Researching livelihoods and
services affected by conflict

What it takes to work adaptively

Learning from an SLRC action
research project in Sierra Leone

Briefing note

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Cover photo: A mother and daughter in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Dominic Chavez/World Bank.

About us

The **Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC)** is a global research programme exploring basic services and social protection in fragile and conflict-affected situations. Funded by UK aid from the UK Government (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, FCDO), with complementary funding from Irish Aid and the European Commission (EC), SLRC was established in 2011 with the aim of strengthening the evidence base and informing policy and practice around livelihoods and services in conflict.

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) is the lead organisation. SLRC partners include: Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), Feinstein International Center (FIC, Tufts University), Focus1000, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Wageningen University (WUR), Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research (NCCR), Busara Center for Behavioral Economics, Nepal Institute for Social and Environmental Research (NISER), Narrate, Social Scientists' Association of Sri Lanka (SSA), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Women and Rural Development Network (WORUDET), Claremont Graduate University (CGU), Institute of Development Policy (IOB, University of Antwerp) and the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS, Erasmus University of Rotterdam).

SLRC's research can be separated into two phases. Our first phase of research (2011–2017) was based on three research questions, developed over the course of an intensive one-year inception phase:

- State legitimacy: experiences, perceptions and expectations of the state and local governance in conflict-affected situations
- State capacity: building effective states that deliver services and social protection in conflict-affected situations
- Livelihood trajectories and economic activity under conflict

Guided by our original research questions on state legitimacy, state capacity and livelihoods, the second phase of SLRC research (2017–2019) delves into questions that still remain, organised into three themes of research. In addition to these themes, SLRC II also has a programme component exploring power and everyday politics in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). For more information on our work, visit: www.securelivelihoods.org/what-we-do

Abbreviations

ART	action research team
CDHR	Centre for Democracy and Human Rights
GBV	gender-based violence
IRC	International Rescue Committee
MEL	monitoring, evaluation and learning
NGO	non-government organisation
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
R&R	review and reflect
SLRC	Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium
ToC	theory of change

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1 Introduction

This paper captures learning from an adaptive experiment to broaden the strategies that development partners use to connect better with the problem of teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in the world: 21% of girls between the ages of 15 and 19 have children, rising to 29% in rural areas (Statistics Sierra Leone and ICF, 2019: 12). Teenage pregnancy is fuelled by a diverse set of drivers, including: lack of information, knowledge and skills; weak institutions and services; poverty and girls' limited access to assets; widespread sexual violence and exploitation; and engrained social and gender norms that make girls vulnerable to early sex and pregnancy. However, research at the outset of this adaptive programme noted that development partner support in this area in Sierra Leone has mostly involved a limited set of intervention areas that focus on girls as the targets of change (Denney *et al.*, 2016). As one donor noted, there has been a tendency for programmes to 'talk at the girls and tell them not to get pregnant', with little transformative effect. This approach overlooks the wider context in which social and gender norms and the attitudes and behaviours of wider society shape girls' actions, inadvertently perpetuating the idea that it is girls who are responsible for teenage pregnancy.

To better connect the drivers of teenage pregnancy with efforts to reduce it, the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) implemented the Adaptive Approaches to Reducing Teenage Pregnancy in Sierra Leone Action Research Programme from 2019 to 2021, funded by Irish Aid. Under this programme, a four-person action research team (ART), based in Freetown and supported by three remote ODI staff, accompanied Save the Children, Concern Worldwide and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) to test different strategies to address the problem of teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone, with a focus on social norm change. The programme helped the three partner organisations to develop and trial new theories of change (ToC) around underexplored drivers of teenage pregnancy, and supported and documented their programme implementation.

An adaptive programming approach was trialled by the three organisations, given that the intention was to work on the challenge of teenage pregnancy in new ways, where clear causal pathways were unknown. Adaptive programming was new to each of the organisations in Sierra Leone, as well as to Irish Aid Sierra Leone. But there was growing interest in trialling such ways of working, given wider trends in the development industry, and Irish Aid was keen for its partners to build

experience of working adaptively, with the benefit of support from action researchers. The programme thus pursued learning about whether and how adaptive approaches unfolded in the context of Sierra Leone, on a highly normative issue like teenage pregnancy and by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) not familiar with working in this way.

This briefing note captures what has been learnt from the programme about this adaptive experiment. It first sets out how the programme was designed to work, before presenting results from the working adaptively trial.

The majority of the note then focuses on unpacking ten lessons from the experience of adaptive programming. These lessons are intended to inform other organisations considering adaptive programming and to contribute to the growing literature on practical experiences of adaptive programming. This note sits alongside two others that distil emerging lessons on the drivers of teenage pregnancy and action research. It draws on: lessons compiled through ART documentation; interviews with Irish Aid, partners and the ART; an anonymised survey completed by partners;[1] and an end-of-project workshop with all programme participants.

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1   The survey was designed to capture information on the experience of working adaptively and with the support of action researchers, complementing the more detailed interviews by providing an anonymous space for feedback. Four partner programme staff completed the survey.

2   The adaptive experiment

The programme built on earlier research undertaken by SLRC and funded by Irish Aid in Sierra Leone exploring the drivers of teenage pregnancy (Denney *et al.*, 2015; Denney *et al.*, 2016; Castillejo, 2018). Irish Aid was interested in using these research findings to inform programming. Because the findings suggested new ways of working on the problem that were largely experimental in Sierra Leone, Irish Aid invited some of its existing partners to include an adaptive component in their new programmes. Save the Children, Concern and IRC opted into the programme on this basis. Each organisation has a wider programme on teenage pregnancy with Irish Aid, and the adaptive component is one piece of this, roughly 20% of the overall programme. The initial plan was to have a one-year pilot, with accompaniment provided by the ART; but this was later extended, recognising the need for more time for the adaptive components to get underway. In the end, the adaptive components of the programmes ranged from EUR 90,000 to EUR 200,000 over two years.

'Adaptive programming' has come to encompass a wide range of programming approaches (Pett, 2020). Often, adaptiveness is understood to refer to flexibility to change activities, or to be responsive to changing context. In this instance, adaptive programming includes these elements of flexibility and responsiveness to context, but most importantly focuses on cultivating a learning orientation among partners and the donor to strategically experiment with approaches to achieving change.

The adaptive programme began with a ToC workshop, where ODI, Irish Aid and the three partner organisations drew on their existing experience of working on gender and teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone, as well as latest research, to identify the various drivers of teenage pregnancy and potential pathways of change that partner programmes could focus on. Ongoing support from ODI over the coming months assisted partners to develop initial ToCs about how they might best address the identified drivers. Box 1 sets out the high-level ToCs identified by each of the partners.

Box 1: Initial theories of change identified by partners

Concern: Even with improved knowledge and attitudes, adolescent girls are unable to take decisions related to key drivers of teenage pregnancy. Influencing the actual decision-makers on teenage pregnancy can improve the outcomes of adolescent-focused teenage pregnancy programming.

IRC: Girls will reach their full potential if parents, caregivers and boys understand and respect adolescent girls' rights and allow them to take part in decisions that affect their lives.

Save the Children: Adolescents and youths can challenge social and gender norms that influence teenage pregnancy by identifying influencing factors and working to address them.

At the same time, a Freetown-based ART was assembled, with two senior and two junior researchers who would accompany the partners, document their learning and act as a 'critical friend' during the adaptive experiment. The ART was trained by ODI in adaptive programming, with the team and ODI then delivering training to the participating staff from partner organisations.

The action research process involved regular visits (every four to eight weeks) by the ART to project sites and country offices of the three partner organisations to observe programming and interview staff and project stakeholders to document how the adaptive component of partner programmes unfolded. In addition, quarterly review and reflect (R&R) sessions that brought together staff from each partner organisation were facilitated by the ART (with remote ODI support). These sessions examined activities undertaken each quarter, progress and setbacks, emerging learning and whether the existing ToCs remained relevant. Reports capturing the outcomes of the R&Rs were produced by the ART. Finally, mid-term and end-of-project workshops were held with Irish Aid and ODI, bringing the three partners together to discuss the programme and emerging learning on working adaptively, the drivers of teenage pregnancy and action research.

3 Results: how did adaptation play out in practice?

The programme ran for just under two years (from April 2019 to February 2021) and more time is needed to determine the success or otherwise of the particular ToCs that partners have pursued. This section first examines the extent to which adaptations were undertaken, and what explains this. Then, we highlight three outcomes from the experience of adaptation.

First, the programme has resulted in some adaptations, set out in Box 2. These adaptations were at the level of activities, rather than ToCs. They suggest that programmes were responsive to changes in the external environment or context.[2] When programming was disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic and the measures put in place to prevent its spread, Concern, IRC and Save the Children were well placed to adjust their programming accordingly (Buell and Castillejo, 2020). This involved practical changes to standard operating procedures with implications for numbers of staff and community members that could be brought together for meetings and programme activities. But it also involved efforts to ensure programmes responded to emerging needs by developing new activities or adjusting existing ones. For example, IRC ran additional trainings on community case management for gender-based violence (GBV) for its staff and volunteers, set up a GBV Response Fund for use by any identified cases, provided mobile phones and monthly top-up credit for community case management workers for referrals, and provided post-exposure prophylaxis for HIV kits at community level for GBV cases. IRC also provided dignity kits to girls (containing hygiene and sanitary items), given the greater financial strain experienced during Covid-19. Concern similarly increased awareness-raising and information-sharing on services for GBV survivors as part of its community mobilisation activities, and has placed increased emphasis on safeguarding mechanisms through staff training and delivering messages in communities.

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2 Ladner (2015: 10–11) notes that adaptations can occur in response to a range of triggers: changes in the context (events and roadblocks) or learning about the context (new information). These are distinct from learning from implementation about the viability of particular pathways to change.

Box 2: Adaptations made by partner programmes to date

IRC

Following commencement of the Girl Shine sessions for girls, boys disrupted the sessions wanting to be included in discussions. Engaging Men in Accountable Practice (EMAP) sessions for boys were thus added to discuss issues related to human rights, gender equity and GBV. Boys were also added into IRC's ToC, alongside caregivers (male and female), as important influences on girls' lives given their roles as brothers, future spouses and chiefs.

Following feedback from girls, graduation ceremonies from the Girl Shine clubs were added to demonstrate the value and importance of girls' achievements (building on other milestone celebrations in Sierra Leone, such as the *Bondo*[3] 'coming of age' ceremony).

Having learnt about specific concerns of women in the community, IRC adapted the curriculum of the men's EMAP sessions, framing it around issues surfaced by the women – making the men's sessions more relevant and responsive to the local context.

In response to Covid-19, IRC ran additional trainings for staff and volunteers on community case management for GBV, set up the GBV Response Fund, provided mobile phones and credit for community case management workers and provided HIV kits at community level for GBV cases, and dignity kits for girls.

Concern

Through initial research, Concern challenged its own assumptions about who has most influence on teenagers and their gender norms. Using influence mapping and drawing on ethnographic research, some surprising results emerged – such as the importance of grandparents and teachers. Concern adapted its activities to factor in these influencers. In response to Covid-19, Concern increased awareness-raising and information-sharing on services for GBV survivors, and increased safeguarding mechanisms.

Save the Children

Save the Children adapted how it identified youth champions, after experimenting with multiple ways of doing this. From initial use of government-registered youth groups, there was a later shift to direct community recommendations. In addition, support provided to the youth champions changed from stipends to a village savings and loans association (VSLA).

In addition to adaptations prompted by Covid-19, programmes also demonstrated a responsiveness to *learning* about the external environment. For example, two of the programmes adjusted their activities based on learning about the relative importance of different actors within the community that programming would need to take account of to achieve results. In the case of Concern, the role of grandparents and teachers was factored into programming based on research findings about their influential role. For IRC, activities targeting boys were added to programming, based on the interest boys showed in being included, as well as a recognition of their influence in households as brothers, future spouses/fathers and community leaders.

Less adaptation, however, was apparent in response to learning from implementation about the effectiveness of particular ToCs and pathways to change. None of the partners altered their initial ToC. In part, this is explicable due to the short timeframe of the programme. Partners indicate that they had not implemented activities for long enough to know whether their underlying ToC required amendment. Adaptation may also have been limited because the partners' ToCs were quite broad. As Box 1 shows, the ToCs were not elaborated beyond quite high-level statements, with more concrete pathways for change (or 'theories of action') within these not mapped out. As a result, strategies being used within each of the ToCs could adjust, while the ToC itself did

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[3] *Bondo* is the largest female secret society in Sierra Leone, from which girls graduate following initiation. This is also known as *Sande* in some parts of the country.

not. For instance, in the case of Concern, while there was a change in which 'influencers' within the community should be engaged because of their impact on teenagers, this did not change the overall ToC that working with those who influence teenagers will help shift gender norms. Perhaps developing more specific theories of action, or sub-ToCs, that sat within the overarching ToC would have created more testable hypotheses about how to pursue change and would have resulted in more adaptations of strategy.

Yet several partner staff noted in interviews and survey responses that their ToC did not change because they continue to believe that it, and the assumptions behind it, are right. This may, of course, be true but also suggests that more critical engagement with ToCs is likely needed to dislodge tightly held beliefs and open space for alternative ToCs to be considered. The three organisations involved in this adaptive programme – and many of the staff – have significant experience working on the issue of teenage pregnancy or wider gender equality issues. This meant that partner programmes were informed by a strong knowledge of the issue at hand and made for rich discussions – for instance at the initial ToC workshop – about the various drivers of the problem. However, it also meant that staff brought with them quite fixed ideas about how to address the problem. This was evident, for instance, with some partners implementing largely pre-designed programmes that they were already familiar with, with some tweaking. This existing knowledge was thus both incredibly useful but also limited the extent to which ToCs were adapted and different strategies to address the problem were really tested.

The reticence to challenge the original ToCs may also stem from the fact that, at least for some of the partners, staff implementing the adaptive components were not involved in the development of the initial ToC. This was undertaken, instead, by more senior staff and so implementing staff did not have the benefit of the full backstory of how the initial ToC was arrived at, and may not have felt able to challenge what was produced by senior colleagues. This speaks to the importance of continuity between staff who design and implement adaptive programmes – as the constant re-design of the programme means 'design' and 'implementation' stages cannot be easily separated.

Despite not yet resulting in significant adaptations to ToCs, however, the programme has resulted in at least three positive outcomes.

3.1 More critically engaged and reflective programmes, partners and donor

The adaptive programming experiment resulted in more critically engaged and reflective programmes, partners and donor. Partner staff spoke of how adaptive programming enabled space for greater reflection, critical thinking and investment in learning than conventional programming affords. As one survey respondent noted, adaptive programming 'motivated us to think carefully about why we chose to do certain things in our programming, what happened that we did not expect, and what we would do differently'. Partners used the space available for learning in adaptive programming to explore issues more deeply through research and probing before starting to implement, which one Concern staff member described as resulting in more 'rigorous' and 'methodical' intervention designs. Another staff member from IRC described adaptive ways of working as 'not just automatic... [because] you think about your goals and what you are doing [to reach them]'. The difference in ways of working is perhaps best captured in an account from a member of the ART:

> *One of our partners told a story saying in a normal project they don't want to go to the field because they already know what they need to write in their reports. But that with an adaptive project, they want to go to the field because they couldn't possibly write their report without knowing what's going on. So this is a much better way to work because you can change things.*

One staff member from IRC explained how she began undertaking her own informal interviews with beneficiaries to gain greater understanding of the context and their views on the interventions – which is something that she would usually feel was not allowed but which an adaptive approach encouraged. These ways of working resulted in more critically engaged programmes and partners, with staff embracing the exploratory and learning approach that adaptive programming encourages. All partner staff interviewed indicated that they would like to continue working adaptively in future programmes, rather than return to conventional ways of working, suggesting that the approach has gained traction and prompted a change from business as usual. Even if programmes have not undertaken adaptations at the level of the ToCs, there has been an embrace of the value of learning throughout implementation and improving the programme on the basis of this.

This more reflective approach also filtered through to Irish Aid as the funder. Irish Aid staff indicated that the experience of managing adaptive programmes encouraged them to engage more critically with their partners. For instance, donor staff pointed to the R&R sessions that they sat in on with partners, encouraging them to follow up and feed back on partner reporting with more pressing and bigger-picture questions – not only for the partners involved in the adaptive programme but across all Irish Aid partners. Irish Aid is now looking with a more critical eye at the results frameworks of other programmes they fund – both adaptive and conventional – and beginning to ask how they could work differently.

3.2   Greater adaptive capacity among staff of partners and donors

Irish Aid and partner staff identify greater adaptive capacity among partner and donor staff stemming from this experience. Moreover, this capacity is identified among both country office and frontline field staff, the latter being described in a range of interviews as more informed, engaged and empowered within meetings and programme decisions. This suggests that the practice of adaptive working was quite devolved within participating partners and that adaptive capacity has been built at a range of levels within those organisations. This capacity became particularly apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic, with the partners working on the adaptive programme adapting more easily to the changed context than some of Irish Aid's other partners. In this way, the adaptive capacity built through this programme appears to have trickled over into partners' other non-adaptive programmes.

Irish Aid, too, reported feeling more confident in operating adaptively during Covid-19 because of familiarity with adaptive ways of working through this programme. This was pointed to as an 'unintended impact' – that Irish Aid was able to switch more comfortably to adaptive ways of working during the disruption of Covid-19 because it had been exposed to such ways of working already. Indeed, Irish Aid now plans to integrate more adaptive programming into its Sierra Leone portfolio on the basis of this programme experience.

3.3   Deeper knowledge of the drivers of teenage pregnancy and communities

Flowing from more critically engaged and reflective programmes, and partner capacity to work adaptively, is a deeper knowledge of the drivers of teenage pregnancy, as well as of the communities that partners are engaging with. Irish Aid indicates that reporting by – and interactions with – partner staff demonstrate a more nuanced understanding of the drivers of teenage pregnancy.[4] In addition, partners speak about the communities with much greater detail than the general observations about project sites that are usual. Irish Aid reports that this comes across in partners' willingness to make programming suggestions, and raise issues and challenges more openly with the donor.

Thus, while the actual adaptations that have been undertaken across the three partner programmes are reasonably limited, partner, donor and ART staff all indicate that the programme has resulted in a deeper and more reflective engagement with the issue of teenage pregnancy and community contexts, as well as a greater capacity within partners and Irish Aid to operate adaptively. The remainder of this paper sets out ten key points of learning that have emerged through the adaptive programming experiment.

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4   See social norms briefing note for further detail about this learning.

4 Lessons learned

4.1 There are many ways to do adaptive programming, each bringing its own challenges

The three partners delivered their adaptive programming component through different modalities. IRC had its own staff implement the adaptive element of programming; Concern sub-contracted a local NGO; and Save the Children supported youth champions they identified within communities to work adaptively. This meant that each organisation had the challenge of getting different groups up to speed and on board with adaptive programming (see 4.2 below), with implications for who was seen to be responsible for adaptation. For Concern and Save the Children, this issue was greater – as they not only needed to get their own staff working adaptively but also a local partner and youth champions, respectively. Concern faced the difficulty of sub-contracting a local partner (Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (CDHR)) to deliver a project with no clear deliverables (again, see 4.2 below). Concern also faced the challenge of building in feedback loops with CDHR to enable regular information-sharing and reflection to support CDHR in making decisions about adapting strategies – particularly now that the ART's support has ended.

Save the Children found that its youth champions required more support than planned in learning about adaptive approaches, with one-off trainings not sufficient. To support this, and address limited knowledge of adaptive programming among Save the Children staff themselves, consultants and staff from Save the Children UK were brought in to deliver training to youth champions and expand on the initial ToC. While these consultants and headquarters staff brought expertise, this also had the effect of local staff seeing the adaptive component as something that others were brought in to do, rather than being something that they themselves were responsible for understanding. This meant that some of the experience of working adaptively bypassed Save the Children's own staff.

IRC faced other challenges in terms of how adaptation worked within the hierarchy of its own organisation. While frontline field staff were given space and were supported to be reflective, changes in the programme still had to be approved by district and national managers. This was seen to be important for programme quality and accountability; however it also meant that those with the greatest knowledge about what was happening on the ground were not always able to drive decisions about programme direction.

In addition to opting for different modalities to work adaptively, partners have also pursued some different – although mostly consistent – styles of learning. All three organisations trialled one ToC at a time, in a manner consistent with sequential learning. In sequential learning, single strategies are adapted over time as the 'best guess' as to how change will happen (Valters *et al.*, 2016: 15). However, within its overarching ToC, Concern planned to undertake some parallel learning at the activity level by trialling work with different influencers (such as teachers, religious leaders and grandparents) simultaneously, to learn which influencers have the greatest impact on the gender norms of teenagers. This is consistent with a parallel learning approach, in which multiple strategies are tested at once, with less successful strategies dropped and those with positive results expanded (ibid.). One benefit of the parallel learning approach – particularly for organisations trialling adaptive programming for the first time – is that staff do not become as attached to a single intervention being 'the right one', as they are using multiple approaches.

4.2 Don't underestimate the challenge of getting (and keeping) people on board

As a bit of a fad in the development industry, there is a tendency for everyone to think they are supportive of adaptive programming. Often it is thought that the core problem is that donors do not incentivise partners to operate with a learning orientation – but rather in a command-and-control manner that emphasises accountability for taxpayers' money (Honig, 2018). Yet, this adaptive programme experience highlights that, even when you have a supportive donor willing to change conventional ways of working and suspend the usual pressures of delivering results, changing mindsets and behaviours within partner organisations and those they work with remains a challenge. In short, adaptive programming is more difficult to achieve than we tend to think.

Getting partner staff on board with clear agreement on what adaptive programming entailed was not straightforward. While almost all staff preferred adaptive ways of working and felt programming was more impactful as a result, there was often confusion about what this involved and a need for ongoing support to encourage behaviour change. An advocate for adaptive working in one partner organisation likened the process to 'pulling teeth,' saying that staff were generally interested in critical thinking only at the start and end of a programme cycle – not in between. Others described adaptive

programming as 'uncomfortable' and 'burdensome'. In some cases, younger staff or those newer to an organisation were seen to be more open to new ways of working; more experienced staff at times struggled with taking on new ways of working. In other cases, some personalities or work styles were less suited to the uncertainty of adaptive approaches, describing them as having 'no hard and fast rules', wherein 'anything can change'. At times, some staff appeared to want greater direction to know what to do and felt the continued need to expend budget and deliver tangible outputs.

Some of this stemmed from the challenge of getting up to speed with a new way of working and clarifying roles of everyone involved, including the ART. While initial workshops were held with partners both individually and as a group, in retrospect this was not sufficient. Workshops are useful in providing a theoretical understanding of what adaptive programming is, but they do not deliver a practical understanding of what adaptive programming entails for day-to-day work. This was not understood until staff actually began 'doing' adaptive programming. In addition, this did not take account of new staff brought in throughout the life of the programme and who were not familiar with adaptive programming – and were not hired on the basis of any skills to work adaptively. In some cases, new staff reported feeling that the ART was 'intruding' on their work and that they were being 'policed' with constant interviews and visits. Other forms of support were needed to overcome this confusion and some initial resistance to the ART (see action research briefing note). In practice, the ART often provided this kind of ongoing mentoring and support (see 4.4 below) but this could have been more strategically planned from the outset. As it was, the ART and advocates of adaptive working within each partner organisation felt that they were continually having to argue the case for why adaptive ways of working were needed and what these entailed.

4.3 Organisational systems must also be brought onboard or otherwise navigated

Even where partner staff involved in implementing the adaptive programme were on board with these ways of working, significant time and energy was expended on aligning business processes, such as finance, contracts and legal and human resources. These processes were described by partner staff as being 'rigid' and not always understanding why staff were asking for different rules to be applied for this programme. Budget systems were consistently identified as a challenge. Programmes had a budget envelope for their adaptive component at the

outset but activities were not pre-determined and it was thus not clear how the budget would be expended. This led to varied approaches to make the budget fit organisational finance procedures.

Save the Children, for instance, put lump sums against just a few initially planned activities with the knowledge that this would change over time as the programme adapted. This created confusion for the finance staff, but also programme staff who were not sure whether they had leeway to spend on things not explicitly included in the budget. Moreover, when new staff came on board, this intention to treat budget lines flexibly and adapt over time was lost and the allocated budgets were treated as more fixed. In addition, the pressure to spend felt in conventional programming was still apparent, with a number of activities taking place that did not appear to fit with the overarching ToC but that helped expend budget.

IRC divided its budget for the adaptive programming roughly across its three financial years and had staff write new proposals each year for how they planned to spend the money. This approach relied on more traditional budgeting but with shorter planning cycles to allow for adaptation and some flexibility between budget lines and year to year.

These budget issues were complicated further for Concern, which sub-contracted a local partner, CDHR, to implement its adaptive programme. Designing a sub-contract for a new local partner without a fixed budget or clear deliverables was seen to be risky within the organisation. It was difficult to bend systems to focus budgets and contracts on overall impact, rather than inputs and outcomes. This required negotiations with a range of systems staff and managers, taking considerable time and effort. Indeed, most of the two-year programme for Concern has been spent negotiating internal systems to get a local partner contracted, that is just now commencing implementation. As one Concern staff member noted: 'Everyone thinking about unit costs and number of beneficiaries… is a difficult habit to break'.

The ART, too, became aware of the importance of organisations' operational systems in constraining their ability to work adaptively – echoing the growing literature on this challenge (see, for instance, Honig and Gulrajani, 2018). As one ART member noted:

> *understanding the structures of each organisation and how they operate… was a steep learning curve. I was initially focused more on [partner]*

> *implementation not their own organisational structures. But I came to realise those two things were related. You have to understand both the implementation and the organisational structures as… the structure affects the implementation greatly.*

In addition, changes to these business processes in some cases also required support from headquarters outside Sierra Leone, which was not always easy to secure. As a result, partner staff spent a lot of time explaining why this programme needed exceptions or different rules to their colleagues working in finance, contracts and legal and human resources, as well as senior management in headquarters. This often met with scepticism and resistance, with staff describing that they felt 'boxed in' by organisational structures that were not supportive. This lack of support from headquarters is particularly striking, given that Save the Children, IRC and Concern headquarters have some familiarity with, and support for, adaptive programming (Mercy Corps *et al.*, 2016; Ahmar, 2018; Save the Children UK and School of International Futures, 2019). Indeed, some of the partners had already trialled adaptive programmes elsewhere in their global portfolios. Yet this experience did not seem to be brought to bear in this programme. This may be because the different 'adaptive experiments' are located in different parts of the organisation that do not speak to each other. But it means that, in practice, each programme that tries to work adaptively has to reinvent the wheel of making the back-end systems work more flexibly and bear the time and energy costs of doing so. It also means that organisations are missing the opportunity of important learning across their portfolios that could help them to deliver more responsive and learning-oriented programmes.

4.4 Have 'critical friends' or mentors alongside but outside

All partner and donor staff pointed to the critical role that the ART played in supporting the programmes to work adaptively. Many felt that the programmes could not have operated adaptively without their support. The ART used the tools developed by ODI to capture learning (monthly and R&R reports), facilitated the R&Rs, helped push the programmes along with monthly check-ins, and prompted continued reflection through asking questions and discussing programme direction with staff (for further detail see Buell *et al.*, 2021). In addition, the ART took on more of a mentoring role than was first envisaged. Much of its time was spent – especially in the first year – answering questions and delivering presentations and

training sessions about adaptive programming. This was a lot to ask of the ART members, who were themselves getting up to speed with what adaptive programming entailed while also being relied on by partners that 'looked at us [the ART] as the experts – not realising we were learning too'.

The 'critical friend' role that the ART played was a challenging one at times. This came to be much valued over the life of the programme, prompting fresh thinking and different perspectives. But some members of the ART found this role tricky to pitch appropriately at the outset. First, during the early stages of programming relationships between the ART and partners, some of the ART members did not want to be perceived as overly critical while partners got up to speed with a new way of working. In addition, gender and age dynamics – as well as different personal dispositions – meant that challenging partner staff was sometimes uncomfortable territory for members of the ART.

While the critical-friend role need not always be played by action researchers,[5] they are uniquely placed to bring both detailed knowledge and bigger-picture insights to bear. The inside/outside status of the ART members was key – being deeply familiar with the programmes and yet not themselves a part of them. One partner staff member described the ART members as a 'semi-independent party'. This enabled more relevant and incisive questions that speak to both the specifics of a given programme and context, as well as the bigger picture. Of course, the productiveness of this role depended on relationships of trust between the ART and the partners (see action research briefing note). These cannot be assumed and had to be built over time – in some cases benefiting from pre-existing relationships.

4.5   An adaptive 'pillar' has pros and cons

As a first foray into adaptive ways of working, Irish Aid set up the partnerships with Concern, IRC and Save the Children to have one adaptive 'pillar' within a wider programme, alongside other pillars that were conventional in their programming approach. The adaptive pillar was not to constitute more than 20% of the overall programme budget. This was intended to ease partners into a new way of working and meant they could

continue to implement and deliver on more conventional outputs under other programme pillars, keeping the adaptive pillar for more experimental work. In theory, this seemed like a good idea and was discussed between Irish Aid and the management of partner organisations as a cautious first 'pilot intervention' for grappling with how to work adaptively.

In practice, however, having the adaptive component confined to just one pillar – rather than applying across the partnerships – meant that partners were still under a general pressure to spend and demonstrate results as per the usual incentives of the development system. This created confusion – with one way of working relevant for most of the programme; and another, new way of working relevant to just one pillar of it. Given that people tend not to operate in the real world as per the schematics on paper, some of the activities that occurred under the adaptive pillar appeared to be largely irrelevant to the ToC being tested, but fulfilled other organisational pressures. While an 'all-in' approach, where the whole of the partnerships were adaptive, would have been more of a risk, this would also have forced partners (both staff delivering the programme, as well as their systems colleagues and managers in the country office and headquarters) to really grapple with what working adaptively meant and how to adjust systems to facilitate it. As a member of the ART noted, even though the adaptive pillar was small 'you still have this huge operational machinery with traditional ways of working' behind it. A larger project may have provided greater incentive to shift those traditional systems. Donor staff echoed this view, noting that, had the adaptive component of the partnerships been bigger, this might have assisted in getting more senior management support from within the partner organisations.

One positive point about the adaptive pillar approach, however, was apparent in IRC's work. Because the same field staff were working across adaptive and non-adaptive pillars, they brought the insights gained from the reflective approach of the adaptive work (such as R&R discussions) to their work on other pillars. They also brought knowledge about the context gained from work in other pillars to the R&R discussions. So there was cross-fertilisation of the strengths of adaptive programming to other parts of the programme.

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5   In other cases, the critical-friend role has been played by staff elsewhere in the same organisation (say, a regional office) who are familiar with the detail of programming but not directly involved in its implementation. See Cole *et al.* (2016: 15).

4.6   Research is important but can be a trap

It is notable that all three partners started their adaptive programming experiments by undertaking research (Box 3). Partner staff all reported finding the upfront research valuable in deepening their knowledge and there was a shared sense that adaptive programming allowed space for research as a legitimate programme activity, in a way that conventional programming does not. The research done under the adaptive pillar was seen as especially useful because it was explicitly connected to driving programme decisions – as opposed to research undertaken as part of usual programming, which can tend to sit on its own and not connect with implementation in a meaningful way. This meant that staff felt the programmes they designed were much more 'evidence-based' and 'informed' than is usually the case. Partner staff also suggested that starting with research put staff in the right frame of mind for a different way of working, more focused on learning.

> **Box 3: Research activities undertaken by partners to inform adaptive programming**
>
> **Concern** began its adaptive programming by hiring an international consultant to conduct three months of ethnographic root-cause analysis of teenage pregnancy in four communities in Port Loko district (Newbury, 2020).
>
> **IRC** drew on an international staff member to work with field staff in six communities across two chiefdoms in Bo district to examine the influence of caregivers on girls' position and power in the household (IRC, n.d.).
>
> **Save the Children** hired a consultant to train the youth champions they had identified in Waterloo and Murray Town to undertake research on how gender norms are constructed among their peers, and to assist them in writing up the findings (BDO, 2020).

Research can seem like a good place to start but it also slowed down the beginning of implementation and filled a gap when staff were not sure what else to do. In some ways, research was a safe way into adaptive programming – buying partners some time while they got up to speed with a new way of working. However, there is a danger that research itself became the output and was treated as a deliverable – rather than a jumping off point to assist strategic experimentation. At times, the reliance on research as the way to start adaptive programming suggested backsliding into conventional programming cycles, with upfront research answering questions that then led to the design and then implementation of a programme (although the connection between the research findings and resultant programme approach was not always clear). In this way, research can give the false impression of having figured out the problem before adaptation has even begun. It also often then became a barrier to learning in the earlier stages of the programme, where partners were reluctant to discuss learning 'until the research was done'.

Upfront investments in research seemed to be considered as a requirement for working adaptively by partners. In some cases, this seemed to imply that partners did not have the requisite knowledge and that research (mostly carried out by a consultant) would provide this. This suggests that staff's significant experiential knowledge at the outset was not enough and that more research was needed before programming could get underway. While the research pieces undertaken by the partners were clearly useful, they were probably not needed as a first step and potentially got in the way of getting on with implementation and the experiential learning that is so important in adaptive programming (Valters *et al.*, 2016: 8).

4.7   MEL for adaptive programmes is hard but important to plan upfront

While partner staff welcomed the opportunity to work adaptively, they consistently reported that it was difficult to know whether they were on track, and how and when to make adaptations as a result. This meant that, at times, there was a risk of adaptation being somewhat ad hoc. That is, staff took advantage of the opportunity to work flexibly and adjust activities as they saw fit; but this was not always done strategically with a view to testing particular ToCs and learning about pathways to change. These challenges speak to the need for due attention to monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) in adaptive programmes. But what MEL looks like was a continued source of confusion and required more upfront support.

Part of the challenge related to the fact that there were multiple things to monitor: both the individual ToCs that partners were implementing, as well as the adaptive experience and what was being learnt from this new way of working. This created confusion for partners. In addition, monitoring was complicated by activities not being known upfront and changing over time. In response to requests

for support from partners, ODI ran a workshop on MEL for adaptive programmes in year one of the project. This was well-received but, in retrospect, not sufficient to address partners' concerns. Partners responded to the MEL challenge in different ways – by tweaking indicators being used for the non-adaptive pillars of their programme and using activity tracking. Concern developed its own MEL tools but, with staff turnover and delays in project start-up, these were not ultimately used. Partners recognised that the approach to MEL was consistently weak. The MEL challenges were also exacerbated by a reluctance on the part of partners to share their MEL frameworks with others – suggesting that not all pressures around demonstrating results were alleviated.

One aspect of the programme design intended to assist with this MEL challenge – the use of progress markers in the quarterly R&Rs – was not utilised to full effect. This may have been due to confusion about their role: when they were used, they often replicated 'traditional' programme markers, such as the conduct of certain activities. In essence, progress markers are 'soft' indicators developed at the end of each R&R session by those present, following decisions about next steps. They are intended to help make assessments during implementation and at the next R&R about whether the agreed course of action has led to progress. They act, therefore, as waypoints on a map – assisting people to know whether they are on the right track to the change they seek. In practice, however, progress markers were not always agreed at the end of each R&R, or revisited throughout implementation or at the beginning of the next R&R. Or, where they were, they were often so process-focused that they did not help to capture whether strategies being pursued were making progress. This, combined with the weaknesses around MEL processes, means that less learning was extracted about the specific impacts of the ToCs partners have trialled than might otherwise have been the case.

4.8 R&R sessions are useful but hard to make strategic

R&R sessions were well received and consistently pointed to by participants as serving a useful function, with interesting material coming out of them. (By contrast, there was little engagement from partners with the monthly reports from the ART.)[6] All partners intend

to continue holding R&Rs within their programmes in future. Participants in these sessions noted a range of benefits – such as providing regular check-ins, promoting information-sharing, identifying challenges and problem-solving as a group, and uncovering new questions partners should be asking themselves. One staff member noted that the sessions helped to 'entrench learning' and encouraged reflection on learning – rather than merely noting it and carrying on with implementation as normal. The reports coming out of R&R sessions were also noted as serving an important purpose within organisations – demonstrating that programmes were making progress, even if this was hard to see against normal markers such as budget being expended and outputs being delivered. One partner used the R&R reports to advocate internally with senior managers to address some of the systems challenges that were causing programme delay.

Part of the success of the R&Rs was attributed to the role of the ART in facilitating the sessions. Having strong facilitators who kept teams focused on big-picture questions, but were also familiar with the detail of the programmes and flexible enough to respond to group dynamics, was noted as immensely useful. The guides that ODI developed with the ART for facilitating these sessions were useful in keeping often wide-ranging discussions on track, although were probably too onerous and detailed. Importantly, those guides could not have replaced strong facilitation. As one of the members of the ART noted:

> *I had to learn how to ask additional questions or phrase them differently so you got the answer you were really trying to get to. So I had to learn how to adapt the template. I had a series of prompts for each question to really get to the heart of the questions.*

The ART played a key role in drawing out learning and reflecting it back to partner staff, who did not always immediately see it themselves, given their focus on implementation. Moreover, the ART helped move partner staff from just reporting on what they had learned to thinking about what that meant for their programme – asking the 'so what?' question.

Despite the positive role played by the R&Rs, however, they did not always serve their intended purpose of being a space for critical reflection on the relevance of

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6   Initial plans were for these reports to be delivered monthly, but following challenges with getting to project sites that regularly and writing up reports quickly enough, this was shifted to every six to eight weeks, with reports sent to partners for comments/feedback. Where this was done by phone or as an in-person briefing, it worked much better. Written reports elicited little reaction.

ToCs and implicit assumptions, results and learning. The sessions, at times, became a catch-all for a range of other purposes, such as information-sharing and catch-up between staff and with the ART. This meant that the sessions were not always focused on testing ToCs and progress towards them. In part, this was related to who was included in the R&Rs. While IRC R&Rs involved all those implementing the adaptive pillar, Save the Children R&Rs did not include the youth champions or the consultants who worked on the programme, and Concern R&Rs sometimes involved the ART meeting with just one staff member, given the delays in getting the local implementing partner contracted. Thus, in many cases, not all of those involved in programming were involved in the reflective discussions. To ensure that these sessions retain a more strategic function, it is important to establish other forums or mechanisms to provide space for information-sharing that can otherwise crowd out more challenging discussions.

4.9 Adaptive programming challenges power dynamics and creates collaborative relationships

One of the most positive lessons that emerged from the adaptive programming experience was the potential for this way of working to challenge the usual power dynamics of development, and to deliver more collaborative programmes. Indeed, one Concern staff member talked about it as being a more 'ethical' way to run programmes. This challenging of power dynamics and opening of space for input and collaboration was apparent at a number of levels – between donors and partners, and within partner organisations, as well as between partners and the local organisations and people they worked with in the community.

For Irish Aid, adaptive programming was a new experience that required open and trusting relationships with partners to explore unknowns together. Donor staff noted that an openness to what might emerge from the experiment resulted in more honest relationships with partners. Rather than donors holding the purse strings and partners feeling compelled to present themselves as 'experts' with all the answers upfront in order to secure funding, the adaptive experiment involved donors and partners acknowledging the limits of their knowledge and together deciding how to work towards change. Partners too suggested that the adaptive experience allowed them space to be more honest with the donor than is usually the case, with less 'pressure to perform'.

Partners found that the experience of adaptive programming led to more collaborative decision-making within their organisations. IRC field staff noted that they were no longer simply delivering activities as part of programmes designed by senior managers or foreign consultants – they were empowered to be part of decision-making themselves. The knowledge that they brought from being on the ground was valued more because it was recognised as crucial to knowing how to respond. As one frontline IRC staff member noted, this encouraged her to learn more – for instance by conducting informal interviews with members of the community to understand their views on the problem of teenage pregnancy and the programme itself. The R&Rs, in particular, were identified as providing a more democratic space in which staff of differing levels of seniority and from different parts of the organisation (programme and systems staff, as well as management) could all make inputs into decisions.

Perhaps most promising of all, however, was that partners felt adaptive programming enabled them to interact differently with their local partners and people in the communities they work in. For Concern, this meant the space to involve their local partner in the design phase of the project. Participatory design is something Concern and other NGOs often talk about wanting to do but rarely have the opportunity for, given donor grant processes. This greater involvement of the local partner in the design of the programme they will then be delivering has the potential to more fundamentally change the ways of working between large international NGOs and their local counterparts by creating more equal relationships. As one member of the ART noted, this way of working required 'giving up some control'.

For Save the Children and IRC, adaptive programming encouraged more participatory engagement with youth champions and communities. One Save the Children staff member noted that it provided 'the potential… to listen to beneficiaries and build the programme around their feedback, not just what the NGO thinks is the best course of action'. A strong focus on community dialogue and consultation meant that the partners learned a lot from people in the communities themselves. While undoubtedly a positive, this was not without its challenges. Partners often looked to the ART to provide feedback to them on what emerged from their interviews with community members – sometimes to the point of this substituting for a beneficiary feedback mechanism. The ART's consultation with communities at times had the effect of raising community expectations about the

programme, which ran the risk of being extractive and counterproductive if the programmes did not actually adapt in response to community feedback.

Despite this, the collaboration with communities was more broadly positive. As a staff member from Save the Children noted, as result of this collaboration 'the agents of change were actual community members' and those whose lives were most affected by the programme were closer to the driving seat than is often the case in conventional development programmes. This attention and responsiveness to the views and feedback of people in the community led some partner staff to feel that adaptive programming was not only more effective but also more ethical than conventional programming. In the words of one Concern staff member:

> *If you are not working adaptively, over the life of a three-year programme it's just not possible that you are always doing what is best for beneficiaries, because the context and the beneficiaries are changing and you are not responding to this change – [you are] sticking to a blueprint.*

By contrast, adaptive programming encourages responsiveness to these changes, in order to have a more impactful programme, and is therefore 'more ethical' in terms of its commitment to improving the lives of people at community level. This is perhaps the most promising lesson to emerge from the programme.

4.10 Adaptive programming will take more time that you think!

A banal but important point is how long it takes to get people on board and trained in adaptive approaches (which itself requires building trust between donors, partners and action researchers), to decide on an initial ToC, get it up and running with all the negotiation of organisational systems this requires, and then let the programme run for long enough that learning is generated and adaptations occur. Donor and partner staff expressed disappointment with how long it took to get adaptive ways of working up and running – and this has meant that implementation simply has not been going on long enough to see real adaptations and learning.

Adaptive programming is also an immensely time-consuming way of working for partner and donor staff. While the flexibility of this way of working was welcomed, a Save the Children staff member described it as 'keeping you around the clock consulting, strategizing, analysing – constant engagement'. This mental engagement for partner staff is on top of the significant legwork of navigating organisational systems to work for adaptive programming, and having to engage with the ART on a regular basis to capture the experience and emerging learning. Donor staff too noted that, because of the collaborative nature of adaptive ways of working, relationships with partners were more important and required significant investments of time – beyond what is usual for donors. For those thinking of undertaking adaptive programming, the significant time involved, both at the start and on an ongoing day-to-day basis for implementing staff, is important to factor into planning.

5 Conclusion

This adaptive programming experiment embarked on by Irish Aid, Concern, IRC and Save the Children has been a steep learning curve for all involved. It has seen a highly committed group of programmers, with significant experience of working to reduce teenage pregnancy, challenge existing ways of working, develop new skills and understandings of the problem, and learn about social norms as an underexplored driver of the problem.

The experiment has not been perfect. The programmes have not always operated in an adaptive manner and there has been less testing of ToCs than would have been ideal. However, the programmes have certainly delivered more learning-oriented and flexible programmes that have been responsive to community feedback and changes in context. Moreover, all organisations involved have now practically grappled with the challenges of working adaptively and are better placed to do so again in future. It is hoped that the results and lessons set out in this paper will be useful for other organisations wanting to work adaptively, and will contribute to the growing literature capturing this experience.

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Annex 1:
List of interviewees

Regina Bash-Taqi, Senior Action Researcher, London, United Kingdom, 10 December 2020

Sarah Cundy, Concern Worldwide, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 25 November 2020

Sarata Daramy, Centre for Democracy and Human Rights, Port Loko, Sierra Leone, 1 December 2020

De Evans, Save the Children, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 1 December 2020

Tania Fraser, Senior Action Researcher, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 8 December 2020

Janette Garber, International Rescue Committee, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 30 November 2020

Jenny Hutain, formerly Concern Worldwide, USA, 9 December 2020

Nafisatu Jalloh, Irish Aid, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 8 December 2020

Moses Kamara, Save the Children, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 2 December 2020

Muallem Kamara, Junior Action Researcher, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 2 December 2020

Henrietta Koroma, Junior Action Researcher, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 30 November 2020

Anni Lehto, Concern Worldwide, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 26 November 2020

Samuel Mokuwa, International Rescue Committee, Bo, Sierra Leone, 25 November 2020

Mary O'Neill, Irish Aid, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 8 December 2020

Jeremiah Sawyer, Save the Children, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 10 December 2020

Elizabeth Tucker, International Rescue Committee, Bo, Sierra Leone, 11 December 2020

Rosa Vandi, International Rescue Committee, Bo, Sierra Leone, 30 November 2020