponded to the pace of reform and instability in the Myanmar context for much of the program.

Information on how investments were extended, adapted, or dropped is detailed under the purposive learning section.

### 2.2.2 Flexible resourcing

Initially, the program worked hard to onboard staff who were willing to think outside standard programming and operational processes. A key element of planned flexibility was also the ability to allocate resources responsively. The inclusion of the flexible drawdown budget, which required approval only from the donor contract lead, was critical in making this responsive allocation possible. The program was able to engage high-quality technical assistance at short notice to respond to entry points that could progress desired changes on local governance problems.

The donor was comfortable with the program directly identifying and engaging qualified and suitably influential consultants rather than conducting lengthy open recruitment processes for each position. The program also established panels of experts in various fields who underwent a competitive process and pre-vetting. This flexibility on both sides meant that the program could rapidly mobilise, for example, a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) team to support the government's response to the economic impacts of COVID-19; develop policy briefing notes on COVID-19 for government stakeholders; and develop policy notes on post-coup civil society to guide development partners. For these examples, the program identified and contracted teams of quality consultants in less than a week to begin work quickly.

Adaptive programs always have to take risks. But that is hard. One solution was that the donor created a flexible drawdown fund so, within minutes, we could come up with a new idea, write a concept note, decide among ourselves what to take up and then do a proper proposal and budget and get started. We could get approval in a day, or two days, then get started. We could take four or five concepts up, get the green light on one or two, improve or drop the others, and start spending straight away. National staff view

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2 The original principles were voice and inclusion, transparency, accountability, responsiveness and coherence, which were then condensed in the second phase to the four guiding principles of openness, consensus, efficiency and inclusion.

3 Ways of beginning an engagement with decision makers through technical assistance, policy dialogue, funding or other confidence-boosting and unthreatening measures.



### 2.2.3 Flexible operations

The team developed the program's operational policies and procedures to enable as much flexibility as possible while maintaining accountability in fund spending. Due to the evolving work plan, the operations team needed to be involved in technical meetings and correspondence to ensure responsiveness in mobilising activities while complying with corporate and donor requirements. This bridge between operations and programming was critical in amplifying planned flexibility. Accordingly, the team brought in the role of Operations Lead in May 2019 to support the link.

The donor played a critical role in supporting flexibility by including a flexible drawdown fund in the contract. The contract lead also rapidly reviewed and approved requests to utilise the flexible drawdown fund, normally within 24 hours after receiving a request. As the contract lead was usually involved in the design of the intervention or had been briefed about it, the final contractual approval process could happen quickly.

However, not all of the donor's project management rules and requirements supported flexibility. One of the most difficult aspects was a requirement that expenditure fall within one per cent of the program's quarterly and annual forecasts. The capacity of the program to achieve this was included in the donor annual program reviews. Even within a short rolling work plan, project plans could change significantly week by week, depending on what opportunities arose or what the team decided to drop. Therefore, to provide quarterly forecasts and meet them within one per cent variance was extremely challenging and threatened to cause the budget to lead programming decisions, rather than the other way around. The team made every effort to meet the quarterly forecasts, and when the expected expenditure varied, the program team would update donor as often as possible to maintain up-to-date records on its system.

Having a flexible budget and operational procedures was critical in supporting the team to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic and then the coup. When the security and wellbeing of the staff and consultants became the primary concern, the program worked with the donor to create a security allowance from the flexible drawdown fund. Individual team members could use this allowance to address their individual safety needs, for example, securing communications or private transport. The program's leave policy was also adapted to enable the team to access leave in a flexible way to compensate for interruptions caused by COVID-19 and the coup.

### 2.2.4 Flexible staffing structures: the Core Program Unit

The responsibility for delivering the program rested with the Core Program Unit (CPU), which was initially based in Yangon with field offices in target locations. Its staff included a team of local governance experts, policy and research experts, program managers and officers, MEL consultants and officers, communications members, grants and finance members, and operations members. DT Global's finance, human resources and legal corporate services supported the CPU.

The structure of the CPU and staffing levels changed over the life of the program in response to learnings on ways of working and workload. The team leads had both management and technical expert roles. The team leader led strategy development, working in tandem with both the delivery team and the donor contract lead. The CPU also jointly developed policy positions and delivery tactics with the donor. Although the team had an organisational structure, it was an informal and non-hierarchical model in practice. For example, the team leader, deputy team leader, and policy and learning lead had management roles while also leading specific reform processes and drafting policy papers.

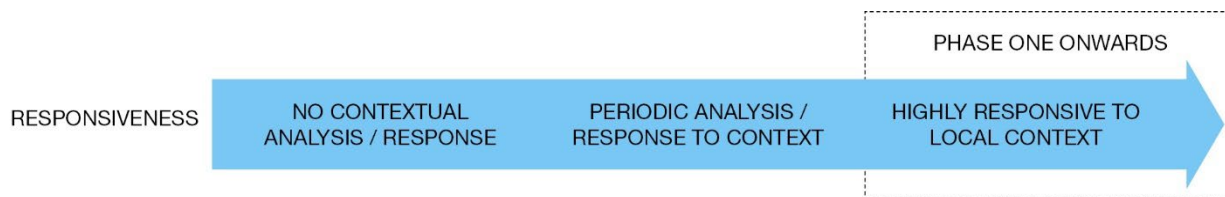
Finding the right staff was key to the project, as was being able to part ways with those not well suited to adaptive management. The program was able to assemble an outstanding combination of staff by mid-2019. Not only were the program staff and leaders confident, politically connected and savvy, equally important were their capacity, efficiency, and attitude. There was little space for big egos or clinging onto pet ideas and concepts – rather, the whole team needed to own its ideas and investments.

Additionally, the donor team was embedded in the design and delivery of the program, operating as part of the program team much of the time. The donor lead would liaise directly with technical team members and consultants to discuss reform opportunities or policy briefs. The donor's local governance adviser would often spend at least one day in the Yangon office to work with the team. This practice was quite different from the traditional model of engagement between programs and donors, where most communication was channelled formally through the team leader or project director.

Most important for effective adaptive management is that the management team could make decisions quickly. [National staff view](#)

## 2.3 Responsiveness

DT Global and others<sup>1</sup> define responsiveness as ‘proactively reading the external environment, tracking the politics around a particular issue, or taking in feedback from people participating in your program’.



The program was able to be highly responsive to the context, leading to three major pivots and strategy changes at the program level, discussed in the following sections: moving from local to national, COVID-19 and the military coup. The program’s responsiveness was driven by an agreed set of principles, namely openness, efficiency, inclusion, and consensus. At a delivery level, there was constant development of new ideas and concepts; decisions on whether to invest; and decisions on what to continue with, adapt or drop. While this was a high-pressure approach to implementation, it enabled significant responsiveness to the constantly changing context and the ability to navigate two massive critical junctures successfully while remaining relevant.

*At the beginning, we didn’t know what we were going to do. We looked at many different options for pilots – CSOs [civil society organisations], women’s groups, etc. We moved from not knowing what we were doing to a position of influence.* National staff view

### 2.3.1 Pivoting in response to external events

Working in the fragile, fast-moving context of Myanmar meant that learning and decision points could not always be pre-planned, even within structures for purposive learning. When facing large context shifts or critical junctures, the program had to drop large swathes of planned projects and activities and restart the thinking process. Such shifts happened three times: in September 2019 when the program moved from local to national influencing in response to government reform efforts (coinciding with the arrival of a new team leader); the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020; and the military coup of February 2021.

**Pivot one:** This was a shift from local- to national-level engagement, but largely on the same problems, bringing the program together much more cohesively. Writing a new TOC at this point was relatively easy, with the team leader drafting, discussing and improving it together with the donor lead, providing clarity for the team on approaches and influencing aims.

**Pivot two:** The program had begun to settle into this new approach when COVID-19 hit. Much of the program’s civic engagement work became impossible; for example, town hall meetings were now a public health risk. The program, like many projects, had to move to remote work. Internationals moved outside the country in the space of a week and were working across time zones from Europe to Myanmar to Australia. To develop a new strategy while dealing with the changes in operating mode:

- The team met online to assess and update the work plan quickly with ‘pause, drop, continue, adapt’ decisions and communicated these to the donor.
- The delivery team quickly reviewed where opportunities for support were coming up with both government and nongovernment authorities, wrote quick concept notes that the team leader reviewed and then put the notes forward for discussion with the donor. The team then agreed to support free consultancy for these authorities.
- Meanwhile, the team leader began to group the ideas that were coming together into different strands, working in partnership with the donor lead as they also worked out how to respond. These ideas for a revised strategy were then tested with the team once the agreed accompanying strategy tests and outcome mapping<sup>4</sup> were developed. This process required three new strategies in six weeks as the team grappled with the turmoil around them.

<sup>4</sup> An approach to planning, monitoring and evaluation that puts people at the centre, defines outcomes as changes in behaviour and helps measure contribution to complex change processes. See <https://www.outcomemapping.ca/>.

**Pivot three:** Three days after the finalisation of the project extension strategy, the coup occurred, rendering the strategy redundant. The program had to abandon approximately 80 per cent of its work overnight. The team and donor, while coping with the emotional and security impacts of the coup, began rethinking the process all over again. Risks were extremely high. Options of varying risk were considered, and many ideas were dropped as new risks emerged. Following the first two weeks of discussion, the post-COVID-19 pivot process was repeated, again with three new strategies written in six weeks to come to the final agreed way forward.

The coup has been really difficult, one of the hardest pivots. It's clear that the program was very adaptive and flexible, ready to change to stay relevant. It wasn't constrained by systems, processes or people – the project had been built the right way to do it and had the people on both sides that were needed.

Donor view

The revised aim was to support the resilience and capacity of local nonstate actors such as CSOs. In the interests of protecting civil society structures, the program supported four think tank and policy and research organisations to adapt their organisational structures and locations (if necessary), develop new programming approaches, and analyse and mitigate risks. The program consulted with a range of CSOs and then used this and others' unpublished analyses to develop and hold discussions on a series of guidance papers for donors. The program supported a major multi-donor trust fund to work out options for civil society programming and funding. While post-coup work was not at the same scale of direct support and systemic impact of pre-coup, the program was able to adapt to the circumstances. It built on its existing reputation to support key CSOs and provide guidance to donors at a time when everyone needed to shift quickly without necessarily having the program's previous experience of fast programming adaptations.

The program first gave our network help with coordinator costs and strategy; then, after the coup, it stayed with us to work out risks, paid for experts to work with us on our new strategy and identity change, and found a way to give us financial support to help even as they were closing.

Partner quote

### 2.3.2 Responsive project design: strategy framing and conflict sensitivity

In starting the program with a blank sheet of paper, the lack of agreed strategy and TOC initially made it difficult for the team to know what the donor was looking for in the overall shape of the program, what the program should be responding to and what the donor would approve for implementation.

While the program started making headway in working up multiple promising entry points at the national and local levels and started to gain traction with partners, the donor continued to push to articulate better how the program was 'greater than the sum of its parts'. In the absence of traditional program development, the program's strategies were based on analysing the 'wicked problems'<sup>5</sup> of local governance. It turned these problems into positive principles that the program wanted to nudge progress on, seeking to identify more proximate problems that the program felt it could reasonably tackle within the available time, capacity, and resources.

From there, it was easy for the delivery team to proceed with building relationships, pilots, policy analysis, research and convening activities. The team developed these activities in response to where it felt moments of change were possible. The strategy development over time was, to some extent, a natural process of exploration; however, the program would have benefited from defining its proximate problems earlier than it did to provide more clarity. All interventions were heat mapped against the four principles to keep an eye on the balance of the portfolio. Where possible, linkages were made between interventions, for example from the local to the national level. Building these linkages increased the potential for change.

This same approach was then used during the final strategy overhaul, following the February 2021 coup. At that time, the program made a significant shift, dropping all government engagement and focusing only on civil society and nonstate governance actors. This shift included influencing development partners' support to both these groups of actors.

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5 Problems that are difficult to articulate and impossible to solve in a way that is simple or final. Rittel, H W, and Webber, M M, 'Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning.' Policy sciences, 4(2), 155-169, 1973. <https://www.cc.gatech.edu/fac/ellendo/rittel/rittel-dilemma.pdf>

By mid-2019, the program had built significant relationships and entry points with different levels and departments in the government but had underinvested in engaging the nonstate governance actors. In working on governance in a context of ongoing civil war, there was a need to work with both sides to be conflict sensitive and seek to understand how consensus on future governance could be built from the local level. The program brought in conflict experts to develop the team's capacity on 'Do No Harm' and, over time, built relationships with the key actors. COVID-19 presented a new entry point to offer specific support to these actors, and the program responded by contracting a well-known partner to provide economic policy support. This support later transitioned to broader local governance capacity support post-coup.

### **2.3.3 Responding to power structures: working with (and trying to bend) the grain**

The initial approach was to 'work with the grain'<sup>6</sup> to build the influence, trust and relationships needed for pursuing bigger system changes. This approach applied to both national and subnational influencing. The most successful approach for significant influence came from working on entry points that contributed to progress on agreed principles of accountability and effectiveness. The team and donor were able to use this credibility to 'work with the grain' to open up conversations on the more difficult topics around principles of inclusion and, to some extent, consensus.

Responsiveness on gender and inclusion was variable. The team tested numerous approaches to gender inclusion in the early days, supporting women's clubs, women in leadership and advocating at the state level for cash transfers to mothers. However, because there was little space on inclusion in local governance for the type of catalytic system change that the program was aiming for, 'working with the grain' meant that these projects failed to gain wider traction. Mainstreaming basics were in place in addition to these specific pilots, but the combination did not achieve the same progress in inclusion as it did for efficiency and openness.

Over time, the program's experience was that achieving inclusion was difficult but not impossible. The 'working with the grain' approach was valid for achieving rapid yet important positive changes within existing reform processes in the short term while also catalysing longer-term, broader systemic changes to the grain itself. By the end of the program, the tactic was one of looking for long-term wins to try to wedge open an entry point on a reform and then bring in gender and inclusion. For example, commitments were secured on using the relationship on a reform to offer a 'modern leadership' course that would appeal to an authority as technical and unthreatening, but with the intention of also introducing inclusion concepts. Alas, these long-term commitments were lost with the coup, and the focus shifted to gender in nongovernment authorities and inclusion within the guidance provided to donors on civil society support.

The program's most influential body of work involved directly influencing a major national-level reform.<sup>7</sup> This was a significant departure from the original civic engagement thinking and enabled the program to respond to some of its strategy challenges. The program used its relationships with a group of interested national experts with insider influence, trusted their analysis of the current reform trends and supported them financially and technically to engage effectively with the reform process. The team took numerous steps together as a group to understand and adapt to the context and reform trends, identify what the reform (government) needed and what the best entry points were. The program later funded a national technical expert to accompany and shape the whole reform process working closely with a dedicated set of government counterparts.

The program then adapted this same approach with a second ministry, building on an existing relationship to offer technical support on a clear and important problem of measuring the impact of development assistance after COVID-19. The program quickly agreed to deploy several experts to design an inclusive M&E system plus social accountability process. It then used its track record to move the relationship to the next level, partnering with a local organisation to begin discussions on researching the potential for overhauling village-level governance systems together with the ministry.

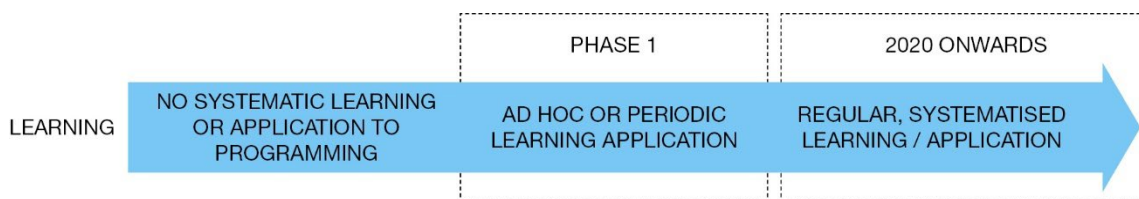
## **2.4 Purposive Learning**

DT Global and others<sup>1</sup> define purposive learning as the 'degree to which learning takes place in a way that is structured, systematic, and is able to shape programming'.

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<sup>6</sup> Brian Levy, 'Working with the Grain: Integrating Governance and Growth in Development Strategies', 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Details anonymised to protect individuals.



The program based its approach to MEL on the understanding that it was not a traditional, linear project – with a structure of activity leading to outputs, leading to outcomes. The approach revolved around testing and learning from different methods and relatively small-scale initiatives, aiming to expand the space for improvements in the intervention areas and progressively improve local governance. Creating and implementing a MEL system proved difficult while the strategy for the adaptive management project and the pilots within it was still in development. A degree of trial and error was required in the first 18 months as the project found, tested and adapted the right tools for its needs.

The disadvantage is staff become blurry on the target outcome if we do quick adaptations. The program did not go in depth; therefore, it was challenging for the M&E staff to measure the outcomes because the program changed to another pilot before achieving the long-term outcome.  
M&E staff view on early days

During the first phase of implementation, the program conducted ‘facilitated reflections’ to review the extent to which the approaches and interventions remained relevant and contributed to the program’s overall purpose. Based on these reflections, the team assessed whether one or both of the target locations required adjustments. The task of deciding what changes to make was more difficult in the first phase of the project while the strategy was still evolving, as it was difficult to measure against a moving target.

In the second half of the program, from December 2019, the basis for purposive learning was honed down to the following:

- **Overall strategies and TOCs plus nested theories of change:**<sup>8</sup> These documents were developed for every pilot, policy analysis or research project, and the team presented them to the donor for agreement to ensure good design and quality from the start of each investment.
- **Quarterly strategy testing<sup>9</sup> workshops:** Each workshop began with discussion on key context shifts, after which the team and relevant partners reviewed and updated the overall TOC and every live mini-TOC through program and online meetings. The team wrote up the outcome mapping of significant behaviour or policy changes by target actors in advance to provide data on the locations of observed change. This process then informed decisions on where activities or full pilots needed to be added, dropped, or adapted. The overall program influencing plan, broken down by target actor, was also updated in the strategy testing to track relationships and products for development.
- **Weekly tea shops:** These two-hour online meetings provided a relaxed space for policy debate, replicating the type of discussion that usually takes place in Myanmar tea shops. Sometimes with THE DONOR or external guests, the attendants debated local governance issues, political contexts that needed analysing, draft papers that needed review or reforms that needed discussion. These meetings were action-orientated, with the participants immediately sharing notes and making changes to pilots, tactics and approaches immediately following the gathering.
- **Messenger groups:** Group chats and phone calls helped bridge monitoring and adaptive management. After moving to online working, the team often used them to report back on where activities were gaining traction or adapting tactics. These chats existed at many levels, including chats with the full project team, the team, the donor, the management team and per major activity or reform with relevant partner staff. The use of messenger groups even improved the information flow compared to working together in an office and also provided the basis for updating outcome mapping, providing a record of information-sharing and analysis.

<sup>8</sup> Mini theories of change for individual pieces of work that contribute to the overall program TOC

<sup>9</sup> Strategy testing is ‘a monitoring system that the Asia Foundation developed specifically to track programs that are addressing complex development problems through a highly iterative, adaptive approach.’ See <https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Strategy-Testing-An-Innovative-Approach-to-Monitoring-Highly-Flexible-Aid-Programs.pdf>.

- **Diaries research:** Building on the work of another organisation in Myanmar,<sup>10</sup> staff and partners through both the COVID-19 and coup times carried out qualitative research. They talked to the same people monthly about their changing views of political and social change, bringing this analysis together and into policy discussions.

When the COVID-19 first wave happened, we immediately worked with others doing a ‘diaries’ type of research to adapt that together for Covid Diaries. We heard community voices, used it to learn ourselves and shared that with our networks and donors. Then we adapted it again after the coup to do diaries while some traditional projects were kept waiting with nothing to be done.

Field staff

#### 2.4.1 Purposive learning in partnership with donors and implementers: donor review processes

The donor’s annual review process and the value for money (VFM) framework and self-assessment process within it varied over the years; on the one hand, it was useful for a more independent view and recommendations on the overall program direction. However, it was also time-consuming for the team, and the VFM work did little to help improve the direction of the program. The hosting of reviewers that were not familiar with the program or country required time for briefing and accompanying them on field trips, which was difficult given the pressure of work. The last annual review was remote and undertaken internally by the donor, reducing the burden on staff.

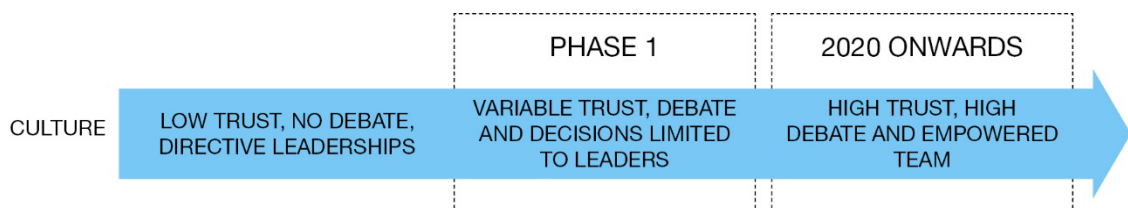
Developing an annual VFM framework and self-assessment process took many weeks per year, involving a lengthy process of the team learning the required methodology under the guidance of the donor’s consultants. Undertaking annual self-assessments against each year’s framework and gathering evidence was then a further time-consuming task, requiring effort on the part of the whole team. By the end of the program, part of the VFM effectiveness assessment aligned with the change strategy testing process. However, to turn strategy tests and nested TOCs into VFM-compatible statements and assess against them was still a cumbersome task that didn’t particularly support delivery decisions in practice. For an adaptive management program without a traditional work plan, it was difficult to predict at the beginning of a year what activities would be implemented, making it impossible to agree in advance what most of the results should be at the end of the year.

Strategy testing easily accommodates necessary shifts in program strategy and is flexible to change the potential pathways of the project, because it focuses on understanding and navigating an unpredictable and complex landscape of interests and incentives. Outcome mapping works as a monitoring tool for gathering evidence on different levels of change (‘expect to see’, ‘like to see’ and ‘love to see’), risks, lessons learned and future actions of the program activities. It helps the program to be specific about the actors it targets, the changes it expects to see and the strategies it employs.

National MEL staff view

## 2.5 Culture

The program defined the fourth core element of culture as the ‘degree to which the team, including client and managing agent, are creating an enabling environment for adaptive management by overcoming inherent asymmetries of power (for example between national and international staff) and building levels of deep mutual trust and respect’.



The addition of culture to the analysis framework comes from the experience that adaptive management not only requires building trust-based relationships with external stakeholders but also requires doing the same

<sup>10</sup> Unnamed for security purposes.

within the aid machinery and the team. Developing an empowering culture is key and not easy given its intangibility, constant evolution and the potential impact from the change of one or two key individuals in an industry characterised by constant churn, especially among international staff.

The program worked to create an enabling environment for adaptive management, extending its efforts beyond the necessary tools and processes. Projects inevitably go through a settling-in period; with the absence of a starting strategy or plan, this adjustment period was where trust sometimes came under stress, exacerbated by the power imbalances between the different actors.

The program's relationship with us was generally very close and constructive. The program was closely aligned to the pulse of what we were working on and its priorities, and both sides were receptive to change and new ideas. It was incomparable to previous experiences or what we would ordinarily see. The donor view

## 2.6 Overcoming traditional culture obstacles: ideas, institutions and interests

The program overcame many of the frequent obstacles to creating an enabling culture, recognising that this would be a continual work in progress. Disaggregating the obstacles into a framework of ideas, institutions, and interests<sup>11</sup> helps explore the experience overcoming them.

### 2.6.1 Ideas

The team leader promoted a purposefully non-hierarchical approach, recognising that the project benefited from some excellent national staff with the capacity and charisma for leading much of the reform work and an unparalleled grasp of the local context. This went against traditional ideas that devolving decision making was too risky. The national staff received the space to lead where possible, with technical backup from the international staff where required. Many of the key individuals in the program and the donor, both national and international, knew each other well prior to working there, shortcutting some of the usual relationship building needed within the team and with others working on local governance. However, it also meant that new staff members needed to be purposefully introduced to this core of ideas. Additionally, the team perhaps suffered from *too much* consensus of ideas at times, needing to reach out to bring in alternative views.

Overall, questioning assumptions, tactics and views was key to the culture created. This willingness to question in both the donor and the program set the tone for the program. Team members' political savviness combined with humbleness then enabled the questioning in practice. A traditional obstacle can be 'analysis paralysis', where constantly thinking and rethinking the context might deter staff from actually doing anything on the ground. The program avoided this obstacle by focusing on 'learning by doing' in which bets were made on what might catalyse change, investments were undertaken, and the questioning continued during implementation.

### 2.6.2 Institutions

Overall, institutions were less of an obstacle than is usually the case in the aid sector, and the team was able to work through them where necessary while still maintaining accountability. The donor generally promoted a culture of questioning and a tolerance for some failure, giving the team confidence to take more risks. With the donor involved directly in reforms and policy analysis, there was significant joint work between what would traditionally be largely separate 'donors and recipients'. The culture also benefited from DT Global's comparatively light and effective project management structures, as well as the lack of organisational advocacy positions and global campaigns to navigate.

The culture regarding institutions was to protect the technical delivery and leadership teams' time as much as possible from institutional requirements and build in the staffing required to handle it. Those on the frontline hugely appreciated these priorities, which promoted a rare mutually supportive relationship between the program and operations teams.

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11 How Change Happens, Duncan Green, 2016

I totally agree culture is key; I would almost have it as number one, this instinctive way of operating and confidence with operating in a flexible, politically informed way. A risk we see elsewhere is that people try to do it, but the team is not empowered and confident, so they create a huge structure around it. Tools for being flexible are created but make it not flexible at all. Confidence to make decisions and behave in a flexible way on an ongoing basis is essential.

International partner view on culture

### 2.6.3 Interests

The team leadership purposefully sought to create space beyond position power dynamics, recognising the potential for improved results from doing so. Within the team, the personalities did not particularly need or desire power, which created a good atmosphere for challenge and debate. However, there were strong, independent personalities willing to experiment with unorthodox ideas. Program staff, both national and international, often directly debated with donor staff and together worked out how best to engage. The weekly online 'tea shops' promoted and protected this space as a regular time for setting organisational positions aside in the interest of analysing local governance subjects that the entire team were passionate about.

Sometimes the negative point of adaptive management is that it very much depends on the skills of individuals, how good they are at adapting to their situation, understanding local context, adjusting their strategy. You need staff and team leaders who get it – it's all about personal skills. Not just being graduates, with a PhD or whatever. It's really challenging to get the right people on the right program.

National staff view

## 2.7 Trust and power among people, implementers and funders

Trust can be difficult to unpack and define. In Myanmar's case, relevant research finds common factors that shape people's trust in governance actors: familiarity, perceived integrity, past experience, shared ethnicity, language, level of education and the respect of governance actors towards the local population.<sup>12</sup> These same indicators of trust resonate with what built trust within the program. Many of the team members were already familiar with one another, and some had even decided to join because they recognised the capacity and integrity of staff already working there based on past experience. Those that joined in the later stages and only ever worked online were able to gel easily with a well-functioning team.

Regarding ethnicity and language, the same research showed that people in Myanmar tend to trust those from their same ethnic group more easily. As the aimed to employ a diversity of ethnicities, trust needed to come from other sources, and inclusion was promoted as a principle. English was also not shared as a first language and provided the potential for power imbalance, meaning the team needed to overcome it purposefully with leading national staff acting as bridges (section 3.1.1). Education levels were high throughout the team, creating a mix of intellectual engagement and experience among both national and international staff. Recognising that some imbalances will persist, this mutual respect within the team and with the donor was key to enabling the adaptive management culture created.

One key axis of trust and power is between the funder and the funded (donor and program). When the donor was happy with the program's work and where it was headed, there was significant space to operate. However, if there were any concerns – for example, when there were delays in strategy agreement among all parties due to the multitude of ideas – then control of ideas and direction could temporarily increase. The leadership team recognised this issue came down to trust, given there were fewer parameters in an adaptive management approach. Trust needed to be earned and, if necessary, defended. The team worked hard to keep moving and reach the next stage, having the sense that adaptive management was a marathon with many sprints along the way.

In many ways, the culture within Myanmar lends itself to adaptive management approaches. Personal networks and the trust implicit within them are a key currency for gaining influence and securing the licence to operate in the country. The same trust-building factors that were part of building an enabling culture within the team were

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<sup>12</sup> Political trust in fragile and conflict-affected areas of Myanmar: Implications for good governance and peacebuilding Amy Croome, Jane Lonsdale, Aung Myo Min, Jo Rowlands and Martin Walsh 2019 [https://myanmar.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/uploads/2019-03/myanmar\\_update\\_2019\\_abstracts.pdf](https://myanmar.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/uploads/2019-03/myanmar_update_2019_abstracts.pdf)



also key to relationship building with governance actors and development partners, something that the team understood well.

It's a very good team – good spirit, everyone is very professional. Team leads are kind-hearted, which is appreciated; they need to be professional, but also a good person. It makes it a happy place to work and a productive work environment. The program is very informal – no 'sirs' or 'madams' – very open and we can talk about challenges and issues. I haven't had this feeling before, a very friendly, open team.

Operations staff on culture

## 3 Final Insights on Adaptive Management

After four extraordinarily intense and tumultuous years, what has been learned about adaptive management? Insights are summarised below, with the caveat that the nature of adaptive management means it isn't entirely replicable. In being responsive to the context, the approach has to vary, and the tools that work for one team at one moment in time may well need adapting for another time or place. These insights fall into the general headings of People and Power, Program Design, and Donors and Implementers.

### 3.1 Insights on people and power

#### 3.1.1 Leadership

The importance of individuals for the success of adaptive management was clear to the program. Finding, supporting and setting leaders free to do great work was central to the approach. Finding personalities suited to adaptive management with the technical experience required and creating the incentives to be experimental cannot be underestimated in adaptive management. Having talented and natural leaders among both national and international staff was crucial. The national staff had the respect and trust of the funders and were able to stand up to pressure from internationals. They also acted as a vital bridge for other national staff to express their views and experiences to the team, as they may have otherwise been less confident in arguing their case in English.

#### 3.1.2 Does adaptive management need mavericks?

Mavericks are entrepreneurial, independent-minded and unorthodox people. They may well be an essential ingredient of adaptive management. Within both the program and the donor, they were necessary for overcoming aid system inertia, getting the project designed and approved, and including creativity and energy in project delivery. However, mavericks can also be counterproductive – a team made up entirely of mavericks is unlikely to prosper. Having smart and flexible 'followers' in the programming and support staff was equally necessary for both program and donor.

#### 3.1.3 Organisational culture

Culture – and the individuals, power and trust within it – was at the heart of the adaptive management approach. Power and trust formed the two main pillars:

- **Power:** Permeates both the system a project is trying to influence as well as the aid system. While good intentions are there, progress is often frustrated by power manifested through interests, institutions and ideas. Understanding power in the system and then working with it where possible was key to this delicate balance. Key achievements included:
  - creating a safe space to present and debate ideas in the knowledge that they may not fly
  - providing detail on what the strategy was and was not to manage competing interests, aiming for a balance where the program was trusted to lead and bring in the donor when needed
  - developing the idea that this was a creative project, but with boundaries
- **Trust:** A critical factor in adaptive management. When trust exists, donors are willing to let technical staff do their jobs. Once lost, the system can collapse and micromanagement reigns until trust can be rebuilt. A virtuous circle of responsiveness and learning, and therefore trust and space to deliver, should be the aim.

### 3.1.4 Culture plus strategy

While many people recycle Peter Drucker's quote, 'Culture eats strategy for breakfast,'<sup>13</sup> the program's experience suggests otherwise. Culture and the individuals that create it are of primary importance, but without a clear strategy, an empowering culture cannot survive. It is the intersection of a culture with strategy plus flexible processes on both operations and learning that gives the space to be creative and responsive.

### 3.1.5 Gender inclusion and working with or bending the grain

There is a potential tension between working with the grain and promoting gender transformation or challenging gender norms. The grain is male dominated, as are the spaces in which to influence policy – outside formal meeting spaces, decision making often happens in beer houses and golf courses. Working deeply on a reform space, building credibility and taking the relationship further to move into an influencing space on more difficult topics was the most successful way to mainstream inclusion in the program's work.

### 3.1.6 Holding an umbrella over delivery staff

In the absence of transforming aid architecture to support adaptive management fully, minimising the amount of time that key staff have to spend on feeding the aid machine was important in getting the best value and results. This tactic required adding additional staff to meet the reporting and compliance demands, which is too often seen as a luxury in aid programs. Having an operations lead role that took an interest in and straddled program and operations contributed to a rare harmony between the two. This harmony also stemmed from organisational culture; the experience from the technical teams was that DT Global has a culture of serving the program, with a real appreciation of the expertise and importance of the technical teams. This scenario avoids compliance staff dictating to delivery staff, which would undermine effectiveness.

## 3.2 Insights on Program Design

When I came to the program, adaptive management felt very familiar. Maybe it's because I am from Myanmar; even though we don't call our lives adaptive management, our whole lives are about adaptation! So, we are used to it. Adaptive management is more like real life. The conflict context makes adaptive management more relevant in Myanmar. No one trusts the political stability of the country, so we can't plan our lives like people in the West. The level of instability and the tensions between stakeholders are high. A small trigger point or problem triggers bigger problems, and conflict settings are very political, so adaptability seems especially relevant in Myanmar and Asian culture – we can't imagine what will happen in the next 10 years like in the West, or even one year! All time horizons shrink. National staff on adaptive management

### 3.2.1 Adaptive management in fragile settings

Adaptive management is often difficult and high pressure, arguably mirroring real life in a fragile or conflict-affected state more than the pre-ordained predictability of a traditional development project. With the instability comes an inability to plan, making it sensible for development projects working on inherently political subjects such as governance in fragile states to think long-term but plan short-term for unexpected reform opportunities or crises. Risk management is extremely important as those same networked political staff can also be at high risk if politics turn, as experienced with the Myanmar coup. Further understanding is needed on if and how to work with adaptive frameworks in extremely fragile situations where there is total institutional breakdown and nationwide conflict.

In normal projects – writing calls for projects, the proposal process, reviewing, contracting and recruiting – the whole process can take a year, and the project is no longer relevant to the local context when actual implementation starts. When there's conflict, the context changes very often, so with adaptive management there can be more accountability to both donors and communities if we can keep adapting to the local context in the same contract. Field staff view

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13 Quote by management expert Peter Drucker.

### 3.2.2 Optimal exploration period

For adaptive management programs, in the absence of an initial strategy, plan and project-specific logframe, a phase of exploration is both inevitable and desirable. The team needs to analyse and agree on problems to work on, and an initial TOC can only be as detailed as the analysis and entry points that the team has identified. For the program, it was 18 months before the project really gained traction, after a national-level reform was announced that the program was able to target and then pin to other parts of the program. In hindsight, if 18 months is too much of a luxury for funders and implementers, there are some possible shortcuts:

- Ensure the donor agrees to a healthy operations budget upfront so that program staff can focus on delivery. Operating cost targets are counterproductive if they come at the expense of multitasking, inefficiencies and staff stress.
- As an initial step, form agreements on problems and issues to address in as much detail as possible, rather than trying to start implementation at the same time. This agreement provides a set target for implementation to aim for and can be updated with each strategy overhaul. Without an agreed definition of what problems to address, it is possible for delivery staff to fall into the trap of trying to work out what the client wants rather than what the context requires. Once ideas and concepts emerge from both the delivery team and the client, there is then a firm basis on which to agree on investments.
- Establish staff adaptive management bridging roles early on. These are the positions that can work across and understand the detail of multiple functions in a team. The operations lead made all the difference to the team leader role by freeing up time and enabled the program and operations teams to work in harmony. A policy and learning lead role bridged the policy work that senior national staff were already carrying out to influence both governance and development actors and increased the capacity to adapt nontraditional M&E processes.
- The donors need to have staff committed to finding flexibility within processes. They also need to have enough program staff time allocated to engaging technically with the project. This commitment is particularly important in the initial stage and possibly necessary for the full project duration if going for a close partnership arrangement.

### 3.2.3 People and processes

There is no one way of doing adaptive management. Being adaptive to the context inevitably involves a process of failure and learning on operational and MEL processes and arriving at something that works for the context, team and client. This 'process of developing the process' felt inevitable; however, it required a fast 'fail, adapt and move on' mindset. The same test, learn, adapt, adopt, or drop approach that the team used at the delivery end was also used for the operations and MEL processes in the early days – the environment was the existing donor and DT Global frameworks, and the program adapted procedures to the extent possible within that operating environment.

If adaptive management projects become more commonplace, projects will hopefully benefit from precedents where both implementing partners and clients have the in-house knowledge and adapted policies and procedures to shortcut some of this operational adaptation. It would be interesting to apply the framework of flexibility, responsiveness, purposive learning and culture used in this paper to test the adaptability (or otherwise) of donors and other implementation partners.

### 3.2.4 Improvisation versus accountability

The balance between having the freedom to think and work politically and having structures to ensure accountability is a key tension within adaptive management. Too little structure, particularly on strategy and decision making, and there is the potential for chaos, confusion and waste. On the other hand, too many rules and processes to complete will squeeze the time, space and culture that technical staff need for building relationships and opportunities.

### 3.2.5 Importance of pace

A difficult combination of speed and strategic patience was key to the program's success. A reputation for prompt responsiveness enabled the program to grow its influence much faster than in traditional projects. Keeping promises and quickly providing high-quality, free consultants on reforms built trust, nudged the agenda within those reforms and brought a lot of goodwill to listen to new ideas. However, the pace of reform varies

greatly; the project maintained patience where needed, judging how far it was sensible to push and communicating this with others to manage expectations on what and how quickly systems could shift.

### **3.2.6 Responsiveness versus reactivity**

In seeking to respond to the environment, there is a temptation to react to every new issue or opportunity. In the early days, while the team was still nailing down strategy, this risk was especially present. Stopping to consider how far the new situation could progress a proximate problem that the project was working on or how far it was likely to throw existing investments off course was key before a team started moving from ideas to concept. One tool that was of use pre-coup was to turn the strategy and TOC into rules of thumb<sup>14</sup> to guide decisions.

### **3.2.7 What to drop**

A trade-off that some project and partner staff found challenging was the concept of dropping activities that, in more traditional projects, would have continued and produced some localised results. In making decisions at the program level on where the program could best catalyse and influence the agreed proximate problems, investment was sometimes switched, and staff or partners closed down pilots responsibly and without damaging relationships where possible. This approach was also challenging for MEL staff who were used to following through on measuring longer-term objectives. Having a strategy test with defined levels of success combined with data coming from outcome mapping of change was useful for comparing indications of success within a portfolio, as decisions on whether a pilot or policy initiative is showing signs of traction needed to be guided by measurement.

### **3.2.8 Strategy testing and theories of change**

Theories of change and strategy tests for each pilot or research project were useful in the design phase to ensure the best-quality investment and think through risks. Strategy testing sessions provided time for reflecting, determining the extent of success, critically evaluating what was not working, thinking through the sum of the parts and planning the next strategic moves amid a fast-paced project.

Adaptive management, however, is a daily rollercoaster that doesn't wait for a quarterly strategy testing meeting. Most decision making needs to take place every single day and every week outside of those reflection processes. When faced with a tactical decision, the relevant team members talked, looked at the best available evidence, drew on experience and added in some instinct. The project activities and their assumptions were already known inside out, so it wasn't instinctive to open up a TOC or strategy test in sudden moments of decision. Rather, the team worked and made decisions on the basis of its rules of thumb.

## **3.3 Insights on donors and implementers**

### **3.3.1 Donor-implementer relationship balance**

This example has shown that a close relationship between donor and implementer can bear fruit; however, there are also potential downsides. The relationship is time-intensive, potentially becoming too much work for both parties. Being seen as an extension of the donor perhaps pulled the program in too many directions at times, denying it the autonomy to fully set its own agenda. On the upside, the closeness and joint work did make a space in which to create a program that could be adaptive from top to bottom, with the ability to reset its strategy and results easily.

The approach will likely vary according to the project and personalities, but if an adaptive management project plans for this very close relationship, then it should acknowledge this plan upfront and agree on clear roles and responsibilities. It takes trust on both sides to share the implementation; trust would be quickly eroded if a donor moved into only a contractual accountability role when their interests were not satisfied. The relationship needs to be a safe space in which to operate, with the donor fully on board with taking ownership of the rough as well as the smooth.

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<sup>14</sup> See <https://oxfamapps.org/fp2p/rules-of-thumb-good-idea-or-double-edged-sword/>

### 3.3.2 Implementing agency efficiency and culture

The efficiency and attitude of the implementing agency are key for a project. The program benefited from DT Global's project management ability, including its capacity to bring in high-quality resources quickly. Significant operational support without technical interference allowed the team to shape the project to the context, not the organisation's view on a particular issue. This 'organisational position' on an issue can often become a distraction to projects in large organisations, distorting how a local team behaves.

### 3.3.3 (Small) size matters

The program had a relatively small budget and – being run by a private company – was not subject to government memoranda of understanding; it had no ministry counterpart to report to and only one donor. Within DT Global's portfolio, the program was seen as a small player and therefore of relatively low financial risk. The program was able to operate largely 'under the radar' as a bespoke program.

### 3.3.4 Replicability and scale

Other projects could likely replicate the adaptive management processes developed to some extent; however, to what extent would vary depending on context, implementing agency, donor, and team capacity and culture. Adaptive management is a high-pressure project management approach. Therefore, a similar project at ten times the scale could aim for one of two scenarios: the same level of adaptive management ambitions with longer pilot timelines and bigger scale investments (and therefore risk); or a significant amount of highly adaptive work that would require its own processes within a larger, more traditional development program, with the potential to take to scale what has proven successful.

## 3.4 Aid architecture – delivery help or hindrance?

The annual cycle of upwards accountability is not particularly compatible with responsiveness, and it didn't really form part of the team's purposive learning; it was an additional (and considerable) time burden. The processes also seemed more suitable for traditional projects. A lightened process for annual reviews and VFM assessments – bringing the essentials without a set of complex tools to be learned and applied – would have provided better VFM while still giving the donor assurance and pointers on the necessary course corrections.

## 4 Recommendations to Donors and Implementing Partners

The following recommendations focus on what is critical for enabling adaptive management, and some may also apply to good project management in general.

Recommendation	Why this is important
Invest in finding the best mix of individuals and building an empowering culture upfront	Adaptive management relies heavily on the mix of individuals with the right culture for the situation and high levels of trust. Avoiding unnecessary structures and processes can create a virtuous circle.
Ensure operational budgets are sufficiently generous	Adaptive management requires the investment and delivery staff to be free to focus on frontline responsiveness while maintaining accountability in the project.
Review the process of donor accountability mechanisms for adaptive management projects	Heavy upwards reporting against traditional project management structures costs more time and money, siphoning resources away from delivery. A lighter approach could provide better VFM.
Include a 12-month inception and design phase	Time without delivery pressure is necessary to identify which problems to tackle and to build the relationships needed to find promising entry points.
Adapt operational procedures rather than working around them, where possible	Finding workarounds to circumvent bureaucratic obstacles to adaptive management is time-consuming and inefficient. It is better to identify and reform such processes head on, for example forecasting flexibility beyond one per cent is necessary.
Work through the balance and trade-off between strategy and experimentation	A challenge for any adaptive management project is whether it is mainly about experimentation and learning or becoming more than the 'sum of its parts', for example creating linkages to achieve impact at a systemic level. The team should discuss any trade-offs upfront develop a consensus on what adaptive management means in the given context and program.

Recommendation	Why this is important
Agree on timelines for the initial strategy upfront	After analysis and exploration, the team needs clarity and focus, including an agreement with the donor on where to focus energy. Adaptable review points should also be built in to respond to external, unexpected events and critical junctures.
Request naming of only key positions in tender applications	Staff capabilities and personalities both contribute to the team culture. The capacity needs emerge through the design and evolution of a project, and a team that can follow a 'flying geese' model – building up slowly from a core of initial leaders – has a better chance of creating the required culture than one which names all positions upfront.
Agree on the donor's levels of involvement in delivery upfront, where possible	Clarity on the roles, responsibilities and relationship between the donor and implementer at inception provides a clear basis for building trust and managing expectations. Donor resourcing directly relates to this level of involvement, with people of an adaptive management mindset needed on both sides to make the relationship work.
Avoid prescriptive MEL tools; take what is useful to the core project mission and adapt	Tools and processes can take on a life of their own, pulling time and resources away from frontline delivery. It is more appropriate to determine what needs to be measured and strip it down to the essentials.

## Annex 1 Self-Assessment Framework

To provide an overall self-assessment on how the program fared with adaptive management, this self-assessment was done against the following framework developed by DT Global, Allen & Clarke and ODI for the New Zealand Government. DT Global and others<sup>1</sup> then condensed these 17 indicators into the three essentials of flexibility, responsiveness and purposive learning, with the program adding culture for this paper.

Indicator	Self-assessment (end position)	Pattern over the project lifetime
<b>1. Permission Space</b>		
1.1. External permission space supports experimentation	Amber	The permission space on procedures was largely unchanged for an adaptive program, but flexibility was applied where possible.
1.2. Corporate systems allow flexibility	Green	Professional, efficient systems were in place, deployed flexibly and adapted for the program within the framework of what was possible.
1.3. Senior staff encourage adaptation	Green	The donor lead provided high degrees of encouragement to adapt and were fast to discuss and agree budget approvals to enable responsiveness.
<b>2. Planning</b>		
2.1. The planning process is problem-driven and collaborative	Green	The project was problem-driven from the start, although an inevitable period of agreeing on the problems made planning challenging early on. Progress was smooth at both the program and pilot levels from Phase 2 onwards.
2.2. Planning builds on evidence	Green	Planning was based on a combination of problem-driven then opportunity-led approaches for reforming entry points. Evidence came from the analysis of problems and the team's constant evaluation of politics and context.
2.3. Rationale for adaptation is clearly articulated	Green	The program had strong documentation with quarterly strategy testing that updating program TOC and all pilot nested TOCs with tracked changes.
<b>3. Activity design</b>		
3.1. MEL framework enables locally driven definition and supports learning	Green	Initially, this was an issue; the systems were too traditional, with the right tools but too heavy, so the delivery team adapted them. Once the right tools were adapted and lightened, the process was much smoother and supported learning very well.
3.2. Learning orientation is built into the design	Green	Piloting, learning and developing case studies was key to the approach. Research using a diaries approach (developed with other organisations) built an iterative approach to research and analysis.
3.3. The implementation plan allows for flexibility	Green	Implementation plans were flexible, changing significantly during the project lifetime while remaining true to the contracted mandate.
3.4. The activity management and governance arrangements allow for partnership	Green	The project used different approaches – formal then informal – during its lifetime and settled on a monthly program – donor-DT Global management meeting with weekly team leader-donor lead meetings. Program and donor staff jointly delivered multiple activities on reform and policy analysis with a strong partnership and team spirit.
<b>4. Activity delivery</b>		
4.1. Implementing relationships empower adaptation	Green	Relationships within the team, including among programs and operations, were consistently empowering. They were initially more variable with the donor and became easy to build once a strategy was agreed as a foundation from which to make decisions.
4.2. Delivery plan allows for adaptation	Green	The plan was consistently enabling, with a three-month rolling work plan and adaptation.
4.3. MEL requirements support adaptive management	Amber	The donor MEL requirements, including annual reviews and VFM assessments, remained heavy and time-consuming.

Indicator	Self-assessment (end position)	Pattern over the project lifetime
<b>4. Capacity, capability and culture</b>		
5.1. Staff have the capacity to manage adaptively	<b>Green</b>	Staff, both program and operations, were high capacity.
5.2. Staff have the requisite capabilities for adaptive management	<b>Green</b>	Staff, both program and operations, were high capability and held attitudes of high flexibility and responsiveness.
5.3. Management culture encourages adaptive approaches	<b>Green</b>	The team leader and deputy team leader encouraged idea ownership and development by program staff, promoting a culture where it was safe to raise problems, tolerate failure and celebrate success.
5.4. There are processes in place for building knowledge and relationships	<b>Green</b>	The early reflection workshops worked well, transitioning to weekly teasops for debating topics and building analysis. Online, the weekly team meetings, signal groups and mandated online joint document work were useful for building relationships and sharing knowledge.



## Annex 2 Program Timeline

Below is a timeline of the program's key contractual, learning, operational and resourcing milestones, provided as an overview of how the program progressed and adapted over the years to key events.<sup>15</sup>

		August 2017 – February 2018		March 2018 – August 2019		September 2019 – October 2021	
		Inception phase		First phase of implementation		Second phase of implementation + extension	
		2018		2019		COVID-19 March 2020	Military coup February 2021
External	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Rohingya crisis</li> <li>– UK and Myanmar government relations strained</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Shrinking civic space</li> <li>– Recentralisation of power</li> <li>– Increasing tension with international community</li> <li>– Ministry changes to civilian-led with reform agenda</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Continued shrinking of the civic space</li> <li>– The donor requests that the program take on a broader portfolio of work, including policy and evidence</li> <li>– The donor requests the program increase its risk appetite for pilots</li> <li>– Champions within government seeking opportunities to influence major reform</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Myanmar sued at International Court of Justice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 24 March 2020: first confirmed COVID-19 case in Myanmar</li> <li>– COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan developed</li> <li>– Elections held in November 2020</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Military coup and state of emergency announced</li> <li>– The donor directs no engagement with military or government authorities</li> <li>– Mass protests and violence</li> <li>– Rapidly deteriorating operating environment for communications, banking, transport, security, etc.</li> </ul>	
	Flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Inception report and design</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Program team established</li> <li>– Yangon and field offices opened</li> <li>– Program operational procedures drafted</li> <li>– DT Global provides additional corporate resource</li> <li>– First grant and subcontracts executed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Team restructured with additional resourcing of the operations lead, policy lead and interim team leader</li> <li>– Longer-term grants executed</li> <li>– Program operational procedures reviewed and updated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– New team leader</li> <li>– Conflict-sensitive project management training conducted</li> <li>– Standing panels of experts established</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Program team and consultants start working from home</li> <li>– Business continuity and risk plans updated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Grants and consultancy agreements terminated</li> <li>– Some subcontracts and grants amended to adapt to the new context</li> <li>– All external-facing communications closed down</li> <li>– Security protocols reviewed and updated, daily review of security environment</li> <li>– Revised work plan developed, and resources mobilised to implement it</li> </ul>

<sup>15</sup> Only examples or limited details are provided in the responsiveness section of this timeline due to sensitivities.

	August 2017 – February 2018 Inception phase		March 2018 – August 2019 First phase of implementation		September 2019 – October 2021 Second phase of implementation + extension	
	2018		2019		COVID-19 March 2020	Military coup February 2021
<b>Responsiveness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Area stakeholder mapping and governance analysis</li> <li>– Local governance analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Initial framework and principles developed</li> <li>– Ongoing political context analysis</li> <li>– Piloting via CSOs</li> <li>– New entry points identified</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Ongoing political context analysis, including external stakeholders</li> <li>– TA engaged to support and influence major reform agenda</li> <li>– Government department requests the program to review one of its major projects; technical assistance mobilised</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Revised strategy and TOC to guide investments</li> <li>– Major reform becomes key to the program’s work at the state, regional and union levels</li> <li>– Pilots and policy work support reform influence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Revised strategy developed</li> <li>– Pilots adapted to support COVID-19 response</li> <li>– TA and funding provided to support government response to COVID-19</li> <li>– Government department requests support with COVID-19 response – technical assistance mobilised</li> <li>– New government department entry point through COVID-19 support</li> <li>– Program (through partner) supported nonstate actors with policy advice relating to COVID-19 (public health, livelihoods, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Revised program strategy developed</li> <li>– Suite of technical notes developed to guide development partners on how to support civil society effectively and webinars held</li> <li>– New window of support to civil society designed for multi-donor trust fund and adopted by donors</li> <li>– Think tanks supported in adaptation</li> </ul>
<b>Learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Social inclusion evidence and policy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– MEL strategy and framework developed</li> <li>– Strategy Review and Reflection Workshop held, leading to changes to ways of working</li> <li>– Donor annual review gives the program a score of ‘A’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Strategy Review and Reflections workshops held</li> <li>– Program TOC revised to include an additional portfolio of work</li> <li>– ‘Reflections of change’ methodology piloted and revised</li> <li>– Program cofacilitates first major learning event to share research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Donor annual review gives the program a score of ‘B’</li> <li>– Outcome mapping journals introduced to track change</li> <li>– Policy and Communications Strategy developed</li> <li>– The program hosts LG in conflict community of practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Donor annual review gives the program a score of ‘A+’</li> <li>– The program commissions the paper Scoping of Gender Equity and Social Inclusion in Myanmar’s Response to COVID-19 to help inform investment decisions</li> <li>– The program starts the COVID-19 Diaries project in collaboration with an international NGO</li> <li>– Analysis workshop on the November 2020 elections</li> <li>– Weekly teashops held to discuss and analyse the environment</li> <li>– The program conducts the first change strategy testing workshop to review its portfolio and test assumptions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Analysis and implications of the coup sessions held</li> <li>– Weekly teashops held to discuss and analyse the environment</li> <li>– Change strategy testing of new strategy undertaken</li> <li>– COVID-19 Diaries pilot adapted to Emergency Diaries research</li> <li>– Weekly teashops held to discuss and analyse the environment</li> </ul>

## Annex 3 Experiences of Reporting, MEL Tools

The following table outlines the experiences of key MEL tools that the program used and adapted.

Tool	Time-consuming?	Useful for donors?	Useful for delivery?	Evolution over time	Other reflections
<b>Program-led</b>					
Case studies	Yes	Varies	Yes	The case study guide was developed with no set format.	The studies were useful to some extent but more useful for influencing than for learning within the team. The key team members often already knew most of the content of the case studies from implementation elsewhere in the program before the case studies were written.
Outcome mapping journals	Yes	No	Yes	These mapping journals were set up at the program level where they were useful, but the approach was initially too heavy. There were many actors and progress markers, reflecting how dispersed the approaches were. It was later split at the pilot level, becoming too cumbersome. It was useful for PMs but not for overall management. Finally, it was reverted back to the program level only in a simplified format combining actors.	The concept of three levels of change to capture transformation is useful, but the tool is heavy, including for partners. A simplified methodology at the program level made it a useful tool for tracking where outcomes were emerging and determining which activities needed more effort.
Strategy testing	Yes	At the program level yes, but less interested at pilot level	Yes	The strategy testing was time-intensive to set up, online throughout, initially 15 hours of meetings quarterly and down to five hours quarterly by the end (a more condensed program strategy).	Strategy testing was good for program quality. Requiring a TOC per pilot and research ensured investments were well checked even when moving fast. However, the need for decisions on entry points and pilot timings will never neatly align with a quarterly process, so weekly decision points are also necessary.
Teashop weekly policy space	Yes	Yes	Yes	These meetings had a similar format throughout, with five to 10 people discussing one topic for two hours. They included pre-reading and four to six questions to deep dive, with notes shared to input into specific products.	The teashop successfully provided space outside of project management meetings for reflection, debate, horizon scanning, building analysis on specific policy products – including the donor in analysis, when needed – and managing workloads.
<b>Contractual requirements</b>					
Output-based indicator quarterly reporting	Yes	Yes	No	This reporting evolved several times to reflect changes in strategy. It was ultimately time-consuming, and the end-of-project position was difficult to aggregate due to the number of changes in indicators during the project lifetime.	The donor set up this reporting as output focused to give flexibility, but it was not useful for delivery and measured quantity rather than quality.

Tool	Time-consuming?	Useful for donors?	Useful for delivery?	Evolution over time	Other reflections
VFM assessment	Yes	Yes	No	In the first year of implementation, the approach to VFM was informed by the key features of the design and its operational model. From 2019 onwards, the VFM focused more on the interventions rather than the operational model.	It was time-consuming and therefore expensive to develop VFM effectiveness frameworks outside of the core learning processes and then self-assess. The methodology took time to learn in the early years, and its usefulness was limited. The effectiveness assessment of VFM could potentially have been replaced by evidence and results of strategy testing once this process was established.
Annual review process	Yes	Yes	Partially	The donor commissioned external consultants to conduct the first two reviews, requiring a lot of preparation and support. The undertook the third review online, reducing the time burden for the program.	The annual review process was largely a donor exercise, but it did provide the basis for an annual conversation on reviewing program direction based on the results.