



# Adaptive Management for Aid in South Sudan: CSRF Discussion Paper

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## Background

Aid programmes operating in fragile, complex contexts such as South Sudan require systems, tools and principles that allow them to sufficiently understand the evolving context, and respond in an effective, efficient and conflict-sensitive manner. Adaptive management theory is an important part of this toolbox, encompassing many of the important principles and approaches that can help donors and their implementing partners build the resources, capacities, norms and values to implement activities in South Sudan in ways that do not contribute to long-term fragility or conflict, but rather contribute to long-term strengths and peace.

In early 2023, the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF) commissioned an options paper to help stakeholders within the Partnership for Peacebuilding, Resilience and Recovery (PfPRR) understand and act on options for building adaptive management approaches into the partnership's approach. Aiming to engage a wider audience, the CSRF has adapted the original options paper to be relevant for the aid sector in South Sudan more broadly.

This paper is intended to support policy makers, programme designers, donors, and managers with theory and proposed objectives that can be used to integrate greater adaptation into humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding programmes in South Sudan.

## What is Adaptive Management?

Adaptive management approaches begin with the premise that aid actors working in complex, unstable environments must develop strong analysis and the ability to use that analysis to develop flexible, responsive ways of working. It also asserts that, in many cases, it may not be possible to do sufficient analysis before a programme is begun, either because the context is rapidly changing or because the intervention itself is expected to have uncertain interactions with the context. In either case, adaptive theory proposes that an ongoing process of analysis, testing, learning and adapting enables aid organisations to effectively deepen and improve its analysis and operational approach over time.

Adaptive management is often defined in opposition to 'traditional' approaches to aid that are described as "linear 'research – plan – implement – report' models"<sup>1</sup> that implicitly assume that one can sufficiently understand the context and one's likely impact on the context before the programme begins. In contrast, adaptive management seeks to build iterative processes of learning and adaptation into programme design to enable the testing of ideas, exploration of areas of uncertainty, and learning over time. It is useful for aid programmes, particularly those working in conflict-affected areas, to be more effective and to avoid unintentionally driving or perpetuating conflict and vulnerability. Adaptive management is also useful when pursuing programmatic goals that are complex and nonlinear (such as HDP Nexus programming). Some enabling factors for adaptive management, drawn from the literature, are below:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Clingendael Conflict Research Unit. *Adaptive Programming: Principles, Parameters and Limits*. 30 June 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, and Laws, Ed, et al. *LearnAdapt: a synthesis of our work on adaptive programming with DFID/FCDO (2017-2020)*. ODI/LearnAdapt Briefing Note. March 2021.

## Benefits and Challenges of Adaptive Management

### Adaptive Management: Enabling Factors

The concept is not new, but aid actors are still in the process of determining what it looks like in practice, how it is enabled, and some of the implicit conflicts between adaptive management and more ‘traditional’ approaches to aid. Some enabling factors for adaptive management that have been identified through recent learning papers and that have relevance for the PfPRR include:

- Appropriate decentralisation to support context-led decision-making.
- The importance of trust and frank discussions about challenges and creative solutions between different levels of the aid sector.
- Investments in people to develop and act on solutions, with a strong focus on staff with strong contextual knowledge and relationships.
- A focus on a principled ‘process’ rather than meeting specific pre-set outputs.
- A willingness to take risks and embrace ‘failures’ as important to the learning process.

There is evident value in being able to adapt when the situation warrants it. In addition, the aid sector in South Sudan has set a number of ambitions that are both important and challenging and that further require creative, adaptive approaches. Some of these ambitions (below) still lack meaningful strategies for being taken forward. Adaptive management principles and approaches will be critical to the ability of aid actors to translate these from jargon into practice. These ambitions include:

- **Effective community engagement.** Increasingly, aid actors believe that communities should have the ability to influence, at a minimum, the design and delivery of aid programmes. This may perhaps seem obvious, but communities rarely feel this is achieved in practice.<sup>3</sup> If the sector is to follow through on its commitments to meaningfully engage South Sudanese communities in identifying and responding to their own humanitarian, development and peacebuilding needs, there must be a strong capacity to continuously and thoughtfully assimilate new analysis into programming priorities over time.
- **Effective coordination and inclusion within the aid sector.** Collaboration and coordination within the aid sector, including between donors, UN, INGOs and NNGOs. This is an important goal, but also a difficult one due to a highly competitive funding context. Different sets of aid actors have assorted types of mandates, varying strengths and weaknesses, and face a range of incentive structures.

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<sup>3</sup> Deng, David; Daniel Deng, and the CSRF. *Community Engagement and Inter-Agency Collaboration across the HDP Nexus in South Sudan*. Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility. 2023.

Diverse participation and contributions will be difficult to invite and manage, but will pay dividends in terms of quality of analysis and range of approaches available.

- **An ability to respond and change course when the situation changes.** In almost any timeframe in South Sudan, aid actors must be prepared to understand, meet, and respond to substantial changes in the political and security context. The need for this when planning programming over a longer-term period is absolutely fundamental.

Adaptive management approaches also offer challenges. First, they require certain capacities and resources at appropriately decentralised levels, which can have implications for budgets and timelines. These are discussed in more detail below.

There are also important questions to be resolved around the nature of accountability. Traditionally, aid programmes are held accountable by a number of pre-set indicators or objectives, contractually agreed between a donor and an implementing partner – payment is typically based upon the satisfactory delivery of those commitments. This delivery/results-based approach offers much in the way of simple accounting, but struggles to accommodate the sort of complex learning and adaptation needed for aid programmes to be innovative, responsive, and conflict sensitive in fragile contexts. More creative and appropriate monitoring and evaluation systems, more coherence around principles, and deeper relationships between donors and implementers can help – but all of these also require additional resources.

Finally, a reminder that adaptive management may not be needed in all aid programmes. In activities where sufficient information and analysis can be ascertained from the beginning, where the context is unlikely to meaningfully change during the course of implementation, where the risks of doing harm are minimal, and where outputs can be confidently predicted, traditional delivery models may suffice.

## Adaptive Management at Different Levels in the Aid Sector

This paper considers five levels where the aid sector can integrate adaptive management into aid programming at five levels. This section attempts to provide a framework for understanding these levels and how to practically build in the appropriate principles, systems and tools to enable adaptive management. The levels explored are:

- Accountability around principles
- Funding
- Strategy: Defining what success looks like
- Area-based management
- Programme management

The relevance of each level to adaptive management is explained below, with specific objectives suggested for each level. Indicative stakeholders and potential processes are tentatively explored to encourage ideas, but should not be taken as prescriptive or limiting. There are innumerable ways to take forward adaptive management, and the best approach is the one that is tailored to the participants and context.

## Level 1: Accountability around Principles

Principles are the anchor to the integrity of adaptive management. As adaptive management tends to de-emphasise the value of pre-set outputs, or even objectives, it is a programme's principles that then help to drive the analysis of what should be done, and how. Principles are therefore the foundation of an adaptive approach to programming, shaping the goals of the programme and identifying the normative values that drive collective analysis and action.

In contrast with the humanitarian principles, which are intentionally global and acontextual, the specific principles that drive individual or collective aid programmes in South Sudan should be contextualised and based on strong analysis of the impacts that aid actors seek to have in the communities where they are working. They should be identified as the cornerstones of an aid approach, or perhaps as a 'north star' helping to guide programmes even when the context changes, or when aid actors confront challenging dilemmas. Of course, principles themselves can also be adapted as needed, if they are found to not be supporting or enabling the right sorts of outcomes.

It is not for this paper to identify or facilitate a conversation about which precise principles do, or should, drive different elements of the aid sector. However, several principles are increasingly part of the aid agenda in South Sudan, yet are often difficult to achieve effectively. It is perhaps useful to name them as examples in the hope that they will make the conversation feel less abstract, and more actionable. These principles may be described in various ways, including:

- **Community Engagement and Localisation.** This principle speaks to an increasing conviction within the aid sector that communities should, at a minimum, inform and guide aid's priorities, but will ideally play a role in developing, overseeing and implementing activities in locally appropriate ways. This could include aid actors' relationships with other South Sudanese stakeholders, such as government, civil society, or nonstate leaders from customary authorities, academia or the private sector.<sup>4</sup>
- **Conflict Sensitivity.** Much of the vulnerability and need in South Sudan are directly or indirectly caused by conflict. The aid sector is slowly shifting toward a realisation that an aid response that doesn't contribute to social cohesion and positive peace risks perpetuating the entrenched systems of violent conflict.
- **Humanitarian-Development-Peacebuilding Nexus.** The HDP-Nexus is premised on the idea that a range of different sectors, skill sets, and spaces within the aid sector are able to meaningfully partner on analysis, and develop and act coherently in support of shared

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, this principle could go further in setting a vision for how aid actors should seek to influence accountability norms and patterns between citizen and state, with explicit expectations about bottom-up accountability and civil society participation.

outcomes that not only respond to the impacts of violent conflict, but also help to reduce it. This form of complex collaboration requires adaptive approaches to build learning and manage changes in context over time.

- **Long-Term Vision.** Donors and aid agencies in South Sudan are increasingly advocating for long-term approaches rather than short programme cycles focused on quick delivery of output-oriented programmes.<sup>5</sup> Long-term visions also provide opportunities for aid actors to confront the dilemmas that are always faced when short-term goals come into conflict with long-term goals, such as whether to work with, and implicitly support, problematic leaders when responding to short-term disasters.

## Objectives for Adaptive Management in Accountability for Principles

### Objective 1.1: Agree and Build Consensus around Principles

The principles above, and many others, are held by a wide range of aid actors in South Sudan. However, the aid sectors’ principles are often not sufficiently disseminated, debated, understood and acted on in a coherent way. This is important for all staff engaged in aid programming, particularly at the field and operational levels. Examples of these ‘applied principles’ might include discussions of what ‘neutrality’ means when local government is influencing organisational targeting, or how to handle situations where the aid sector’s norms around gender clash with local community norms. In the absence of a set of principles that are debated and applied, the aid sector’s commitments run the risk of being little more than jargon.

Stakeholders	Potential Processes
<p>The articulation of and commitment to principles should engage all programmatic stakeholders. It may be led by a leadership body, but with the meaningful participation of the various implementing aid levels. Ideally, there could also be community and civil society contributions to the process of developing principles, defining what they mean in specific contexts, and evaluating them over time.</p>	<p>There is no one correct way to engage a set of stakeholders on principles but it should ideally involve a process of reflection, dissemination, discussion, debate and revision. It is probably helpful to have a set of custodians for the principles, such as in a management committee who commit to design and oversee the process of principles development</p>

### Objective 1.2: Accountability Mechanisms for Principles

Agreeing and building consensus around principles at the start of a programme is one thing, consistently acting on them is quite another. Accountability mechanisms are critical to ensuring that the aid sector commits to the principles it sets for itself. Accountability over time requires dedicated effort, resources, commitment, and space for critical inquiry. It also requires a level of independence from the daily demands of implementation and fund management that face all implementing UN and NGO actors. These mechanisms can be compliance-oriented or, perhaps more effectively, they can be learning-oriented – where failures and challenges are not punished, but rather areas of learning and

<sup>5</sup> In recent years there are more programmes with 3-7 year timeframes, which are long by aid standards, but still quite short for private sector or public sector planning purposes.

adaptation. These could include regular team or programme strategy sessions, internal or with community participation, to assess understanding and application of principles.

Stakeholders	Potential Processes
<p>Management must play a special role in leading this area, setting principles as an organisational priority, and allocating time and resources. Organisational blind spots can be corrected by bringing in outside analysis of the degree to which principles are being met, sacrificed or forgotten is important. Inputs may be sought from a range of sources: local communities themselves, experts and academics, civil society and others.<sup>6</sup></p>	<p>An accountability mechanism for principles must be regular and structured, and it must have the ability to lead to change. The level of resources (primarily time and energy) will likely shape how robust and inclusive it can be in terms of getting diverse perspectives. But at a minimum it should be based on periodic, independent reflection based on actual on-the-ground data and analysis. Findings of gaps or challenges where principles are not being sufficiently met should lead to a remediation process that has specific processes or benchmarks to be met.</p>

## Level 2: Funding

Funding, whether from donors or between implementing organisations, plays a key role in shaping incentives and resources – and therefore the willingness and capacity for organisations to programme adaptively. In South Sudan, as in many countries, the funding stream cascades down from a limited number of funds and donors, through implementing UN agencies and NGOs, and often through downstream partners. This section attempts to speak to the full chain of funding, with many actors being on both the funding and the receiving side. It focuses on the power of funding to shape incentives and manage competition productively, and to provide or encourage needed resources – both financial and non-financial – particularly to national or local organisations.

### Objectives for Adaptive Management in Funding

#### Objective 2.1: Incentivising learning and adaptation

Aid actors are responsive to financial incentives. If ‘success’ is defined as following a process of strategy and engagement with integrity and being able to flexibly respond to analysis and needs as they arise, and if it leads to additional financial support, aid actors tend to follow suit. Conversely, if ‘success’ is defined as delivering predetermined outputs in a short period of time, and adhering to an initially-agreed workplan without any deviation, then that will act as a constraint on adaptation and strategic engagement. Incentives manifest in many ways. A few include:

- The factors that are used in assessing proposals, annual review scoring or programme evaluations. Are projects and staff scored on their ability to effectively learn, pilot, meaningfully partner with communities, test and adapt? This relates as well to how ‘failures’ are viewed and treated institutionally and contractually.

<sup>6</sup> Deng, David and Daniel Deng. *Community Engagement and Inter-Agency Collaboration across the HDP Nexus in South Sudan*. CSRF and Detro Research Advisory. April 2023.



- Benchmarks embedded in the work plan. Are projects planning concretely for strategic reflection, recalibration, and adaptation?
- Criteria for collaboration. Are implementers required or encouraged to collaborate and jointly strategise with others as a sign of programmatic success?

Stakeholders	Potential Processes
<p>Those who are providing funding, either as donors or as upstream partners, need to understand the behaviour that they are incentivising. This requires open and trusting discussions and analysis from both those providing and receiving funding. Those receiving funding must also be able to assess the impacts of the explicit and implicit incentive structures they face, and provide feedback to their funders.</p>	<p>Perhaps the most important time to consider this component of adaptive management is during the concept note and proposal processes: are there provisions for learning and adaptation? Do work plans contain regular opportunities for strategic reviews? Are there requirements for collaboration? Does the M&amp;E framework emphasise learning and adaptation as a critical component of programmatic success?</p>

## 2.2: Resourcing adaptation: skills, relationships and flexibility

Adaptive programming requires resources which must be built into programmes' budgets, staffing plans, and work plans. Some of these resources imply specific budget lines, such as for the travel needed for team strategic meetings, for training, or for an additional staff position to interact more closely with a community. Some resources have a less direct relationship with the budget – for example, ensuring that terms of reference, inductions, and staff performance appraisals all consider an emphasis on contextual knowledge and responsiveness. Other times, the resource needed is time within a work plan, and a willingness to accept delays in project delivery in order to build consensus within a divided community. Ensuring adequate resources for local organisations is fundamental to community engagement and localisation.

Stakeholders	Potential Processes
<p>As in the previous category, this area is relevant for those who are funding, authorising or evaluating projects, as well as those who are receiving funds. It also requires open, strong communication about programme needs and lessons learned over time. The budget allocation governance structure is important for being able to manage funds flexibly without driving harmful competition.</p>	<p>Donors or aid organisations might consider making a checklist of adaptive management elements that should be built into each programme proposal's work plan, budget, and M&amp;E plan.</p>

### Level 3: Strategy: Defining What Success Looks Like

Here we define ‘strategy’ as the analytical space where aid programmes explain and explore their working assumptions of what they ought to be doing, and why. It is fundamental to adaptive management for two sets of reasons.

First are the functional reasons. The strategy provides the overarching analysis that shapes the programme’s approach in such a way that it can change over time. Whether through a ‘Theory of Change’ or a set of analytical observations and objectives, it describes the expected relationship between how the project will work and what sorts of outcomes it might have. It should be adapted as lessons are learned to reflect an up-to-date analysis of this relationship.

In addition to the above, adaptive management is also important as a communications tool with external observers, particularly those who are evaluating progress or success from distant capitals or headquarters. Despite the global lip service often paid to the importance of approaches such as adaptive management, donor missions and their implementing partners often find themselves tied by their own headquarters to traditional, short-term expectations of quantitative measures of success. This has the potential to act as a serious constraint on innovation and long-term investment and perspective. The logic of adaptive management may provide an additional avenue for demonstrating progress, or ‘results/success’ in the short-run in a way that does not come at the expense of the programme’s integrity or longer-term goals. The same may be true in terms of helping aid actors explain to local governments and communities how it will work and adapt strategies over time.

#### Objectives for Adaptive Management in Strategies

##### 3.1: Producing analysis for an evolving Theory of Change

Strategies need to explain the theoretical relationship between the projects and their intended outcomes. However, understanding of this relationship should evolve over the course of implementation, and the strategy should be built to keep pace.

Analysis that is done at the beginning of a programme should be revisited periodically throughout the life of the activities to assess the initial working assumptions, incorporate lessons learned, respond to changes in the context, and consider the relevance of observed outcomes.

There may be times when multiple levels of Theories of Change may be useful; an over-arching theory for the organisation’s or partnership’s larger work, and smaller theories of change for specific activities. Ideally, these different levels of theories of change should link to each other, though an adaptive approach supports a level of exploration, testing and learning.

Stakeholders	Potential Processes
<p>A meaningful, contextualised strategy is something that is unlikely to come from technical experts or management alone. These concepts must be deeply contextualised to South Sudan to have any practical meaning at either the practical level or at the theoretical level, and</p>	<p>Analysis should be built into workplans, and resourced in budgets. This includes initial analysis, as well as ongoing analysis. Regular strategy sessions help to build accountability and integrity to an adaptive strategy process. Strategy dissemination processes</p>

should involve the practical experiences and inputs from operational and field staff. Ideally this includes participation from South Sudanese communities and civil society.

are critical to ensuring that the aid workers designing and implementing the activities are also aware of the underlying analysis and assumptions, and have a chance to share their lessons learned.

**3.2: Advocacy and interactions with policy and diplomacy**

There are often linkages between aid programmes and policy and diplomacy objectives in South Sudan. This may include advocacy within the aid system or within the South Sudan governance system, and it may include points for collective action between aid actors. This may be outside of the scope for some aid organisations, but those with the resources and mandate should seek to use adaptive strategies to support their advocacy and policy work.

Stakeholders	Potential Processes
<p>Potential action areas for advocacy and collective action may emerge through formal or informal channels, including through organisational leadership or through collective approaches to learning. Appropriate champions, which might include donors, diplomats, INGO Forum and UN leadership, could be identified to act on agreed issues.</p>	<p>The areas for advocacy and collective action are likely difficult to identify in advance, and having an overly-structured approach to identifying them is probably unhelpful. However, having the question flagged as part of an ongoing process of inquiry may be helpful, for example as part of a regular strategy review process.</p>

**Level 4: Area-based Collaboration**

In recent years, the aid sector has made greater efforts to advance collective approaches to ‘area-based programming,’ or decentralized approaches to strategy, decision-making, and stakeholder engagement in South Sudan. This offers some benefits over the long-standing model of an aid system largely headquartered in Juba, and previously Lokichogio during Operation Lifeline Sudan. A decentralised approach provides meaningful opportunities for aid to be more locally-relevant, locally-driven, better coordinated, and effective – however, adaptive approaches are useful for these benefits to be achieved.

Of all the areas discussed in this paper, this area is perhaps the most diverse and open-ended in terms of potential ways of working, and in terms of the nature and number of opportunities and risks. Aid organisations and actors working in these areas will need support in understanding and using adaptive principles and encouragement to do so. Interviews for this paper suggested that many old habits around linear, short-term programme approaches are deeply engrained at the field level and will require a paradigm shift at multiple levels. The Accountability to Principles section earlier helps lay the groundwork for this, but investments in adapting systems, tools, definitions of ‘success,’ and incentive systems will also be critical.

## Recommendations for Adaptive Management in Area-based Strategy and Management

### 4.1: Analysis, Information Management and Coordination

Collaborative approaches to producing contextualised analysis and community engagement are necessary for adaptive area-based management. This sort of approach also represents a potential paradigm shift from a Juba-led approach of organisations working in competition to a field-based centre of analysis and operations using collective analysis and coordinated approaches. While competition is not likely to be totally removed, it can potentially be managed through donor requirements and incentives around collaboration. Shared analysis between organisations likewise can be incentivised and resourced by donors. Within the framing of shared analysis are a number of other implicit capacities or goals: collective approaches to community engagement; collective approaches to strategy development; and collective approaches to monitoring, evaluation and learning.

Stakeholders	Potential Processes
<p>Donors play a role in setting up the incentives and requirements for collaboration, as well as ensuring the needed resources (human, time, financial) are present. They also should help to ensure that the higher-level principles are in place and understood. This requires an understanding of when principles conflict with other programming directives, for example when community engagement processes are cut short in order to meet tight donor deadlines.</p> <p>Area-based collaboration obviously requires participating agencies to invest in more ‘field-forward’ management structures and analytical capacities. This requires a shift in the location of staff, meetings, and operations, along with the supporting infrastructure. It also requires having the right job descriptions and local knowledge. When hiring for field-based leadership structures, organisations should ideally privilege candidates with strong existing relationships and knowledge.</p>	<p>Area Reference Groups were developed under existing area-based platforms, and serve as a useful starting point for understanding the options. However, ongoing innovation and adaptation will be useful. Regular strategy or reflection sessions with contributions from a range of South Sudanese stakeholders and independent analysts will help to reduce blind spots and challenge assumptions. It may also provide an important check and balance for the likely top-down political pressures that will be felt, and may perhaps even help to shift norms around the nature of political accountability.</p> <p>Accountability, governance, understanding of principles, and quality assurance within the area-based strategy and management systems will benefit from planned evaluations, and will likely have lessons and implications for donors as well as agencies. Organisational and area-based MEL efforts should also be supported, and acted on.</p>

### 4.2: Community Engagement, Localisation and Operations

The aid sector in South Sudan has set community ownership and localisation as key goals, a step that is in line with shifting global agendas and attitudes. However, as with the global commitments, the actual analysis, practices, and resources needed for this process are not yet in place. Many of the implementing stakeholders still resort to more traditional approaches of community engagement, which are highly modelled on humanitarian-style ‘rapid needs assessments’ and community validation exercises in which approval – rather than genuine inputs – are sought.

The challenges and opportunities associated with the aid sector’s current approach to community engagement are explored in greater detail in the CSRF’s forthcoming analysis on community engagement within HDP Nexus approaches.<sup>7</sup>

The critical observation from the perspective of adaptive management is twofold: first, any credible community engagement or localisation process will necessarily be adaptive, able to act on community priorities (including those specific to women/girls and men/boys) and analysis as they emerge and change over time. This is in relation to the actual projects to be implemented, whether on food security, governance, or peacebuilding. Second, at a higher level, our very understanding of what is meant by community ownership and localisation is still at the start of the journey. Ongoing work is needed in learning and adaptation around the very nature of what community ownership and localisation mean, and how they can be supported.

Stakeholders	Potential Processes
<p>Much of the existing aid infrastructure in South Sudan is not well-placed to do this work on its own. There are entrenched ways of working and both the legacies and ongoing incentives that drive existing models of community engagement prioritise ‘upward’ accountability. This is true within and between each level of the aid sector, from donors to ‘downstream partners.’ Outside expertise with a strong anthropological, social, political or economic lens will be helpful for aid actors and communities to critically evaluate the current nature of the relationship, and where opportunities and risks lie.</p>	<p>Much innovation is needed here as this represents a paradigm shift within the aid sector. At a start, MEL systems can be revised to include more objectives and indicators that measure meaningful community engagement, not just in terms of one-off events, but ongoing relationships. Another shift is to measure and evaluate learning, rather than ‘success’ and to involve communities in creating and assessing indicators.</p> <p>Analysis of the communities themselves, including their internal divisions, their blind spots and biases, and their place in the national and regional political economy is also important here.</p>

## Level 5: Programme Management

Adaptive management is important at the operational level for two sets of reasons. First, it is the area where the organisation will encounter most of the information it needs to analyse its interaction with the context. The field and operational staff implementing activities not only have eyes and ears ‘on the ground’ to collect data, but also often have the contextual background knowledge to interpret and make sense of it from a programmatic perspective. They will be the first to know how programmes are interacting with the context. Second, the operational arena of programme management is also where a great many adaptations can be made, in real time, as needed. In many ways, the adaptive management approaches discussed in the previous four levels are intended to build capacity, incentives, and resources to enable adaptation at this level.

<sup>7</sup> Deng, David; Daniel Deng and the CSRF. *Community Engagement and Inter-Agency Collaboration across the HDP Nexus in South Sudan*. Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility. 2023.

This requires a fundamental paradigm shift for the top-down way that many organisations work. This shift, away from a structure that prioritises ‘headquarters-level’ technical knowledge toward one that invests in ‘local-level’ contextual knowledge and relationships requires a radically different valuation of what expertise looks like, where decisions should be made, and the nature of accountability and participation.<sup>8</sup>

## Recommendations for Adaptive Management in Programme Management

### 5.1: Building institutional awareness of the context

Aid actors implementing programmes in project locations often have acute senses of how programmes are interacting with local social, economic and political dynamics. Yet, the organisations they work for are often blind to these dynamics, with the organisational gaze fixed on its contractual obligations and official metrics of success. Inherent biases further give greater weight to international technical expertise than to local voices. Both of these weaknesses need to be addressed in order for institutions to be able to better integrate and respond to the sort of evolving contextual knowledge needed for adaptive management.

This requires a shift in norms and values, as well as improvements to systems and tools for gathering data, analysing it, and acting on it. There is a strong component of community engagement, decentralisation involved, trust-building, as well as investments in building consensus around the principles discussed earlier.

Stakeholders	Potential Processes
Aid agencies are at the core of this objective. Staffing decisions, training opportunities, the nature of strategy discussions and opportunities for reflection and learning all shape this component of adaptive management. For more on the challenges of localisation in South Sudan see the CSRF’s 2021 lessons learned document. <sup>9</sup>	Organisations should assess their current forms of gathering data and building analysis, considering if they are compliance oriented and extractive, or if they offer genuine opportunities for those closest to the communities, and the communities themselves, to participate in shaping the understanding and the vision of the programme.

### 5.2: Testing, Acting, and Learning from Options

Analysis is a necessary but insufficient component of conflict-sensitive adaptive programming. Acting on analysis is equally important. This

<sup>8</sup> Recognising that the categories of ‘headquarters’ and ‘local’ or ‘field’ often depend on your vantage point – Juba is ‘the field’ to people in Bonn, and ‘headquarters’ to aid workers in Maban.

<sup>9</sup> Robinson, Alice and the CSRF. *Localisation and Conflict Sensitivity: Lessons on good practice from South Sudan*. Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility. 2021. <https://www.csrf-southsudan.org/repository/localisation-and-conflict-sensitivity-lessons-on-good-practice-from-south-sudan/>

requires flexible work plans, budgets, and strong enough operational capacity and decision-making to know which options are feasible and to take action as needed.

Stakeholders	Potential Processes
<p>Operating agencies are again at the fore of building work plans, budgets and organisational structures capable of adaptation. Donors however, have a role in approving these, and allowing for changes to delivery schedules, areas of operation, staffing lines, and budgets over time.</p>	<p>Many of the capacities and resources needed for adaptive management should be built into programmes during the proposal stage. In addition, programme and operational staff will benefit from understanding the principles of adaptive management, as they run counter to the systems of ‘implementation’ that many aid workers are used to.</p>

## Conclusion

The current international aid system is encountering a potential paradigm shift. Traditional models of aid delivery, based on linear, top-down analysis and accountability lines, are being increasingly challenged on an intellectual, moral, and aid effectiveness basis – but the alternative modalities for community-led aid and localisation are not yet well-developed or accepted, including by many donor headquarters. Other areas of society, such as the technology sector, are demonstrating that creativity, adaptation and human-centred design are able to transform and shift ways of working to collectively identify and act on important priorities.

Adaptive management provides both a compelling explanation of what ‘success’ can look like in the absence of pre-set indicators and outputs, and an operational pathway for moving in that direction. A shift toward understanding aid delivery as a collaborative process rather than a set of discrete activities and products is the next step in the sector’s ability to make good on its commitments to effective, conflict-sensitive aid that builds strengths and reduces vulnerability over the long-run.

This approach requires an emphasis on learning, an acceptance of an indeterminate timeline and set of objectives, and a tolerance for things to ‘go wrong,’ so long as lessons are absorbed and lead to changes in understanding and ways of working. These are the fundamental steps to translating jargon into practice, supporting aid’s ability to be transformative in South Sudan, and building lessons that can contribute to the aid sector’s potential paradigm shift.

## Table of Adaptive Management Options

The table below summarises the recommendations regarding options from the original paper for supporting adaptive management at different levels of responsibility within the PfPRR. It is shared here to illustrate what the above analysis might mean in practical terms in a particular partnership. Example goals for each level are provided in three categories, which can be understood as representing different levels of ambition.

They should not be read prescriptively, as activities to be implemented without any deviation, nor necessarily sequentially, as some ‘aspirational’ goals may precede ‘must dos’. Instead, they should be tailored to the context, resources, and opportunities and – in line with adaptive management principles – adapted to fit the circumstances. The levels of ambition can be understood as low, medium, high, as follows:

- **‘Must do’**: These can be considered the minimum necessary for the process to have integrity.
- **‘Should have’**: These are desirable, and should be achievable, though potentially with some additional resources or political will.
- **‘Aspirational’**: These will be more difficult, but are framed at the level that should be within the PfPRR’s capacity and timeline if provided sufficient resources.

Ideally, the recommendations in this table will be discussed and agreed collaboratively with a range of PfPRR stakeholders.

Level 1: Accountability to Principles		
Must Do	Should have	Aspirational
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Articulate the PfPRR’s principles in programme documents and calls for proposals.</li> <li>• Integrate the PfPRR’s principles into M&amp;E frameworks.</li> <li>• Annual or bi-annual internal process of assessing the PfPRR’s performance on its principles.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Area Reference Groups (ARGs) have a chance to participate in the discussion of what the principles are, and how they look in practice.</li> <li>• Annual or bi-annual collaborative process of assessing the PfPRR’s performance on principles.</li> <li>• Agreed assessment and change process for when PfPRR deemed to not be following its principles.</li> <li>• Communications strategy to message approach to capitols.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advisory group of South Sudanese thought leaders, academics, civil society participate in shaping the principles.</li> <li>• Annual or bi-annual process of assessing the PfPRR’s performance on its principles with community level inputs.</li> <li>• Learning paper on PfPRR’s ability to meet its principles commissioned and shared.</li> </ul>
Level 2: Funding		
Must Do	Should have	Aspirational
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proposals and concept notes are required to include budgetary and work plan provisions for organisational and area-based learning</li> <li>• Donors agree to allow flexible approaches to staffing plans, work locations, indicators, and outputs based on changes in context and/or analysis.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guidance for designing adaptive budgets, workplans and M&amp;E frameworks produced.</li> <li>• Funding to PfPRR partners contingent upon effective collaboration, information-sharing and coordination.</li> <li>• Funding for area-based learning events.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funding for area-based learning and strategy platform.</li> <li>• Shift toward collective outcome harvesting or similar MEL framework for all PfPRR partners.</li> <li>• Budget allocation governance structure is independently managed and neutral.</li> </ul>
Level 3: Partnership-Level Strategy		
Must Do	Should have	Aspirational
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compile and apply lessons and best practices from previous and ongoing similar initiatives.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fund and organise annual learning events at the Partnership-level to assess and refresh strategy as needed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funding and support for an independent leaning and strategy platform</li> </ul>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop and articulate theoretical linkage between PfPRR’s approach and their contribution to long-term peace and stability.</li> <li>Disseminate the strategic analysis in a way that is accessible to a wide audience.</li> <li>Induction on adaptive management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structure regular (e.g., quarterly) reflection discussions with ARGs to learn about policy and diplomacy priorities that are emerging or evolving.</li> <li>Strategic theory of change that documents and provides an accountability framework around the ‘process’ that the PfPRR is using.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engage advisory body of South Sudanese communities, leaders and civil society to contribute to the PfPRR’s strategy.</li> <li>Commission external analysis on thorny questions and dilemmas, e.g., how to constructively work with government while promoting downward accountability.</li> </ul>
<b>Level 4: Area-based Strategy and Management</b>		
<b>Must Do</b>	<b>Should have</b>	<b>Aspirational</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ARGs (or similar entity) lead regular strategy sessions.</li> <li>TORs for ARGs and area leadership emphasise local knowledge, existing relationships and facilitation skills.</li> <li>ARGs develop and disseminate area-based strategies that explain link between H, D and P in the specific areas.</li> <li>Shared objectives and MEL indicators around the ‘process’ being used.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ARGs have an area advisory board with a meaningful TOR which include area experts, communities, civil society, private sector and academics.</li> <li>Area-based monitoring and evaluation efforts assess collective outcomes through process-oriented MEL, such as outcome harvesting</li> <li>Targets set for increasing # of national staff in ARG leadership every year.</li> <li>Funding for analysis and research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MEL objectives and indicators co-designed with the community.</li> <li>ARG leadership is nominated and elected from within the local aid community.</li> <li>Area leadership is independent of particular organisational agendas or budgets</li> <li>Area-based learning and engagement platform established to provide analysis and institutional memory</li> </ul>
<b>Level 5: Programme Management</b>		
<b>Must Do</b>	<b>Should have</b>	<b>Aspirational</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure programmes can articulate how their activities will link to the area-level strategy.</li> <li>Annual strategy meetings where field staff are involved in discussing and adapting theories and plans.</li> <li>Build time, money and skills into workplans and budgets for stock-taking, analysis, and flexible approaches</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Quarterly reflection exercises to critically evaluate whether the programmes assumptions and theories are holding.</li> <li>Calls for proposals provide a list of components that enable adaptation that all proposals should include.</li> <li>MEL approaches that build understanding and learning about outcomes rather than linear log-frames, or focus on outputs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feedback loops that are relationship-based, focused on trust and long-term goals.</li> <li>Robust commitment and resources to localising projects over the 7-year timeframe.</li> <li>Innovative MEL approach to documenting and learning about community engagement approaches.</li> </ul>