

**TOWARDS MORE ADAPTIVE  
APPROACHES TO MANAGING THE  
NEW ZEALAND AID PROGRAMME**

Phase 2 Report

FINAL

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<b>Author(s):</b>	Nick Leffler, Kate Lee-Gleisner, Ed Laws, Pablo Yanguas, Mark Pruden
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<b>Peer / technical review:</b>	Ned Hardie-Boys
<b>Verification that QA changes made:</b>	Nick Leffler
<b>Proof read:</b>	Selina Munro
<b>Formatting:</b>	Nick Leffler
<b>Final QA check and approved for release:</b>	Nick Leffler, Senior Consultant

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# CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>I</b>
<b>1. BACKGROUND</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1. International context	1
1.2. New Zealand context	1
1.3. Purpose	2
<b>2. APPROACH</b>	<b>2</b>
2.1. Diagnostic tool	2
2.2. Approach	3
<b>3. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS</b>	<b>4</b>
3.1. Aggregate findings	4
3.2. Key Theme 1: Planning for adaptation	7
3.3. Key Theme 2: Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning (MERL)	9
3.4. Key Theme 3: Partnerships	10
3.5. Key Theme 4: MFAT capability and capacity	12
<b>4. IMPLICATIONS FOR MFAT</b>	<b>14</b>
4.1. Conceptualising adaptive management	14
4.2. How do the identified Activities fit in this framework?	15
4.3. When is adaptive management necessary (and not)?	17
<b>5. ENABLING A SHIFT TO ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT</b>	<b>18</b>
5.1. How does adaptive management fit in broader Activity management?	18
5.2. What changes are required?	19
<b>6. NEXT STEPS</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>ANNEX 1: DIAGNOSTIC FINDINGS</b>	<b>22</b>



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings from Phase 2 of a project aimed at supporting the New Zealand Aid Programme to increasingly adopt practical and pragmatic adaptive management and programming approaches in support of locally driven development outcomes.

Phase 2 consisted of a comparative review of eight activities that were identified by MFAT as being designed or implemented adaptively. The Activities that were identified were:

- The Bougainville Healthy Communities Activity implemented by the Leprosy Mission New Zealand.
- The Samoa Cocoa Industry Development Initiative implemented by The AgriChain Centre.
- The Caribbean Geothermal Facility implemented by Jacobs New Zealand.
- The Pacific Fisheries Leadership Programme implemented by the Pacific Community (SPC).
- The Pacific Horticulture and Agricultural Market Access (PHAMA) Plus programme, a Delegated Cooperation Agreement with the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).
- The Timor-Leste Tourism Development Programme implemented by The Asia Foundation.
- The Rakhine Winter Crops Activity implemented by Adam Smith International.
- The Negotiated Partnership with Save the Children NZ.

### Defining adaptive management

There is no settled consensus (either in MFAT, or in the development community at large) on the meaning of adaptive management or the circumstances or problem areas in which it is required for getting better results. The absence of a definition, however, has led to confusion and misappropriation of terminology in MFAT. The report therefore presents a three-part model for conceptualising its adaptive programmes, focused on **flexibility, responsiveness, and purposive learning**.

As flexibility and responsiveness are often conflated with adaptiveness, presenting them as elements of the framework can help to clarify intent. Most, if not all, aid programmes benefit from having a degree of flexibility that enables them to react to unexpected changes. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated how all projects have had to change to an unanticipated change in the global context for example.

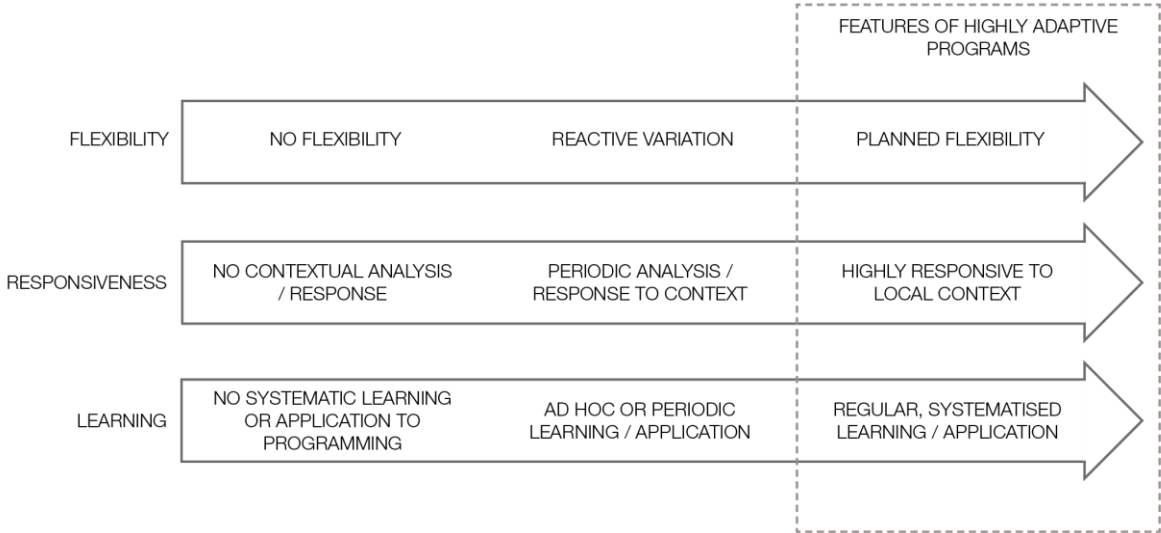
Responsiveness, meanwhile, includes having defined systems and process to analyse and interpret how the local context may change over time. Regular political economy analysis for example can identify changes in the Activity permission space that may require an adjustment in engagement type or approach. Purposeful responsiveness together with flexibility enables good project management.

Purposive learning, with regular and systematised reflection, ensures that progress towards outcomes is regularly checked to enable course corrections that may be required to achieve

targets. This includes strong Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning (MERL) systems together with effective governance for joint learning and decision making.

Highly adaptive programmes display a high degree of flexibility, responsiveness, and purposive learning. This is represented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 1: Adaptive management conceptual framework



### Diagnostic review findings

Following a review of documentation and interviews with key stakeholders, the Activities were scored against a diagnostic tool with 5 main categories, 17 sub-categories, and 61 indicators. The review found significant variability in practices across activities, but certain high-level patterns emerged from the aggregate data:

- The MFAT **permission space** is generally conducive to adaptiveness but provides no clear vision for what adaptative management means.
- Existing **planning** processes encourage a focus on problems and put a premium on working with partners and beneficiaries but are weaker on providing a clear rationale for adaptation.
- Flexibility in **design** appeared consistently as one of the strongest enablers of adaptive management but systems for learning and adaptive governance are less well developed.
- Activity **delivery** is shaped by strong partnerships between MFAT and implementers, but this ethos is not matched by delivery plans that incorporate iteration and reflection.
- **Staff** are generally encouraged to be adaptive and are open to honest discussion, but these attitudes are not supported by systems that build staff capacity.

The overall picture that emerges from the activities reviewed is one where formal policies and processes create ample space for staff to seek out approaches compatible with adaptive management (there is a "high ceiling" of adaptive potential), and yet there appears to be limited emphasis on the kinds of toolkits and skillsets that would empower staff to make the most of this permissive organisational space in order to develop flexible, context-sensitive, and learning-oriented programmes (there is a "low floor" of adaptive practice). In combination, the high ceiling

and low floor for adaptive management are probably responsible for the extensive variation observed across the activities reviewed.

## **Key themes for reflection**

In terms of the Activities themselves, only the Timor-Leste Tourism Development Programme was found to display the features of highly adaptive programmes. Amongst the Activities reviewed there was a combination of:

- Lack of articulation of the need for and approach adaptive management
- Good project management approaches being presented as adaptive management
- COVID-19 reactions being equated to adaptive management

Given the Activities were identified by MFAT based on being seen to display the characteristics of adaptive management, this emphasises the need to develop, adopt, and disseminate a definition of adaptive management for MFAT. Even then, there are also a set of key themes that emerged across the Activities that are useful to consider in what MFAT would need to do to adopt more adaptive practices.

## **Planning for Adaptation**

There is a lack of a consistent approach to planning for adaptation, that is, identifying whether the nature of the problem and context calls for an adaptive approach, having a clear idea of what the approach itself entails, and devising frameworks and processes to support it. When pressed to demonstrate how activities have been adaptive, evidence is presented of practices that would be conventionally identified with sound activity management, not necessarily adaptive management. Overall, MFAT relies heavily on the capacity of implementing partners to develop designs and implementation plans that meet an unclear definition of adaptiveness.

## **Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning (MERL)**

MERL is often seen as an accountability function that falls outside of or becomes important only after implementation, rather than as central management and learning tool for adaptation. Not enough attention is paid to theories of change that outline the pathways and assumptions required to translate the outputs into the desired outcomes, which makes it difficult to anticipate potential challenges and document intermediate results. Reporting templates are generally good but are frequently underutilised. In general, there is a lot of dependence by MFAT on partner's MERL capacity.

## **Partnerships**

Nearly all of the reviewed activities were characterised by effective and trusting relationships between MFAT and the implementing partner. In the absence of a consistent approach to political economy analysis or similar context-sensitive approaches, the strength of relationships with implementing partners is also the primary way in which MFAT is able to stay connected and responsive to the local context. However, few of the activities reviewed had governance mechanisms that are specifically designed to support highly responsive and adaptive programming.

## MFAT Capability and Capacity

There is a lot of variation in capability and capacity, and this seems to be shaped by the individuals at various points in time, rather than systematically, through organisational policies. Individual staff backgrounds and choices appear to determine whether programmes will be adaptive. Engagement with partners can be a strain on the already limited capacity of activity managers and is not seen as a contributing factor to good adaptive practice. Finally, those managers that work adaptively do so in silos.

## Implications for MFAT

As noted in the Phase 1 report, adaptive Activities are typically a small minority within an aid programme. They sit in a portfolio of other Activities as a response to a particular set of circumstances that may include complex environments or intractable problems that require innovation to make progress. Given adaptive management requires a greater level of investment in time from all partners, careful consideration is necessary to confirm that this investment represents value for money. However, it is clear that there will be circumstances where MFAT will want or need to take an adaptive approach and it is therefore necessary to create the pre-existing conditions necessary to enable good adaptive practice. Based on the findings of this project, the constraints that MFAT currently faces, and some potential solutions are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Constraints and potential solution for more adaptive practice

Constraint	Potential Solution
There is a lack of a common and consistent understanding of adaptive management	Develop and socialise a definition of adaptive management for MFAT. The framework described in this report could be a starting point.
There is a need to identify when adaptive management is necessary and feasible	Develop a decision tree or a set of criteria for design teams to work through
There is insufficient technical input into Activity design from across sectoral and central teams	Strengthen the Activity design process to ensure that key MFAT capability (sectoral, MERL, commercial, legal, others) is called on at the right time
There is limited documentation of political economy analysis integrated into Activity design <i>and</i> management	Introduce more formalised documentation of political economy analysis, including documenting the rationale for change
Adaptive management is more resource intensive	Develop a new Activity management model for Activities identified as benefitting from adaptive management. This includes the ability to draw in other parts of the business to support informed decision making or setting up additional structures.



Constraint	Potential Solution
Activity management capability is low	Increased capability development on Activity management in general, including the components of flexibility, responsiveness, and learning, would improve outcomes in general, and can support adaptive management specifically when identified, as necessary.

Addressing many of the constraints above is a long-term process that may sit within a broader rethink of the Activity management lifecycle from design to delivery, including who is engaged at various points and how a management model can best be structured.

However, in order to maintain momentum on adaptive management there are a number of actions that could be considered. These include:

- In the short-term, there is an opportunity to increase the understanding of adaptive management across MFAT and ensure that a common definition is adopted. This could be achieved through a series of knowledge / learning events on the findings from this work so far, a definition of adaptive management for MFAT, case studies of adaptive projects, and how to strategically plan for adaptive management in a portfolio. A decision tree that identifies when adaptive management may be useful or necessary could also be developed and disseminated during these knowledge events.
- In the medium-term, interim guidance documents for adaptive management could be co-developed with key MFAT teams for use when it is determined that an activity should be designed adaptively. Additional training and dialogue with the internal community of practice could also be provided to develop adaptive management “champions” that MFAT can call upon as needed.

Longer term, as there is existing work underway in MFAT to review the Activity management lifecycle, there is a risk of duplication and overlap if a separate process is launched specifically for adaptive management tools and processes. Rather, there is an opportunity to integrate adaptive management into the overall continuous improvement piece, including the development of tools and processes as outlined in this report.



# 1. BACKGROUND

## 1.1. International context

Development aid programming has traditionally been planned in a very linear approach, setting out sequential steps over a number of years that, if achieved as planned, lead to the attainment of the intended goal. This assumes a stable institutional and development context that enables a fully planned approach to delivering results.

In complex and less certain environments, the traditional and reductionist approach to development programming is at an increased risk of not achieving expected results. This is largely due to a lack of systems that enable adaptation to new information or new contexts in a timely manner. In response to this, adaptive programme management, otherwise known as ‘adaptive management’, has emerged as an alternative and complementary programming approach to respond to real world complexities and challenges.

Adaptive management is an umbrella concept that focuses on testing, learning, and adapting, as well as working with decision-makers to ensure solutions are a good fit to the problem and context at hand. Though the strength of evidence in terms of effectiveness and outcome is varied, the challenges and successes of adaptive management are context dependent, driven by the specific development challenge being addressed and the specific organisational constraints.

## 1.2. New Zealand context

Like in other parts of the world, the contexts in which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) is delivering development assistance are increasingly complex. New Zealand recently adopted a new International Cooperation for Effective Sustainable Development (ICESD) policy affirming a commitment to “[a]daptive approaches driven by local context and continuous learning.” In response, MFAT has integrated some of the language and aspects of adaptive approaches in its templates and programming.

While some MFAT Activities have therefore been designed to be more flexible and integrate some of the characteristics of adaptive programming, there are currently few formalised processes, tools, or systems to:

- Identify Activities that are best suited to adaptive approaches and design these in line with best practice approaches.
- Contract or partner with implementing agencies in a way that enables adaptation.
- Ensure an evidence-driven iterative and adaptive approach is maintained throughout delivery.
- Develop the capacity and capability of staff to apply and/or use adaptive management where appropriate.
- Systematically collect knowledge and information from across MFAT on the value of the approach and how to practically work more adaptively.

In particular, it has not been clear what changes, if any, would be required to both the systems and ways of working of the Pacific and Development Group (PDG) to enable more adaptive approaches and more broadly within MFAT to create the permission space for adaptive management.

### 1.3. Purpose

The terms of reference identified that the purpose of the project is *“to support the New Zealand Aid Programme to increasingly adopt practical and pragmatic adaptive management and programming approaches in support of locally driven development outcomes.”* It stated that the project deliverables will serve as an evidence base for and directly support the design and iterative implementation of new PDG-wide processes (systems and culture) that support more adaptive evidence-based, locally driven ways of working.<sup>1</sup>

In Phase 1 of the project, international evidence was reviewed to understand the policies, processes, tools, and systems required for development cooperation agencies and their implementing partners to support and enable adaptive management. A diagnostic framework was developed to assess MFAT’s current systems and practices and identify areas that need strengthening in support of adaptive management.

Phase 2 of the project focused on assessing a selection of MFAT Activities against the diagnostic tool in order to understand how adaptive management concepts have been integrated into programming and identify any system and culture enhancements that would better support adaptive approaches within the New Zealand Aid Programme. A third Phase may then follow where some of the recommendations of Phase 2 are implemented.

This is a report on Phase 2 of the project. Section 2 outlines the approach and revisits the diagnostic tool. The summary findings are presented in Section 3 and implications for MFAT are in Section 4. Section 5 presents some ideas on how adaptive management can be integrated into aid programming and Section 6 presents next steps.

## 2. APPROACH

The approach to Phase 2 was guided by the diagnostic tool developed in Phase 1. The tool is described below and the approach to using the tool detailed further down.

### 2.1. Diagnostic tool

The tool identified indicators across 5 functional categories:

- **Permission space:** Factors related to the overarching organisational MFAT policy context and authorising environment, such as organisational goals and strategy, budgets, diplomatic objectives, and corporate requirements.
- **Planning:** Factors feeding into problem identification, including the prioritisation of issues, context analysis, use of evidence, and relationship building.
- **Activity design:** Factors contributing to an activity's adaptive potential, for instance how results are defined, implementer and partner identification, modality, approval processes, procurement and contracting, planned reflection points, and resourcing for MERL.
- **Activity delivery:** Factors contributing to the operationalisation of adaptive practice such as Activity management and resourcing, partner, and implementer relationship

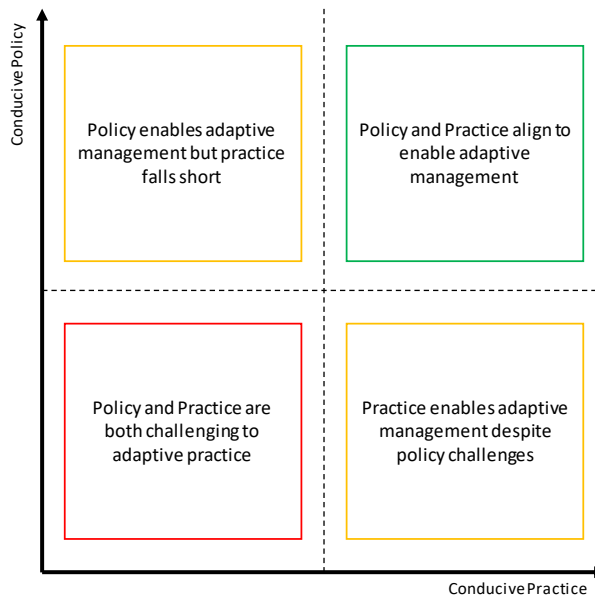
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<sup>1</sup> MFAT. Terms of Reference: Towards more adaptive approaches to managing the New Zealand Aid Programme. 2020

management, reporting approach and quality, operationalisation of reflection and learning, and iteration of delivery pathway.

- **Capacity and culture:** Factors contributing to staff and implementers' ability and willingness to work adaptively, including the staffing model, performance management, professional development, and risk appetite.

The intention was to assess each of these categories against both the policy and practice dimensions. By having a clear distinction between policy and practice the diagnostic would identify four different behavioural configurations across all indicators as represented in the figure below.



As the tool was deployed, it became evident that a clear distinction between policy and practice would be difficult to identify. Therefore, the dimensions were altered to focus on:

- The content of the Activity documentation provided – this is an indication of the policy space for the Activity as determined by its design and reporting frameworks.
- The feedback from interviewed stakeholders – an indication of the practice space for the Activity, the accumulated knowledge of people involved in the operationalisation of the Activity that contextualises the document content.

## 2.2. Approach

A sequenced approach to implementing the diagnostic tool was followed that included:

- **Policy / template assessment:** we reviewed a selection of overarching policies and Activity design and management templates against the diagnostic tool.
- **Activity assessment:** we reviewed documents and interviewed key MFAT and implementer representatives for 8 Activities.
- **Sense-making:** we presented our initial findings to MFAT's Steering Group.

The Activities that were assessed were proposed by the MFAT Reference Group based on being considered to demonstrate a degree of adaptiveness. They include:

- The Bougainville Healthy Communities Activity implemented by the Leprosy Mission New Zealand.
- The Samoa Cocoa Industry Development Initiative implemented by The AgriChain Centre.
- The Caribbean Geothermal Facility implemented by Jacobs New Zealand.
- The Pacific Fisheries Leadership Programme implemented by the Pacific Community (SPC).
- The Pacific Horticulture and Agricultural Market Access (PHAMA) Plus programme, a Delegated Cooperation Agreement with the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).
- The Timor Leste Tourism Development Programme implemented by The Asia Foundation.
- The Rakhine Winter Crops Activity implemented by Adam Smith International.
- The Negotiated Partnership with Save the Children NZ.

Following completion of the assessment of all the Activities, an internal team discussion was held to present back the findings on each Activity and discuss the implications for the overall findings internally. This was then presented to the MFAT Steering Group at a sense-making workshop. The findings and the outcomes of that workshop are presented in this report.

### **3. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The diagnostic effort drew upon nine sets of sources: a selection of policy and process documents, as well as documentation and interviews from the eight pre-identified Activities. As the research shifted towards the latter, it became apparent that policy and process documentation painted an incomplete picture of the degree to which formal guidance and frameworks in MFAT were conducive to adaptive management. This is because the policy ceiling for adaptive management in MFAT is very high. There is significant leeway to adapt policy and process for an adaptive approach where the capability for this exists. Because of that, the findings presented below are based primarily on the review of the Activities.

There are data and methodological limitations to these findings. Most importantly, the Activities were proposed by the MFAT Reference Group based on being seen to display features of adaptive management. The selection was therefore not random, nor necessarily representative of the broader MFAT portfolio. In addition, not all Activities were scored based on the same number and type of sources (documents and interviews), which again was beyond our control.

Section 3.1 presents an aggregation of the diagnostic tool scoring and some high-level findings. The key themes that emerged around planning for adaptation, MERL, partnerships, and MFAT capability and capacity are then discussed in Sections 3.2 to 3.5. Full diagnostic findings are presented in Annex 1: Diagnostic Findings, together with a discussion of methodological considerations.

#### **3.1. Aggregate findings**

Table 2 below presents a summary of aggregate findings for the main categories and subcategories of indicators. For each indicator, the table includes:

- **Average score:** A “horizontal” aggregate of scores across all Activities, with a spectrum between 0 (not conducive to adaptive management) and 1 (fully conducive) and a “vertical” aggregate within the main category of the sub-category aggregates. Results are colour-coded based on ranges of the spectrum: green (score 1 to 0.67), amber (score 0.66 to 0.34), and red (score 0.33 to 0).
- **Variability:** a metric of how much the different Activity scores deviate from the average (Minor, Moderate, and Major), which helps distinguish more consistent patterns from more random ones. Results are colour-coded based on ranges of the spectrum: minor-green, moderate-amber, and major-red.
- **Coverage:** The percentage of Activities for which observations were generated, which helps identify gaps in data. Results are colour-coded based on ranges of the spectrum: green (67-100%), amber (34-66%), and red (0-33%).
- **Pattern:** An indication of the strength and direction of the patterns that emerge from the combination of average score, variability, and coverage. Regardless of score, low-variability and high-coverage patterns are considered the strongest ones, and therefore most significant.

Table 2: Summary of aggregate findings

INDICATOR	AVERAGE	VARIABILITY	COVERAGE	PATTERN
<b>1. Permission Space</b>	<b>0.81</b>	<i>Minor</i>	57%	
1.1. External permission space supports experimentation	<b>0.88</b>	<i>Minor</i>	33%	Insufficient data
1.2. Corporate systems allow flexibility	<b>0.94</b>	<i>Minor</i>	53%	Insufficient data
1.3. Senior MFAT staff encourage adaptation	<b>0.62</b>	<i>Moderate</i>	83%	Not always conducive, variable
<b>2. Planning</b>	<b>0.66</b>	<i>Moderate</i>	88%	
2.1. The planning process is problem-driven and collaborative	<b>0.73</b>	<i>Moderate</i>	100%	Conductive but variable
2.2. Planning builds on evidence	<b>0.62</b>	<i>Moderate</i>	91%	Not always conducive, variable
2.3. Rationale for adaptation is clearly articulated	<b>0.62</b>	<i>Moderate</i>	72%	Not always conducive, variable
<b>3. Activity design</b>	<b>0.67</b>	<i>Moderate</i>	87%	
3.1. MERL framework enables locally driven definition and supports learning	<b>0.67</b>	<i>Moderate</i>	90%	Conductive but variable
3.2. Learning orientation is built into the design	<b>0.55</b>	<i>Moderate</i>	81%	Not always conducive, variable
3.3. The implementation plan allows for flexibility	<b>0.82</b>	<i>Moderate</i>	84%	Conductive but variable
3.4. The Activity management and governance arrangements allow for partnership	<b>0.65</b>	<i>Moderate</i>	94%	Not always conducive, variable
<b>4. Activity delivery</b>	<b>0.66</b>	<i>Moderate</i>	84%	
4.1. Implementing relationships empower adaptation	<b>0.87</b>	<i>Minor</i>	96%	Conductive and consistent
4.2. Delivery plan allows for adaptation	<b>0.60</b>	<i>Moderate</i>	84%	Not always conducive, variable
4.3. MERL requirements support adaptive management	<b>0.52</b>	<i>Major</i>	71%	Not always conducive, highly variable
<b>5. Capacity, capability, and culture</b>	<b>0.65</b>	<i>Moderate</i>	69%	
5.1. Staff have the capacity to manage adaptively	<b>0.64</b>	<i>Moderate</i>	71%	Not always conducive, variable
5.2. Staff have the requisite capabilities for adaptive management	<b>0.69</b>	<i>Moderate</i>	92%	Conductive but variable
5.3. Management culture encourages adaptive approaches	<b>0.68</b>	<i>Moderate</i>	44%	Conductive but variable
5.4. There are processes in place for building knowledge and relationships	<b>0.57</b>	<i>Major</i>	71%	Not always conducive, highly variable

### 3.1.1. High-level findings

The patterns emerging from the review can be interpreted into key messages for each diagnostic category:

- **Permission space:** Based on the experience of the project team with other donors, permission space was identified as a potential challenge for adaptive management, largely due to the increased uncertainty and additional scrutiny that ensues. However, despite not featuring prominently in documents or interviews, it is clear that the MFAT permission space is generally conducive to adaptiveness, particularly in terms of a clear political<sup>2</sup> mandate and flexible corporate systems. However, there are different understandings of what adaptive management is, which adds confusion to the general climate of encouragement.
- **Planning:** Existing planning processes encourage a focus on the problems the Activity seeks to address and put a premium on working with partners and beneficiaries. The use of evidence of what has worked in the past is more limited. In some cases, this is because Activities build on previous ones and there is no need to do scoping; but that is not always the case. Another weak point is the rationale for adaptation, which is not always clearly articulated and, when it is, not always consistent with the Activity.
- **Activity design:** Observed design practices are one of the strongest enablers of adaptive management, particularly regarding flexibility around areas of intervention, budget spend, and staffing and partnerships. There is also a general alignment between results expectations and local conditions, which is a good proxy for context sensitivity. However, the systems that would enable systematic learning are less well developed, with governance arrangements that tend not to generate genuine reflection and a learning orientation that tends not to be explicitly built into the design and MERL Framework but left tacit and informal.
- **Activity delivery:** The subcategory that presented best in the diagnostic tool relates to the relationship between MFAT and its implementing partners. These tended to be based on flexible and outcome-focused contracts and joint performance review. But this partnership ethos is not matched by delivery plans that incorporate iteration and reflection. It is also undermined by insufficiently robust MERL systems that rely on subjective and unchallenged assessment by implementers prone to positive bias and poorly articulated links to reflection and decision-making.
- **Capacity, capability, and culture:** Both MFAT and implementing partner staff are generally encouraged to be adaptive, and the practices reviewed revealed that staff are able to balance the corporate requirements around contractual accountability with the resourcing and relationships required for adaptive management. Staff are accustomed to engaging in open discussion, but honest reflection is sometimes less prevalent. However, these attitudes are not supported by systems that build staff capacity. Activities that were found to display adaptive management relied heavily on the existing capabilities and approaches of implementers. Where an implementer was expected to deliver adaptively

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<sup>2</sup> The Inquiry in Aid in the Pacific by the Foreign Affairs, Trade and Defence Committee (FADTC) in 2019/20 recommended that the New Zealand Government “*Step up efforts to design and deliver initiatives that are local owned, adaptive, responsive, and based on evidence*”. In parallel, MFAT developed the New Zealand’s Policy Statement on International Cooperation for Effective Sustainable Development (ICESD), which similarly commits to “*Adaptive approaches driven by local context and continuous learning*”.



without existing capabilities the adaptive potential was not typically realised. Adaptive management practices depend significantly on individuals and implementing partners, with key approaches and lessons seldom disseminated.

### **3.1.2. A high ceiling, but also a low floor**

The diagnostic findings reveal an interesting enabling environment for adaptive management within MFAT, at least based on the Activities reviewed.

Formal policies and processes create ample space for staff to seek out approaches compatible with adaptive management (there is a “high ceiling” for adaptive management). Contrary to what is often seen in other donors, there is no overriding requirement to plan all details of an Activity years in advance, nor is there a concern about engaging with difficult issues or complex contexts that do not lend themselves easily to “quick wins”.

However, there appears to be limited emphasis on the kinds of toolkits and skillsets that would empower staff to make the most of the permissive organisational space in order to develop flexible, context-sensitive, and learning-oriented programmes (there is a “low floor” of adaptive management practice).

In combination, the high ceiling and low floor for adaptive management are probably responsible for the extensive variation observed across the activities reviewed. With so much organisational freedom, but so little organisational guidance, it is up to individual staff (and implementing partners) to find bespoke ways of working adaptively.

## **3.2. Key Theme 1: Planning for adaptation**

One of the key themes that emerged from the comparative review of the Activities was the lack of a consistent approach to planning for adaptation: that is, identifying whether the nature of the problem and context calls for an adaptive approach, having a clear idea of what the approach itself entails, and devising frameworks and processes to support it.

### **3.2.1. The main elements of adaptive management appear in some form**

All the elements that are normally considered enablers or preconditions for adaptive management are present in varying degrees in the sample of Activities reviewed; albeit that not all the elements appear together in every Activity.

MFAT approaches most of its Activities in a responsive and context-sensitive manner. They are often based on long-term relationships in a region or country, in some cases with a long history of partnership. An Activity like Bougainville Healthy Communities is so intertwined with local communities that its approach and objectives both contribute to and are informed by the developmental priorities of regional authorities.

A majority of the Activities also enjoy flexible contracts and GFAs, explicitly granting the space necessary for adjusting expenditures, activities, staffing, and local partnerships. This flexibility enables creative responses to the severe disruptions arising from COVID-19 restrictions, for instance in the Timor Leste Tourism Development Activity.

Finally, even if there were a few instances where Activity results were prescribed to the level of individual inputs, there is clear space for the results frameworks that implementing partners adopt to focus on outcome-level changes that are higher-level and longer-term.

### **3.2.2. Variation across Activities reflects lack of clarity and guidance**

All Activities suggested by MFAT for this review were identified as “adaptive”, though there was significant variation in how the adaptive label is understood and applied.

In some cases, the term can be misleading because it is not clear that the nature of the problem and context even require an adaptive approach in the first place. Examples of “adaptation” that are documented or were referenced in interviews would typically be considered the type of conventional updating that Activities undergo during implementation rather than an adaptive approach *per se*. They were not part of a holistic and systematic approach to testing, learning, and adaptation. Similarly, when pressed to demonstrate how Activities have been adaptive, evidence of practices that would be conventionally identified with sound Activity management, not necessarily adaptive management, are often presented by MFAT staff and implementing partners alike. This betrays a lack of clarity by MFAT and its partners on what it means to be adaptive.

Other Activities, particularly the Negotiated Partnerships, developed more comprehensive approaches to adaptation as part of their outcome arrangements and Activity design documents. However, the rationale for adaptation was not entirely clear, despite the emphasis on MERL and delegated decision-making, the lack of a clear and shared rationale does not provide the impetus necessary for joint learning and decision making. Only in the case of Timor Tourism was the need for adaptation clearly linked to the complexity and uncertainty of a nascent sector in a weak state, and a methodology developed that would enable the implementer to tackle such complexity and uncertainty.

Clearly articulating both the need for and implications of adaptive management is key to ensuring that the right processes and tools are deployed in support of the approach. Strong governance and MERL arrangements are key to managing partnerships operating under uncertainty, and these are the elements that were often found most lacking in the Activities reviewed, primarily because of insufficient scoping and resourcing upfront (the question of MERL is further explored below).

### **3.2.3. There is a strong reliance on implementing partner capacity**

With clear gaps in definition and guidance, MFAT’s adaptive management practice is overly reliant on the capacity of implementing partners to design and execute adaptive approaches. MFAT is good at providing the permission space for partners to manage adaptively if they have the skills, time, and inclination. The extent to which implementers capitalised on this permission space varied from Activity to Activity.

The Asia Foundation (TAF) has a long track record of practical experience and thought leadership on politically smart, locally led work, even before “adaptive management” became a term in development parlance. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that TAF could propose and implement a context-sensitive and learning-oriented management approach in Timor-Leste. Some of the other designs, also reflect a broader organisational commitment to working adaptively, building on pre-existing human resources, toolkits, and lessons learned.

In contrast, there are several examples of implementing partners who had an incomplete understanding of adaptive management, and perhaps responded to a request for “adaptation” with a design for flexibility. Even a trusted partner deeply attuned to local context and willing to course correct, can still fail to document in an explicit and systematic manner the strategic and tactical choices that it makes, because of a lack of a purposive learning methodology.

MFAT’s dependence on its partners for adaptive management capacity points to another emerging theme: the centrality of partnerships, explored below. While MFAT has a tendency to select

partners based on established trust and partnership, the partner's capability for adaptive management appears to feature less in commercial decision making.

### **3.3. Key Theme 2: Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning (MERL)**

MERL is often seen as an accountability function that falls outside of or becomes important only after implementation, rather than a central management and learning tool. For adaptive programmes, in particular, MERL is a core enabler of adaptation, generating the evidence and lessons necessary for responding to context, articulating the need for adjustments, and developing comprehensive narratives of change. MERL is therefore critical at each stage of an Activity, providing the anchor for Activity design, as a core management, reporting, and learning tool throughout implementation, and for any evaluation following completion.

#### **3.3.1. MERL frameworks often do not pay enough attention to theories of change**

A majority of the Activities reviewed use results frameworks that are focused primarily on output metrics with very granular and detailed sets of indicators based on robust methodologies for documenting effects on beneficiaries. These are, typically, limited to a results diagram and indicator table. And, regardless of the quality of these artefacts, there is often not a clear articulation of how these relate to a full theory of change that outlines the pathways and assumptions required to translate the outputs into the desired outcomes. Without comprehensive theories of change, it is difficult to anticipate potential challenges, and intermediate results go undocumented.

The Negotiated Partnerships and the Timor Tourism Activity supply high-quality illustrations of how to incorporate strong theories of change at the design stage or early in implementation. In the case of Save the Children, following revisions in the first year of implementation to address recognised shortfalls in the design MERL, the organisation's own theory of change (outlining how it works) is presented together with a programme logic model that specifies how different types of outcomes contribute to one another, and supplemented by Activity-level theories of change. This type of approach enables ongoing monitoring and evaluation of an Activity that is being managed adaptively: a results framework that focuses not just on the "what", but also on the "how" and "why" of process steps and management choices.

#### **3.3.2. Reporting templates are well designed but underutilised**

The MERL templates in use by MFAT generally ask all the relevant questions that one needs to answer in order to manage an adaptive activity. The Activity Progress Reports template, for example, includes questions on such topics as unintended consequences, context changes that call for adjustment, relationships with key stakeholders, rationale for updating the results framework, changes to governance arrangements, and lessons learned.

Despite the general high quality of templates, the reviewed reporting documents do not capture enough evidence to inform a third-party without pre-existing knowledge about the actual trajectory of Activities. A typical example of this is captured in the quote from an Activity Progress Report below:

*"The programme continues to learn from the implementation and reflect on the learnings. No specific lessons to report at this stage."*

In some cases, Activities ostensibly have systematic processes for reflection and learning, but the lack of documentation makes it challenging to understand any changes that may have occurred

over time. It is assumed that some of this reporting will happen in a tacit and informal manner, as part of everyday engagement between MFAT staff and implementers. However, as this is not recorded in any progress reports, Activity Management Assessments or other documents the potential for dissemination and learning within MFAT is limited, and the periodic loss of institutional memory as key individuals rotate or leave the organisation is all but guaranteed. In addition, formal reporting was reported by partners to generally either receive a response from MFAT too late to be useful, or no acknowledgement at all. This left some partners with the impression that Activity reporting was more of a 'tick box exercise' for MFAT than a useful adaptive tool.

### **3.3.3. There is a high degree of dependence on partner MERL capacity**

Like the differences observed in planning for adaptation, there is wide variation in MERL frameworks and partner reporting capacity. On one end, some Activities had minimal scoping for monitoring and reporting, generally folded into the Activity management role, with third-party evaluation incorporated as a one-off input into the process. These Activities had limited reporting against outcomes, imprecise impact claims, and limited supporting evidence. On the other end, an activity like Timor Tourism had MERL scoped and resourced at the design stage and incorporated as part of a comprehensive adaptive management approach, using quick feedback loops and record keeping apps to document decision-making.

The inconsistency in partner MERL capacity is partly due to limited engagement on MFAT's part. In the Activities reviewed, only a minority of MFAT Activity managers were involved in reflection and learning processes. This is largely due to MERL being seen as a compliance requirement, and therefore not given sufficient attention, rather than an Activity management tool. Capacity and capability also limit the ability for Activity managers to engage sufficiently. As a result, the ability of MFAT to critically examine partner-supplied frameworks and reporting.

Without strong direction from MFAT, it is clear that there is an overreliance on the capacity of partners to carry out rigorous MERL. The disparities in pre-existing capacity are evident in the design documents, with some partners being able to incorporate their own methodologies into MFAT's activities: for example, TAF's strategy testing methodology in Timor Leste, and Save the Children's advocacy monitoring tool in its Negotiated Partnership. There are also examples of Activities that did not start implementation with sophisticated MERL approaches, but developed new learning tools through implementation, such as was the case in the Rakhine Winter Crops Activity. In other cases, implementers have been expected to manage adaptively without necessarily having existing capabilities, limiting the adaptive potential of Activities. This points to a need to ensure capability is considered in partner selection for adaptive Activities.

## **3.4. Key Theme 3: Partnerships**

Nearly all of the reviewed Activities were characterised by effective and trusting relationships between MFAT and the implementing partner. These relationships provide the bedrock on which an adaptive management approach could be built. In the absence of a consistent approach to political economy analysis or similar, the strength of relationships with implementing partners is also the primary way in which MFAT is able to stay connected and responsive to the local context of its funded activities.

### **3.4.1. Adaptive management is facilitated by trust**

Adaptive approaches hinge on an open and trusting relationship between funder and implementer; without this, it is harder to take risks, be honest about failure and work together to find solutions. The diagnostic framework specifically sought to assess the extent to which all partners involved in a given Activity have shared values and intent for change, with relationships built on trust.

Of the 8 Activities reviewed, our findings are clear that nearly all have strong relationships between MFAT and the implementing partner, characterised by mutual respect and high trust. There was generally good values alignment, which paved the way for a relatively smooth operational relationship. Clearly articulated alignment of MFAT's development objectives with the wider foreign policy objectives of the New Zealand government was also noteworthy in most of the reviewed Activities, and specifically acknowledged by some implementing partners as beneficial.

Conversely, where the values alignment was less strong and not able to be resolved through Activity design or inception phases, the negative impact on partner relationships and overall Activity management was enduring. This reinforces the point that was often made that:

*"A good relationship helps to get priority things done."*

In general, MFAT's approach to partnering includes some key enablers of trusting relationships. Most central to this, is the investment in a relationship-based approach to partnering, particularly in the Pacific, which is seen as a hallmark of New Zealand's international brand. MFAT also has partner relationships that have developed over long periods of time that are founded on trust. This includes relationships with partners that have good organisational systems themselves, which enables a lifting of engagement from an administrative focus on chasing loose ends, to substantive discussion and joint decision making.

There are also a number of constraints to effective relationships between MFAT and its partners. Although in most cases these did not derail the relationship overall, they were noted as obstacles which had to be navigated. Staff turnover has a high cost as relationships and trust need to be rebuilt. The personal preferences and style of the incoming Activity manager can significantly influence the way MFAT engages overall. This is also linked to a lack of consistency and messaging between different parts of MFAT, including staff at Post and Wellington, that are sometimes not as joined up as they could be. In general, implementing partners found MFAT staff at Post are easier to work with as they are immersed in the political economy and closer to the decision making. Both staff turnover and consistent messaging are also impacted by the intrinsic funder-recipient dynamics and the corresponding impact it can have on the willingness of some partners to open up about failures and mistakes.

### **3.4.2. Partnership is a means of being responsive to context**

The diagnostic framework included multiple indicators aimed at assessing the extent to which a given Activity was able to understand and respond to complexities, risks, opportunities, uncertainties, and problems in the local environment. This included identifying both who was involved in the Activity (and the strength of their local connectedness) as well as how the local context was analysed.

Our overall finding in this area is that the reviewed Activities appear, on the whole, to be well connected to local political realities and responsive to context. This was despite the fact that formal political economy or similar analysis appeared to be used infrequently by either MFAT or

the implementing partner. Rather, local connectedness and contextual understanding appeared to arise mainly through the strength of MFAT's relationship with the partner, and in turn the partner's relationships with local stakeholders, particularly in geographies or sectors where delivery is long-standing.

*"MFAT values regular catch-ups because the team has eyes and ears on the ground..."*

### **3.4.3. Activity governance**

Effective Activity governance is a key input to successful implementation of an adaptive approach. It also forms the central structure within which MFAT and implementing partners relate and interact over the course of an Activity. The diagnostic framework therefore sought to assess the extent to which governance processes encouraged adaptive programming.

Overall, most Activities in the sample have not adopted Activity governance mechanisms that are specifically designed to support highly responsive and adaptive programming. The mechanisms that are in place typically consist of annual meetings, structured around reporting on what has already happened rather than governing in real time based on observations of what is happening. In a number of cases governance groups can be quite large, which means that they may be more effective as a form of stakeholder management than for governance itself.

For those Activities that are more adaptive, these meetings are often supplemented by more frequent and less formal communications between the MFAT Activity manager and the implementing partner. These interactions did not require preparation or reading of reports, so were relatively resource-light, and enable the partner to receive MFAT's feedback in real-time.

Adaptive management requires clearly defined governance mechanisms that can reflect on learning and make decisions on any adaptation that may be required. In the absence of this, changes risk not have received due consideration of all key stakeholders. Effective governance for adaptive Activities therefore needs to be included in Activity design and operationalised early in implementation.

## **3.5. Key Theme 4: MFAT capability and capacity**

Capability underpins good design and planning, enables reflective MERL, and contributes to constructive engagement with partners. The capacity to deploy this capability is equally important. Across all the Activities reviewed, and critically for MFAT, there is a lot of variation in capability and capacity, and this seems to be shaped by the individuals at various points in time, rather than systematically, through organisational policies.

### **3.5.1. Individual backgrounds and choices determine the practice of adaptation**

Across the board, the understanding of adaptive management of Activity managers is based on their own professional backgrounds. There is little guidance on what managing adaptively means in MFAT and individuals therefore resort to a combination of previous exposure to adaptive thinking, personal research, or implied understanding, or contracting external resources to provide support. In this context, the individual's attitude towards uncertainty plays a significant role in determining the level of adaptation that any Activity may display. This includes both in terms of uncertainty of achieving outcomes and adapting to context, but also uncertainty of how to operate within the permission space afforded.

In a similar vein, Activity managers that invest additional time to work adaptively with partners do so at their own behest as opposed to specifically having the level of engagement required factored into their overall capacity. This is a factor of both individual interest in working adaptively with partners and a level of experience that enables the individual to determine how best to invest their limited time across the Activities that they manage and their other work responsibilities. However, this is likely to be the exception as Activity managers report having very limited additional capacity available to deploy. Regardless how well designed an adaptive Activity may be, it is likely that Activity management will default to the minimum levels of contract management and compliance.

Some of the more adaptive Activities reviewed for this project are managed either by staff in non-rotational positions in sectoral teams or divisions<sup>3</sup> or by staff that have longer and more diverse experience than typical MFAT Activity managers. This may indicate that adaptive programmes may benefit from a specific approach to identifying suitable Activity managers or developing alternative management models that leverage capability from across the business.

### **3.5.2. Content of engagement is more important than frequency**

While MFAT is generally seen as easy to engage with, in line with the general partnership approach adopted throughout the aid programme, there are instances where engagement with partners is frequent but adds little value. In this context, engagement is a strain on the already limited capacity of Activity manager and is not seen as a contributing factor to good adaptive practice.

Partners would welcome more technical input into reflective practice in adaptive programmes, and a level of shared understanding in decision making on any changes in approach that may be required. Good contextual understanding of the political economy in which the Activity is operating is equally important. In some of the Activities reviewed, this does happen but is again driven by the individuals having relevant technical capabilities in the sector relevant to the Activity or being immersed in the political economy, for example if the Activity is managed at Post.

Where the Activity manager does not have specific capability relevant to the Activity, partners consider it would be useful for this to be mobilised either from other parts of MFAT or through alternative mechanisms. Mobilising this capability can provide the Activity manager with the level of comfort in decision making to enable partners to work adaptively.

### **3.5.3. Activity managers working adaptively are doing so in silos**

Learning and reflection is essential in adaptive management. While this is central to the design and delivery of a specific Activity, using knowledge from MERL to make decisions on adapting to context for example, it is equally useful across adaptive Activities within the organisation. It can foster cross-programme learning on how to respond to specific types of circumstances and contributes to building capability across Activity managers.

The individuals managing the Activities reviewed for this project are doing so largely in silos. At best, they may be aware of other Activities that are working adaptively but are not pro-actively or regularly engaging with other Activity managers. We recognise that there is an emergent community of practice on adaptive management developing in MFAT that the project engaged with in Phase 1. However, at present it appears to be a group of people that interact on an ad-hoc basis based on interest rather than a forum for regular cross programme learning and reflection.

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<sup>3</sup> Formerly DST Division, now DEVPP and DEVECO Divisions

There is an opportunity to significantly strengthen this community of practice and articulate a clear goal and approach to bringing people together to learn from each other.

#### 3.5.4. There are risks to continuity in Activity management

While some of the Activities reviewed for this project are managed by non-rotational staff, providing continuity in relationships and knowledge, often across multiple phases of Activities, this is not the norm in MFAT. Where there has been a rotation during the course of implementation, Activity managers noted a lack of resources to draw on. This relates both generally to adaptive management as a practice, but also to the details of the specific Activity. Some of the internal Activity management documentation often provides only cursory information with much of the contextual information assumed understood amongst the individuals involved at the time. While this makes it difficult for an external party to assess the usefulness of Activity management tools, more importantly it emphasises the need for a good handover between Activity managers, including overlap where possible.

Regardless of rotation in Activity managers, there is generally little record of decisions made over time in managing an Activity. The rationale and decision-making process for changes to the delivery approach or changes to the MERL framework are poorly or not documented. This compounds the risk to continuity in Activity management and misses an opportunity to build an evidence base of adaptive practice within the community of practice or MFAT more broadly.

## 4. IMPLICATIONS FOR MFAT

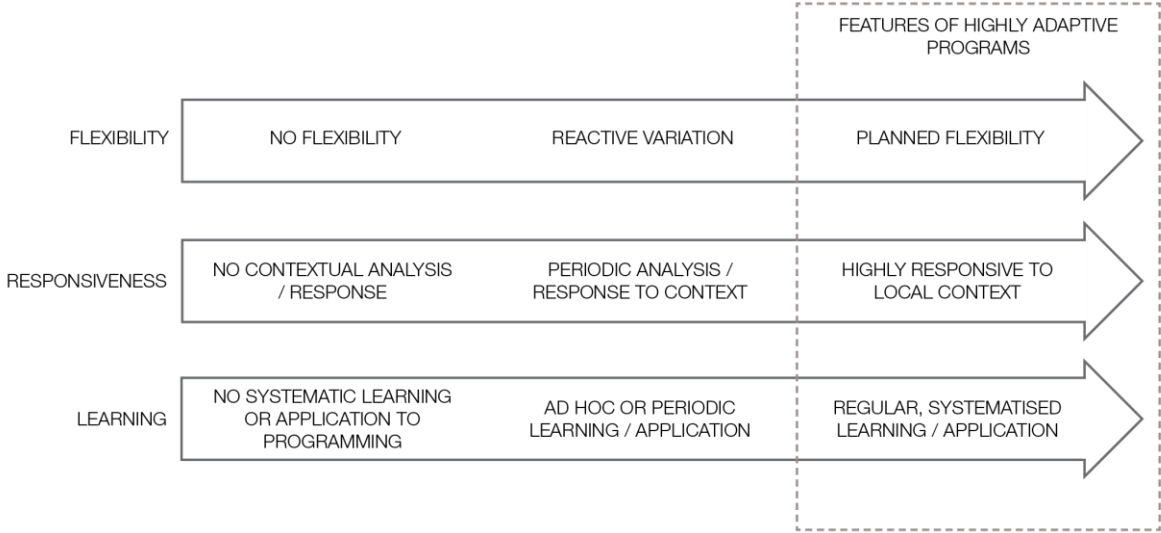
### 4.1. Conceptualising adaptive management

As noted earlier, there is no settled consensus (either in MFAT, or in the development community at large) on the meaning of adaptive management or the circumstances or problem areas in which it is required for getting better results.

However, there are common points of convergence on both the general features of the approach and the situations in which it can add value. Synthesising across our discussions and literature review in Phase 1 and the diagnostic process in Phase 2, we suggest that MFAT adopt a three-part model for conceptualising its adaptive programmes, focused on **flexibility**, **responsiveness**, and **purposive learning**. This is represented in Figure 2 below.



**Figure 2: Adaptive management conceptual framework**



While the terms ‘flexible’ and ‘adaptive’ are often conflated or used interchangeably, they are not the same. **Flexibility**, in our understanding, is simply the capacity to adjust things (resources, activities, partners, outputs, etc) if needed. All development programmes need a degree of flexibility, to deal with uncertainty, new information, and unexpected events. It describes the *absence* of constraints that force teams to stick to predetermined plans. In contrast, **responsiveness** is about proactively reading the external environment, tracking the politics around a particular issue, or taking in feedback from people participating in your programme.

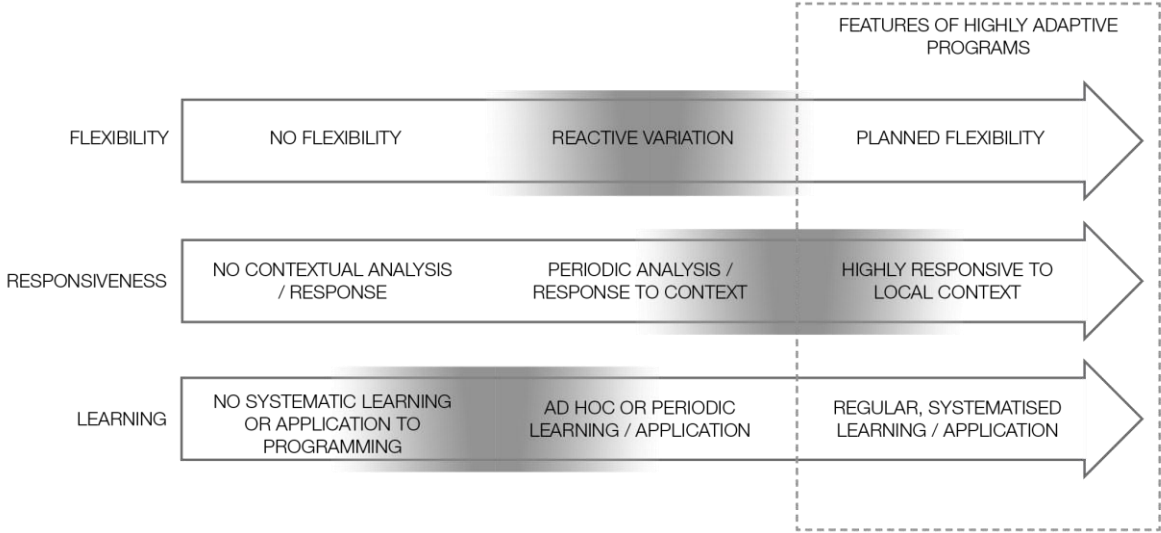
A third critical feature is the degree to which **learning** takes place in a way that is structured, systematic, and able to shape programming. Adaptive programmes build in deliberate learning and experimentation in response to uncertainty or a lack of evidence on how best to achieve the desired programme outcome. The form this learning takes can range from an ad hoc and informal process of ‘purposive muddling’ through to a very structured and quasi-experimental approach.

When assessing the kind of adaptive approach that may be required in different circumstances, it will be helpful for MFAT to look at these elements, both individually and as a set. Not all flexible or responsive programmes need to be adaptive. However, adaptive programmes do need to have built-in flexibility to make changes to programme activities based on evidence and learning, and responsiveness to evolving priorities or needs, including feedback from programme participants and other stakeholders. Some combination of these three elements can probably be found in most, if not all, development programmes, to a greater or lesser degree. When they are found together you have the hallmark of a genuinely adaptive programme.

**4.2. How do the identified Activities fit in this framework?**

The Activities in our sample demonstrate these three elements of adaptive programming to a greater or lesser extent. Revisiting the figure presented in Section 4.1, we have mapped the Activities reviewed in Figure 3. The diagram does not directly map individual Activities (the diagnostic was not designed for that purpose) but instead shows where we assess the greatest concentration of MFAT Activities to sit on the spectrum for each component. Further explanation is provided below.

**Figure 3: Mapping of reviewed activities to adaptive management conceptual framework**



**4.2.1. Flexibility**

The majority of MFAT Activities reviewed were judged to be flexible, with few inhibiting factors. This was demonstrated through relatively flexible contracts, a general lack of prescription around Activities or inputs, and an ability to adjust Activity budgets within and across years. Similarly, flexible implementation was often supported by rolling workplans, outcome-level results frameworks, close partnerships with implementing partners allowing joint discussion of progress and performance, and a willingness/ability to endorse necessary changes to programming (sometimes quite significant) in response to unexpected circumstances such as major changes in context, new requests from partners, recommendations from Activity reviews and so forth. This was particularly well evidenced in the way many Activities were able to adjust to the impact of COVID-19.

However, this flexibility was generally assessed as ‘reactive’ rather than ‘proactive’ change; was often driven by external rather than internal factors or systems; and often involved a significant lag between when the need for change emerged, and when it was actually acted upon. There were relatively few examples of planned flexibility, where the Activity acknowledged the uncertain context up-front, the likelihood that things would change over the Activity life, and therefore deliberately built flexibility into the Activity’s architecture.

Flexibility was also generally heavily reliant on the experience and capabilities of delivery partners, or key individuals like Activity managers to drive it and to make it work. This resulted in quite uneven approaches to implementation between Activities, or even sometimes over the life of an individual Activity.

In summary, this conforms to our ‘high ceiling-low floor’ characterisation, where Activities have the flexibility necessary to support adaptive management but, in the absence of a clear understanding of adaptive management and guidance in its use, this capability is rarely exploited to its full extent.

#### **4.2.2. Responsiveness**

As previously acknowledged, MFAT typically places a strong priority on understanding and being sensitive to the context in which it works, designing activities that align approaches and expected results to local conditions, having strong relationships with partners and beneficiaries, and an ability to respond to changes in context and partner requests. Overall, this was assessed as a consistent strength across MFAT activities.

There were, however, few examples where this contextual knowledge and responsiveness was informed by formal and ongoing political-economy analysis or similar tools. Instead, MFAT was seen to rely heavily on the understanding and networks of its implementing partners, who often had a long-standing presence in the geography/sector. While this did result in strong contextual appreciation, it also resulted in some partners being chosen primarily for their knowledge of context, at the expense of other capabilities conducive to adaptive programming (such as the tools/systems/experience for flexible implementation and iterative learning).

#### **4.2.3. Learning**

Figure 2 depicts our assessment of MFAT's relative weakness in 'purposive learning': the extent to which Activity successes, setbacks and failures are systematically analysed, understood, and fed back into programming. As has been presented in the findings in Section 3, this is largely down to the approach to monitoring and evaluation, often being treated as routine Activity management rather than with dedicated focus and resourcing. This is not surprising, given that MERL frameworks focus on proving 'what' the Activity was achieving, in terms of development results, with much less focus on the process and use of evidence and learning to drive decision-making and improvement. And as a direct consequence of this, analysis and reporting are often limited and the link to decision making not clearly documented or recorded.

While anecdotal evidence suggests learning is happening to some extent in an organic manner, the extent is hard to gauge, and the lack of documentation means that the opportunity to capture, disseminate and build upon learning within the organisation and across the life of an Activity is lost. Overall, this translated into a learning orientation across the portfolio that would require significant strengthening to enable adaptive management.

### **4.3. When is adaptive management necessary (and not)?**

Working adaptively is resource-intensive and would be inefficient in a predictable environment with a robust and well-evidenced theory of change. Some of MFAT's diplomatic and development priorities can be addressed by rolling out tried and tested solutions that we can be confident will work. Implementation is about following the plan, while keeping flexibility to respond to unforeseen changes. While some development priorities can be addressed in this way, others involve more complex challenges, where the evidence base on what works is more limited. In these circumstances, responding to uncertainty and complexity with interventions that are fully planned out risks costly failure or missed opportunities.

Based on the findings of Phase 1 and the collective view of the team, to decide whether to take an adaptive approach, Activity design teams need to interrogate the nature of the problem or the change you would like to see. The kind of uncertainty and complexity that calls for an adaptive approach is likely to be present where there is no clear pathway to achieving outcomes or there is a need for innovation (e.g., you are designing a pilot programme with limited evidence, where the emphasis is on developing a solution, or where existing approaches will not achieve the scale

or breadth of change you are looking to see). These types of situations typically require a high degree of flexibility and responsiveness together with a systematised learning approach to iteratively assess the progress that is being made and course correct as required.

Where the context is less complex or uncertain, some flexibility and responsiveness may still be required to ensure the programme consistently delivers good results. However, the additional element of purposive learning may not add sufficient value in these circumstances to justify the greater resources it requires.

In addition to the type of problem being tackled, it is also important to consider the programme in the wider portfolio. Would an adaptive approach complement existing programming, or is there a risk it will be undermined by other, less flexible parts of the portfolio? In a portfolio that is focused on delivery of basic services or the roll-out of interventions where there is a strong evidence base on how to proceed, adaptive programmes may be less beneficial.

These reflections raise the questions:

- How can MFAT have a more analytical, robust approach to deciding when flexibility or adaptation is required, and to what extent?
- Where it is determined that adaptation is important, can MFAT make the necessary resources, guidance and support available to deliver?

The remaining sections of this report seek to address these questions through a range of recommendations supporting MFAT to establish a clear organisational understanding of adaptive management, how it can reinforce (but be clearly distinguished from) good Activity management, and when it should be applied and to what extent.

## **5. ENABLING A SHIFT TO ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT**

### **5.1. How does adaptive management fit in broader Activity management?**

As noted in Section 4.1, the characteristics that make up adaptive management are likely to exist to varying degrees in all activities. It is therefore important to consider adaptive management as the combination and systematisation of those characteristics as opposed to a completely different set of tools or approaches. However, it is equally important to differentiate good Activity management more generally to adaptive management explicitly. The current diversity of understanding of adaptive management across the business, and the haphazard use of terminology in templates and what guidance exists has resulted in the current situation where almost all Activities attempt to define an approach to adaptive management that is neither fit for purpose nor conducive to improved development outcomes.

We understand that MFAT has a number of continuous improvement workstreams currently underway in relation to Activity management and governance. This is an opportunity to be clear on what constitutes good Activity management, which is necessary in all Activities regardless of whether they are intended to be adaptive, and when adaptive management is necessary/desirable and what additional factors need to be designed into an adaptive Activity that may not be necessary in other Activities.

## 5.2. What changes are required?

This report has outlined the findings of applying the diagnostic tool to a selection of Activities identified by MFAT as demonstrating elements of adaptive management. While the Activities demonstrate degrees of flexibility or responsiveness and some have some learning mechanisms built into them, the majority do not demonstrate all three features of highly adaptive programmes: planned flexibility; highly responsive to local context; and regular, systematised learning/application. That is not to say that all would need to or benefit from displaying the levels of flexibility, responsiveness and learning expected from an adaptive programme given the problem they are addressing. Table 3 below briefly outlines the main constraints to adaptive management in MFAT that have been identified and provides an indication of potential solutions. These are outlined in more detail below the table.

**Table 3: Constraints and potential solution for more adaptive practice**

Constraint	Potential Solution
There is a lack of a common and consistent understanding of adaptive management	Develop and socialise a definition of adaptive management for MFAT. The framework described in this report could be a starting point.
There is a need to identify when adaptive management is necessary and feasible	Develop a decision tree or a set of criteria for design teams to work through
There is insufficient technical input into Activity design from across sectoral and central teams	Strengthen the Activity design process to ensure that key MFAT capability (sectoral, MERL, commercial, legal, others) is called on at the right time
There is limited documentation of political economy analysis integrated into Activity design <i>and</i> management	Introduce more formalised documentation of political economy analysis, including documenting the rationale for change
Adaptive management is more resource intensive	Develop a new Activity management model for Activities identified as benefitting from adaptive management. This includes the ability to draw in other parts of the business to support informed decision making or setting up additional structures.
Activity management capability is low	Increased capability development on Activity management in general, including the components of flexibility, responsiveness, and learning, would improve outcomes in general, and can support adaptive management specifically when identified, as necessary.

In order to be in a position to integrate adaptive management as a tool within broader Activity management, it is important that MFAT first arrive at a clear consensus on what the term means in MFAT's context. While there is no internationally agreed single definition of adaptive management, there is general consensus on what contexts require an adaptive approach and what

tools are necessary to work effectively in those contexts. Sections 4.1 and 4.2, while used here to contextualise the implications for MFAT and these recommendations, also provide a framework on which to build an internally consistent and agreed definition.

With an agreed definition in place and noting the opportunity to integrate adaptive management as a tool within design and management of Activities, there will be a need to develop processes to identify when adaptive management is necessary and feasible, and if so, how to design an Activity that integrates all the necessary approaches, tools, and resourcing. The current approach to design asks of the business case drafter to provide detail on how the Activity will be adaptive. It does not require any consideration of why the Activity should be adaptive. The first step in a design process should be to consider the issue that is being tackled and the political economy in which the issue is located. A set of criteria, or a decision tree, could be developed for design teams to identify whether the Activity should be designed adaptively. Reaching this decision would likely require input from country teams, sector teams, and supporting functional teams (e.g. IME, COD, Legal). This is a process issue as well as a decision support issue, and there is scope to design a new approach with identified resourcing, including potentially a central resource with adaptive management expertise to support the decision.

While MFAT's partnership approach to development cooperation generally lends itself well to understanding political economy as part of engagement and decision making, there could be benefits from more explicit political economy analysis in both design (such as in the strategic case of the business case) and management. In formalising political economy analysis, there is a risk of over-engineering and losing some of the authenticity that currently characterises MFAT engagement with partners. However, documentation of the political economy and reflecting its implications provides the context to justify the design, informs activity management, and supports evaluation of results.

Political economy analysis is also important to support improvements in MERL and purposive learning. The current gap is not so much about the quality of the MERL frameworks themselves, rather around the processes to use the MERL framework for Activity management, reflection, and adaptation. Guidance is necessary on what systems, processes, and resources are necessary to make use of the MERL framework in an adaptive programme.

There is also a need to consider resourcing on Activities that have been designed for adaptive management. As mentioned earlier, the rotational model of Activity management is not intrinsically well suited to adaptive management. Adaptive Activities benefit from a variety of inputs in decision making including technical expertise and local context. It may therefore be necessary to develop a different Activity management model for Activities that have been identified as benefitting from adaptive management. There are many options to consider that could include:

- Processes to draw in other capability in a more regular formalised manner (e.g., sectoral, MERL, commercial) to support informed decision making by Activity managers
- Identifying non-rotational staff to manage adaptive Activities
- Contracting Implementation Leads to run the day-to-day Activity management in support of the Activity managers
- Technical Advisory Groups bring in additional expertise/capability and can exist either in parallel to the arrangements outlined above or instead of.

Ultimately, however, while the tools and processes outlined above are a part of the solution, there is a need across the board to provide improved and additional training and support to Activity

managers. This includes both specific training and guidance for any of the elements outlined above as well as more general training for Activity management. This was identified as one of the weakest elements across all the Activities reviewed, echoing concerns raised in Phase 1, and could go a long way to improving the achievement of development outcomes.

## 6. NEXT STEPS

In our original proposal, there was an expectation that a number of tools, templates or systems would be identified that could be improved or developed to enable a more coherent and consistent approach to adaptive management. What we have found, however, is that wholesale changes to tools, templates, or systems are not required given the high policy ceiling but that, at the same time, technical tweaks to templates or the introduction of additional guidance is unlikely to achieve the desired outcomes. There is a broader need to rethink the Activity management lifecycle from design to delivery, including who is engaged at various points and how a management model can best be structured. This includes a better understanding and articulation of when adaptive management is necessary and what this means from a design and delivery perspective. These are more fundamental changes.

However, in order to maintain momentum on adaptive management there are a number of actions that could be considered. These include:

- In the short-term, there is an opportunity to increase the understanding of adaptive management across MFAT and ensure that a common definition is adopted. This could be achieved through a series of knowledge / learning events on the findings from this work so far, a definition of adaptive management for MFAT, case studies of adaptive projects, and how to strategically plan for adaptive management in a portfolio. A decision tree that identifies when adaptive management may be useful or necessary could also be developed and disseminated during these knowledge events.
- In the medium-term, interim guidance documents for adaptive management could be co-developed with key MFAT teams for use when it is determined that an activity should be designed adaptively. Additional training and dialogue with the internal community of practice could also be provided to develop adaptive management “champions” that MFAT can call upon as needed.

Longer term, as there is existing work underway in MFAT to review the Activity management lifecycle, there is a risk of duplication and overlap if a separate process is launched specifically for adaptive management tools and processes. Rather, there is an opportunity to integrate adaptive management into the overall continuous improvement piece, including the development of tools and processes as outlined in this report.

## ANNEX 1: DIAGNOSTIC FINDINGS

### Methodology

#### Scoring methodology

Indicators were scored for each activity following a traffic light approach:

- **Green:** Assessment of the available evidence leads to the conclusion that this indicator corresponds an enabling factor within MFAT.
- **Amber:** Assessment of the available evidence leads to conflicting inferences or corresponds to a variety of outcomes that cannot justifiably lead to a Green or Red assessment.
- **Red:** Assessment of the available evidence leads to the conclusion that this indicator corresponds to a challenge within MFAT.
- **Grey:** Insufficient evidence available to provide an assessment.

#### Aggregation methodology

Individual scores were translated into a scale between 1 and 0 representing the spectrum between total and non-existent conduciveness to adaptive management, using the above categories as qualitative anchors. Green scores were coded as 1, amber scores as 0.5, and red scores as 0. An average was taken of all scores of the same indicator across activities; then, averages are generated for sub-categories and for the five main categories. For the sake of accessibility, average scores were colour-coded based on two cut-off ranges of the spectrum (0.33 and 0.66), thus resulting in green (score 1 to 0.67, conducive to adaptive management), amber (score 0.66 to 0.34, not always conducive), and red (score 0.33 to 0, not conducive) ranges.

#### Variability

In order to determine whether aggregate scores were representative of a pattern of concentrated scores or merely an average of extremes, a coefficient of variation was generated by taking the ratio of the standard deviation to the average. Despite the small number of observations and thus absence of a normal distribution, this metric of dispersion is useful in order to ensure that there can be a clear differentiation between concentrated and dispersed patterns of observations. For the sake of accessibility, the resulting coefficient was turned into a variability categorisation with three ranges: minor (0 to 0.33), moderate (0.34 to 0.66), and major (0.67 to 1). Results were colour-coded based on the ranges: minor-green, moderate-amber, and major-red.

#### Coverage

Given the variation in access to sources for each Activity, and thus ability to score every indicator, a percentage of Activities for which observations were generated is presented as way to help visualise limitations in data. Results are colour-coded based on ranges of the spectrum: green (67-100%), amber (34-66%), and red (67-100%).



## Interpreting results

The most significant indicator scores - regardless of how high or low - are those that present minor variability and near-100% coverage. High-variability, high-coverage scores represent artificial aggregates that are not reflective of the actual Activities observed, which in reality have very dispersed scores. Low-variability, low-coverage aggregate scores need to be assessed cautiously, as they may be an artifact of a small number of observations. Finally, high-variability, low-coverage scores represent have the lowest validity. The full diagnostic table is presented below, followed by tables that highlight those indicators that present concentrated or divergent patterns.

## Full Diagnostic Table

INDICATOR	AVERAGE	STANDARD DEVIATION	COEFFICIENT OF VARIATION	VARIABILITY	COVERAGE
1. Permission Space	0.81	0.27	0.33	Minor	57%
1.1. External permission space supports experimentation	0.88	0.22	0.25	Minor	33%
1.1.1. Ministerial/Parliamentary setting enables a level of failure in the aid programme					0%
1.1.2. Public perceptions of aid are positive					0%
1.1.3. Diplomatic and developmental goals are mutually supporting	0.88	0.22	0.25	Minor	100%
1.2. Corporate systems allow flexibility	0.94	0.16	0.17	Minor	53%
1.2.1. Corporate strategies and plans allow flexibility in planning	1.00	0.00	0.00	None	50%
1.2.2. Budget cycle and requirements allow flexibility in execution	0.88	0.22	0.25	Minor	50%
1.2.3. Corporate results management and reporting allow for adaptation	0.90	0.20	0.22	Minor	63%
1.2.4. All of Government procurement, audit, etc. systems are compatible with adaptive management	1.00	0.00	0.00	None	50%
1.3. Senior MFAT staff encourage adaptation	0.62	0.27	0.43	Moderate	83%
1.3.1. Leadership has bought into and understands adaptive management principles	0.57	0.32	0.56	Moderate	88%
1.3.2. Line management has bought into adaptive management principles	0.71	0.25	0.35	Minor	88%
1.3.3. Governance processes encourage adaptive programming	0.58	0.19	0.32	Minor	75%
2. Planning	0.66	0.31	0.47	Moderate	88%
2.1. The planning process is problem-driven and collaborative	0.73	0.32	0.44	Moderate	100%
2.1.1. Local actors are engaged to identify support needs	0.81	0.35	0.43	Moderate	100%
2.1.2. Proposed solutions follow from iterative problem analysis	0.69	0.24	0.35	Minor	100%
2.1.3. Priorities are sense-checked with other relevant MFAT teams	0.69	0.35	0.51	Moderate	100%
2.2. Planning builds on evidence	0.62	0.28	0.46	Moderate	91%
2.2.1. Data is used to identify gaps and deficiencies that need addressing	0.69	0.24	0.35	Minor	100%
2.2.2. Political-economy analysis is used to identify risks and opportunities	0.63	0.33	0.53	Moderate	100%
2.2.3. Capability assessments are carried out before partners are selected	0.57	0.32	0.56	Moderate	88%
2.2.4. Portfolio level planning (within MFAT and with other donors) is considered	0.58	0.19	0.32	Minor	75%
2.3. Rationale for adaptation is clearly articulated	0.62	0.30	0.49	Moderate	72%
2.3.1. The relative complexity (e.g., entrenched incentives, multi-system co-ordination) is considered	0.69	0.24	0.35	Minor	100%
2.3.2. The evidence base for reform is assessed	0.70	0.40	0.57	Moderate	63%
2.3.3. Intervention options are calibrated to the identified degree of contextual uncertainty	0.70	0.24	0.35	Minor	63%

INDICATOR	AVERAGE	STANDARD DEVIATION	COEFFICIENT OF VARIATION	VARIABILITY	COVERAGE
2.3.4. Trade-offs of proposed approach are clearly stated	0.40	0.20	0.50	Moderate	63%
3. Activity design	0.67	0.31	0.47	Moderate	87%
3.1. MERL framework enables locally driven definition and support learning	0.67	0.31	0.47	Moderate	90%
3.1.1. MERL Framework is developed in collaboration with partners/local actors	0.64	0.35	0.54	Moderate	88%
3.1.2. Results are more defined at the outcome than the output level	0.56	0.39	0.69	Major	100%
3.1.3. Data collection is aligned to learning focus	0.75	0.25	0.33	Minor	100%
3.1.4. Expected results and timelines are aligned to local political and capacity context	0.75	0.25	0.33	Minor	75%
3.1.5. Activity MERL is properly scoped and budgeted	0.64	0.23	0.35	Moderate	88%
3.2. Learning orientation is built into the design	0.55	0.32	0.58	Moderate	81%
3.2.1. MERL is properly resourced	0.50	0.00	0.00	None	38%
3.2.2. There is a systematised process for reflection	0.50	0.35	0.71	Major	100%
3.2.3. Reporting requirements encourage learning by MFAT and partners	0.57	0.32	0.56	Moderate	88%
3.2.4. There is a process to reflect learning into design	0.63	0.33	0.53	Moderate	100%
3.3. The implementation plan allows for flexibility	0.82	0.28	0.34	Moderate	84%
3.3.1. There is flexibility around specific areas of intervention	0.79	0.25	0.31	Minor	88%
3.3.2. There is flexibility around spend of allocated budget	0.83	0.24	0.28	Minor	75%
3.3.3. There is flexibility around specific partnerships	0.92	0.19	0.20	Minor	75%
3.3.4. There is flexibility around team staffing and governance	0.75	0.35	0.47	Moderate	100%
3.4. The Activity management and governance arrangements allow for partnership	0.65	0.29	0.45	Moderate	94%
3.4.1. There are joint decision-making frameworks between MFAT, partners and implementers	0.63	0.22	0.35	Moderate	100%
3.4.2. All partners (MFAT, beneficiary, and implementer) participate actively in governance arrangements	0.69	0.35	0.51	Moderate	100%
3.4.3. The Activity and relationship management requirements are properly scoped and budgeted	0.64	0.35	0.54	Moderate	88%
3.4.4. Decision-making is delegated to the appropriate levels	0.64	0.23	0.35	Moderate	88%
4. Activity delivery	0.66	0.35	0.53	Moderate	84%
4.1. Implementing relationships empower adaptation	0.87	0.26	0.30	Minor	96%
4.1.1. Partners (MFAT, beneficiary and implementer) have shared values in intent for change and relationships are built on trust	0.88	0.33	0.38	Moderate	100%
4.1.2. Contractual arrangements are outcome-focused and flexible	0.88	0.22	0.25	Minor	100%
4.1.3. Performance is jointly reviewed regularly	0.86	0.23	0.26	Minor	88%
4.2. Delivery plan allows for adaptation	0.60	0.34	0.57	Moderate	84%
4.2.1. Strategic tools (e.g., ILM) are used to proactively identify and manage contextual risks	0.50	0.45	0.89	Major	63%
4.2.2. Implementation timeline includes reflection and iteration points	0.57	0.32	0.56	Moderate	88%
4.2.3. Processes to reflect on emerging evidence of impact are systematised	0.50	0.27	0.53	Moderate	88%
4.2.4. Adjustments to work plans are agreed and documented	0.81	0.24	0.30	Minor	100%
4.3. MERL requirements support adaptive management	0.52	0.36	0.69	Major	71%
4.3.1. Data and evidence generated are acted upon	0.67	0.24	0.35	Moderate	75%
4.3.2. MERL processes are diverse and transparent about biases and gaps	0.40	0.49	1.22	Major	63%
4.3.3. Reporting frameworks are timed to inform decision-making	0.50	0.29	0.58	Moderate	75%
5. Capacity, capability, and culture	0.65	0.35	0.55	Moderate	69%
5.1. Staff have the capacity to manage adaptively	0.64	0.38	0.60	Moderate	71%

INDICATOR	AVERAGE	STANDARD DEVIATION	COEFFICIENT OF VARIATION	VARIABILITY	COVERAGE
5.1.1. Workload expectation allows for relationship building and meaningful engagement	0.79	0.25	0.31	Minor	88%
5.1.2. There is sufficient continuity in Activity management	0.63	0.41	0.66	Moderate	100%
5.1.3. Where a change is necessary, there are handover procedures that enable continuity	0.50	0.50	1.00	Major	25%
5.2. Staff have the requisite capabilities for adaptive management	0.69	0.32	0.46	Moderate	92%
5.2.1. Staff have the tools, skills, and understanding to interpret data and use information for decision-making	0.56	0.39	0.69	Major	100%
5.2.2. Staff can balance accountability requirements with adaptive management needs	0.69	0.24	0.35	Moderate	100%
5.2.3. Staff engage in honest reflection/learning from failure	0.83	0.24	0.28	Minor	75%
5.3. Management culture encourages adaptive approaches	0.68	0.25	0.36	Moderate	44%
5.3.1. Line managers support and empower supervised staff	0.80	0.24	0.31	Minor	63%
5.3.2. Performance evaluation encourages learning and reflection	0.67	0.24	0.35	Moderate	38%
5.3.3. Organisational communications approach is compatible with uncertainty and setbacks	0.50	0.00	0.00	None	25%
5.3.4. Risk is understood and actively managed	0.75	0.25	0.33	Minor	50%
5.4. There are processes in place for building knowledge and relationships	0.57	0.42	0.73	Major	71%
5.4.1. Staff are familiarised with contextual analysis frameworks and tools	0.63	0.41	0.66	Major	50%
5.4.2. Staff are exposed to external analysts and thought leaders	0.67	0.47	0.71	Major	75%
5.4.3. Systematic learning processes, with regular frequency, bring different teams together	0.43	0.32	0.75	Major	88%

## Concentrated Patterns

INDICATOR	AVERAGE	VARIABILITY	COVERAGE
1.1.3. Diplomatic and developmental goals are mutually supporting	0.88	Minor	100%
2.2.1. Data is used to identify gaps and deficiencies that need addressing	0.69	Minor	100%
2.2.4. Portfolio level planning (within MFAT and with other donors) is considered	0.58	Minor	75%
2.3.1. The relative complexity (e.g., entrenched incentives, multi-system co-ordination) is considered	0.69	Minor	100%
3.1.3. Data collection is aligned to learning focus	0.75	Minor	100%
3.1.4. Expected results and timelines are aligned to local political and capacity context	0.75	Minor	75%
3.2.1. MERL is properly resourced	0.50	None	38%
3.3.1. There is flexibility around specific areas of intervention	0.79	Minor	88%
3.3.2. There is flexibility around spend of allocated budget	0.83	Minor	75%
3.3.3. There is flexibility around specific partnerships	0.92	Minor	75%
4.1.2. Contractual arrangements are outcome-focused and flexible	0.88	Minor	100%
4.1.3. Performance is jointly reviewed regularly	0.86	Minor	88%
4.2.4. Adjustments to work plans are agreed and documented	0.81	Minor	100%
5.1.1. Workload expectation allows for relationship building and meaningful engagement	0.79	Minor	88%
5.2.3. Staff engage in honest reflection/learning from failure	0.83	Minor	75%

## Dispersed Patterns

INDICATOR	AVERAGE	VARIABILITY	COVERAGE
1.3.1. Leadership has bought into and understands adaptive management principles	0.57	Moderate	88%
2.1.1. Local actors are engaged to identify support needs	0.81	Moderate	100%
2.1.3. Priorities are sense-checked with other relevant MFAT teams	0.69	Moderate	100%
2.2.2. Political-economy analysis is used to identify risks and opportunities	0.63	Moderate	100%
2.2.3. Capability assessments are carried out before partners are selected	0.57	Moderate	88%
3.1.1. MERL Framework is developed in collaboration with partners/local actors	0.64	Moderate	88%
3.1.2. Results are more defined at the outcome than the output level	0.56	Major	100%
3.1.5. Activity MERL is properly scoped and budgeted	0.64	Moderate	88%
3.2.2. There is a systematised process for reflection	0.50	Major	100%
3.2.3. Reporting requirements encourage learning by MFAT and partners	0.57	Moderate	88%
3.2.4. There is a process to reflect learning into design	0.63	Moderate	100%
3.3.4. There is flexibility around team staffing and governance	0.75	Moderate	100%
3.4.1. There are joint decision-making frameworks between MFAT, partners and implementers	0.63	Moderate	100%
3.4.2. All partners (MFAT, beneficiary, and implementer) participate actively in governance arrangements	0.69	Moderate	100%
3.4.3. The Activity and relationship management requirements are properly scoped and budgeted	0.64	Moderate	88%
3.4.4. Decision-making is delegated to the appropriate levels	0.64	Moderate	88%
4.1.1. Partners (MFAT, beneficiary and implementer) have shared values in intent for change and relationships are built on trust	0.88	Moderate	100%
4.2.2. Implementation timeline includes reflection and iteration points	0.57	Moderate	88%
4.2.3. Processes to reflect on emerging evidence of impact are systematised	0.50	Moderate	88%
4.3.1. Data and evidence generated are acted upon	0.67	Moderate	75%
4.3.3. Reporting frameworks are timed to inform decision-making	0.50	Moderate	75%
5.1.2. There is sufficient continuity in Activity management	0.63	Moderate	100%
5.2.1. Staff have the tools, skills, and understanding to interpret data and use information for decision-making	0.56	Major	100%
5.2.2. Staff can balance accountability requirements with adaptive management needs	0.69	Moderate	100%
5.4.2. Staff are exposed to external analysts and thought leaders	0.67	Major	75%
5.4.3. Systematic learning processes, with regular frequency, bring different teams together	0.43	Major	88%