ODI

Working paper

Evidence-led adaptive programming

Lessons from MUVA

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Key messages

Learning-by-doing is essential to adaptive programming, but it can be challenging to establish data collection processes that generate useful, timely and practical information.

MUVA – a female economic empowerment programme in Mozambique – has an atypically evidence-led adaptive management approach. This has two fundamental features. One, data collection and analysis are synchronised with set cycles for learning and adapting projects. Two, data collection is oriented more to the needs of implementing staff than to the reporting requirements of funders. Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) systems are designed to prioritise actionable learning.

This approach was enabled by building collective ownership over the programme's objectives and the purpose of MEL from the outset. Implementers are asked about their motivations, and these are related to the programme's Theory of Change. The evidence culture is supported by the proximity of MEL staff to implementing staff; and through structuring upwards accountability to funders around justifying evidence-based adaptations instead of reporting on more narrow indicators.

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MUVA

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Acknowledgements

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Acronyms/Glossary

FCDO   UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

MEL   monitoring, evaluation and learning

NGO   non-governmental organisation

OPM   Oxford Policy Management

1   Introduction

For over a decade, calls for more 'adaptive programming' have been prominent in international development practice. The underlying premise is that most development interventions take place in uncertain and complex contexts. And so, advocates argue, it is rarely effective for programmes to simply execute a predetermined plan. Instead, they need to constantly assess and re-assess what is and isn't working and adapt programming accordingly. A crucial part of this is 'learning by doing' (Valters et al., 2016).

Attempts at embedding learning within development programmes are increasingly well documented (see for example Bridges and Woolcock, 2019; Chambers and Ramalingam, 2016; Christie and Green, 2019; Derbyshire and Donovan, 2016; Gray and Carl, 2022; Laws et al., 2021). Programmes have mostly attempted to learn through some form of 'reflective practice'. This provides space for those involved in day-to-day implementation to reflect on what is working more or less well, and how contextual changes might influence programming. It aims to surface tacit knowledge and provide opportunities for changing course. Various methods have been used to structure this learning-by-doing, strategy testing being a common one (see Ladner, 2015).

This kind of reflective practice is necessary for effective adaptive programming, and for certain contexts it might be sufficient. At the least, it might be the most plausible way to embed ongoing learning given time and resource constraints (Sharp et al., forthcoming). But relying on reflective practice alone can have drawbacks. Staff views are partial, might not be well suited to assessing the impact of interventions, and may be rooted in the day-to-day of programme implementation, missing the bigger strategic picture (Ramalingam et al., 2019). There is also a risk that reflections become dominated by programme leaders and so miss the full range of stakeholder views and the realities of programme implementation.

For development programmes, becoming more learning-oriented is not straightforward. The large bureaucracies of development organisations can be resistant to experimentation; accountability demands can trump incentives to learn; and implementers can be more accustomed to adhering to rigid logframes (Ramalingam et al., 2017, 2019; Sharp, 2021; Sharp and Wild, 2021). Establishing reflective practice itself is difficult. Incorporating data collection processes that generate useful, timely and practical information to inform adaptations in real time is even more so. Based on our experiences working on and researching adaptive programmes, we suggest there are relatively few that have combined systematic, inclusive reflective practice with extensive real-time data collection. MUVA is one such example.

In this brief working paper, we set out the MUVA monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) model, discuss some of the enabling factors for evidence-led adaptive management, and reflect on the applicability of MUVA's approach to other adaptive programmes. We draw mostly on

internal programme documents, reviews, and evaluations; existing published literature on the programme; interviews with staff; and personal experience supporting MUVA's MEL function. But first, we introduce MUVA.

1.1 Background to MUVA

MUVA started as a programme funded (for £18 million between 2014 and 2022) by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO, previously the Department for International Development) and managed by Oxford Policy Management (OPM). In 2020, it transitioned to a Mozambican non-governmental organisation (NGO) based in Maputo to continue the work with the same approach and principles, beyond the OPM contract.

MUVA aims to address economic problems facing young urban women in Mozambique. Urban females aged 19 to 24 suffer the highest unemployment rates in Mozambique and rely predominantly on informal work. Challenges of finding decent work are linked to the 'sticky' problems of gendered social norms and the attitudes of labour market actors that place significant barriers in the path of young women transitioning from school to work, and are compounded by high rates of HIV/AIDS and early pregnancy (LearnAdapt, 2018).

MUVA's business case highlighted the fact that despite the gravity of this problem, little evidence is available on what might make female economic empowerment initiatives in Mozambique effective. In consequence, the programme was established with a specific mandate to test, learn and adapt. It emphasises innovation: testing different initiatives, including those that had been implemented elsewhere but not in Mozambique; learning what is effective; and disseminating this knowledge. As of 2022, MUVA has designed and tested over 20 approaches across a broad range of intersectional issues related to female economic empowerment, including education, urbanism, entrepreneurship and the arts.

2 MUVA's evidence-led adaptive management approach

In this section, we describe two features of MUVA's MEL approach that are fundamental to its evidence-led adaptive management. First, we look at how data collection and analysis are synchronised with set cycles for learning and adapting projects. Second, we outline how the implementers of projects are prioritised as the end users of monitoring and evaluation data. The section concludes with an illustrative example of a soft skills training project, MUVA'titude.

2.1 Synchronised data collection and analysis within a learning and adaptation cycle

As a programme designed to test different initiatives, MUVA began by devising a structured process through which ideas could be piloted and refined. MUVA settled on a three-cycle approach. Initial ideas are formalised into concept notes and reviewed by a decision panel composed of donor staff and MUVA leadership (both MEL and operational). If approved, they are piloted for one cycle, and if they show promise, the ideas are refined and tested again in two further cycles.

The process of refining initiatives requires useful, timely information about implementation. This begins with MEL and operational staff jointly developing a Theory of Change (ToC) for each project and from this, determining learning needs (for further detail, see section 2.2). The guiding questions are twofold. First, what is the project trying to test? What evidence is it aiming to generate? Second, what do implementers need to know in order to:

1. understand if the project is achieving its stated objectives,
2. identify and address bottlenecks?

Based on this, the MEL team develops data collection tools that can provide useful insights into these areas within the timeframe of a project cycle.

The process of data collection builds towards regular reflection workshops, held over the course of one or two days. These include engagement with relevant evidence as to the effectiveness of the project thus far, and a look at project progress in relation to the Theory of Change. These sessions are carefully prepared by the MEL team in advance, who examine the data to identify trends or issues and, in discussion with project leadership, decide where the reflection should focus. The cycle of project reflections is followed by institution-level reflections, which explore themes emerging across projects and broader operational and management questions. Figure 1 summarises the learning and adaptation cycle.

A key principle of these reflections is to separate the learning process and the decision-making process. In practice, this means that MUVA management does not join project-level reflections. Riemenschneider and Selvester (unpublished) explain how various considerations beyond evidence-based learning influence decisions to adapt. These include commitments made, contractual requirements, relationship management, and managerial insight. By separating the processes, staff feel that the sometimes-challenging decisions on how to operationalise adaptations are able to take place elsewhere. It leaves the reflections to truly focus on learning. These decisions are then documented so they can be referred back to in the next round.

Figure 1 MUVA's learning and adaption cycle
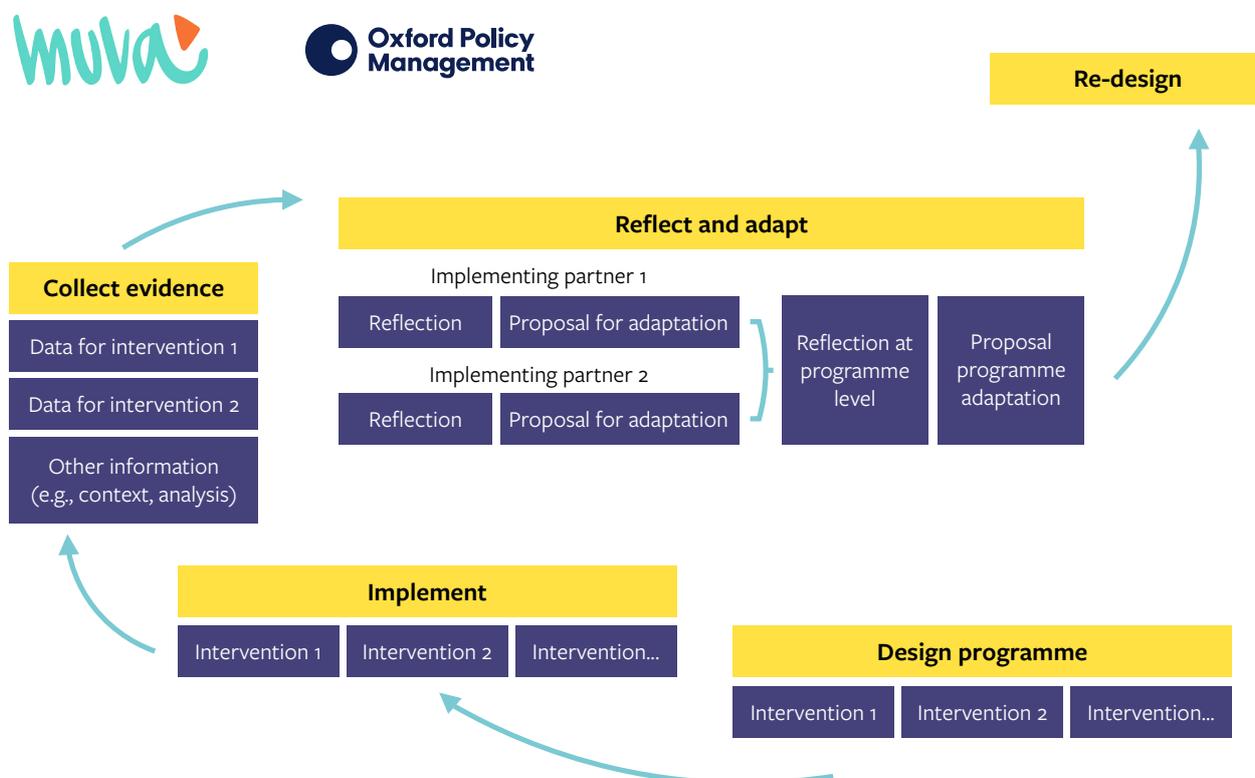
Source: Riemenschneider and Selvester (unpublished)

The regularity of these cycles and reflections is important. There needs to be time for meaningful data collection and learning to occur, but they need to be sufficiently frequent that adaptations are timely. MUVA settled on every six months. A regular schedule does mean that they may not occur at the most relevant moments during implementation (after a big change in the context, for example), but the predictability allows for planning of data collection and ensuring the whole process is manageable.

To provide 'just-in-time' data, the MEL team relies on a variety of data sources. These include 'participant voice' qualitative interviews or focus groups with those that participated in MUVA projects. According to staff, these, along with similar qualitative data from implementers, almost always provide useful insights even if other evaluative data is not available. Usually there is also some monitoring data built into programming (for example attendance rates or participant profile data) which can be used to identify gaps or raise questions. Where possible, this is supplemented with more resource-intensive data, such as selection surveys and baseline, midline and endline evaluations. This 'just-in-time' approach is underpinned by not aiming for a quantitative, statistically significant evaluative approach for every project, every cycle. Instead, the purpose is to build as good as possible an 'evidence picture' from the available sources, given time and resource constraints.

This approach is also reflected in the presentation of the data in manageable and digestible formats, such as PowerPoint slides and infographics, rather than lengthy reports. Priority is given to providing information in a useful manner for decision-making, rather than to formal report writing between cycles. Results reports are compiled at the end of the three cycles (Riemenschneider and Selvester, unpublished).

MUVA dedicates its MEL resources primarily to a local team focused on data collection that informs implementation (as opposed to primarily funding external staff to conduct large scale or longer-term evaluations, for example).[1] This undoubtedly helps with 'just-in-time' data collection. One staff member commented: 'there is always something useful we [can] collect, especially with the [MEL] machine we [have] – so many enumerators and MEL officers'. Even if the identified learning needs are relatively intangible, the large MEL team expands the options for timely data collection.

Finally, data collection tools themselves are iterated across cycles. One example stems from a project called MUVA+, which provides a bundled set of business training and mentoring for women market sellers. The data collection consisted of gathering bookkeeping data to assess the effect of the project on business practices. However, staff realised in the first cycle that the quality of bookkeeping data was not sufficient, and adjusted their approach in the second cycle. Enumerators visited the market sellers daily to ask them about products they had sold and bought. This helped to improve data quality. Moreover, it became an opportunity to train the market sellers in record keeping.

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1   In addition to its 'day-to-day' MEL budget, MUVA has an additional budget that has allowed it to do some more evaluative work (for example follow up studies with cohorts of participants and annual value-for-money evaluations). The programme leader noted that this additional budget is a luxury not available to all programmes who might need to prioritise.

2.2 Implementers as the end users of monitoring and evaluation data

The second key feature of MUVA's MEL approach is to orient data collection better to the needs of the implementers, rather than to the reporting requirements of funders. One staff member described this as downwards accountability to implementers and participants over upwards accountability to funders. Another staff member described it as follows: providing information to implementers will tell us what is working and what is not, and, ultimately, this is also what the funder wants to know.

The learning and adaptation process is not solely the realm of the MEL team, but involves project 'leads' within MUVA and implementing partners from local NGOs. A subset of the information generated during this process is then fed into an accountability framework. Sometimes funder staff (for example, FCDO had a social development advisor embedded with the programme) participate in the reflection sessions, which helps them appreciate the rigour of the process.

This inclusive learning approach starts from project conception with a Theory of Change process. For each project a workshop is held to develop a shared understanding of the Theory of Change with those implementing the programme. These workshops ask three questions:

1. What is success to you with respect to the programme?[2]
2. What are the challenges?
3. How do we want to achieve the objectives, given the challenges?

The first question is intended to draw out the motivations of staff. A participatory exercise relates these motivations to the overall objective and develops a coherent narrative of what a project is aiming to achieve, in the words of those implementing it. This narrative becomes the basis for the Theory of Change. The Theory of Change in turn becomes embedded in the reflective learning sessions, where assumptions and progress towards goals can be checked. In this way, staff members can see how their motivations link to the overall objective, and that the programme aims are also personally important to them.

According to staff, giving the MUVA operational team a sense of ownership over data collection has been key in creating a culture where operational decisions are made based on evidence. Linking the MEL process to implementers' personal motivations and objectives is intended to boost the willingness to act on the information generated and create subsequent demand for more evidence. MUVA has seen some success in this regard: for example, implementers have made requests for rapid surveys to explore the reasons for female drop-out of projects and to obtain more information on the reaction of households and the wider community.

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2   Sometimes it has been useful to reframe this as 'if you want to describe to a friend or relative what you are hoping to achieve with the programme, what would you say?'

The structure of the programme around three cycles also helps build the evidence culture. Implementers are aware they have three cycles to demonstrate some success with their project, and so want to know how to improve. A member of the MUVA leadership commented on the importance of striking a balance: 'I'm not sure what is the right number [of cycles], but if it's forever maybe the motivation would be less, and if it's one the stakes would be too high.'

Overall, MUVA's MEL approach prioritises actionable, immediate information to refine ongoing implementation over sharing insights more widely. Actionable learning does include exploring the impact of MUVA projects, such as whether female participants were more likely to find renumerated work and if they had greater say about money earned than a comparison group. Staff are keen to know the impact of projects, partly to inform decisions about what to scale up. The MEL system focuses on generating timely information about 'what's working' to inform these operational decisions, rather than to share or demonstrate these impacts externally.[3] This emphasis on actionable learning appears essential to effective adaptive management, and has garnered the backing of FCDO, whose programme reviews have been glowing.

This relates to a final point. This approach requires approval, or at least the requisite autonomy, from funders (see more detail in Section 3.3). As MUVA is transitioning to an independent NGO with additional funders and different reporting requirements, it is already finding it more challenging to make the case for prioritising actionable learning.

2.3 A project example: MUVA'titude

MUVA'titude is an innovative 'soft skills' training project targeted at out-of-school and out-of-work disadvantaged young people from poor urban households (Riemenschneider and Holland, 2022). It combines gender-conscious training on intra- and interpersonal 'soft' skills (that are often required in the workplace) with more traditional technical vocational training and work experience.

Soft skills are hard to measure, so the MEL team developed a range of observational exercises where a team of experts graded participants from one to five in categories such as 'listening skills' and 'professionalism'. These were assessed before the project (baseline), after the intensive soft skills training (midline), and after six months of technical and soft skills training (endline). The first project cycle saw improved performance across a range of indicators (see Figure 2). In qualitative feedback participants described how the project increased their confidence and altered their self-perception (Bischler and Holland, 2021).

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3   MUVA does sometimes share learning externally when possible, for example at evaluation conferences, but the priority is on generating learning for ongoing operational decisions.

Figure 2 Observer assessed soft skill scores for MUVA'titude cycle
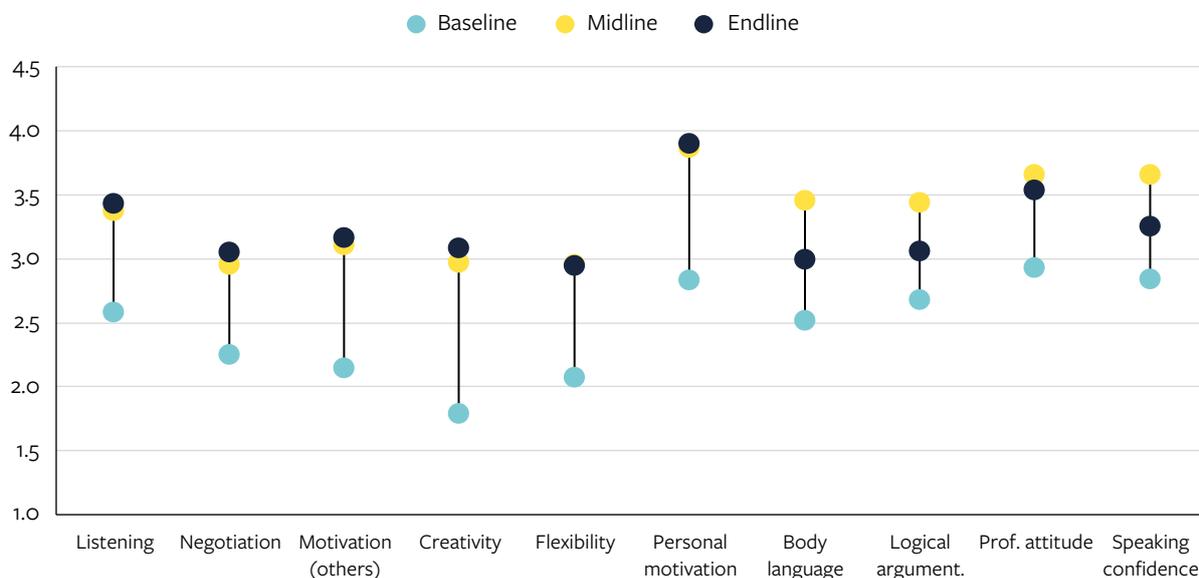
Source: Bischler and Holland, 2021

However, monitoring data highlighted that drop-out rates were high, especially among the least educated participants. How to address this drop-out issue was made the subject of a reflection session. Project implementers developed two options: a redesign of the project to cater for those with lower literacy skills, or a requirement of a minimum level of literacy to participate (with the intention to set up a new intervention for those who were less literate). On reflection, the implementing team concluded that the project was intrinsically well designed for those with a minimum education level, and so went for the latter option. This had an immediate impact: drop-out rates decreased from 31% in cycle 1 to less than 10% in cycle 2 (Riemenschneider and Holland, 2022). Ultimately, the intervention proved successful, with participants more often employed in renumerated work than their peers in a comparison group.

3 Enabling factors for evidence-led adaptive management

Several factors enable MUVA's atypically evidence-led and inclusive MEL process. Some are mainly about the structure and design of the programme; others are explicit management decisions. We highlight three in this section. First, how ownership of the programme's MEL approach is built from the start. Second, the proximity of implementing staff and MEL staff. And finally, how the programme's upwards accountability to funders is conceived.

3.1 Building ownership of programme objectives and the purpose of MEL

As stated above, MUVA is explicitly designed to test innovative ideas. This clearly helps set the incentives for learning. The Business Case did not present an overly detailed programme design, but instead focused primarily on the context and the problem to be addressed. The delivery team were then tasked with conceiving and testing ideas; to do so without a substantial focus on ongoing learning would be impossible.

However, MUVA made a key programme decision to be as inclusive as possible in filling out the gaps in the programme design, and so build a sense of ownership over the programme's objectives and the importance of learning. This was helped by a longer, nine-month inception phase. During this time the Theory of Change and logframe were developed, followed by two months to submit the first project concept notes. According to staff, this provided time for trust and shared goals to grow between team members. It also allowed for ten formative scoping studies on the Mozambican context, covering the range of areas MUVA intended to work on, literature reviews of relevant secondary data and political economy analysis. According to one MEL staff member, these studies helped hone initiatives better fitted to the context than would otherwise have been possible.

Programme processes are also designed to be as inclusive as possible of staff members in different roles. The Theory of Change process for individual projects described in Section 2.2 is one example. Reflections workshops also involve a range of stakeholders engaged in implementation. The Centre for Public Impact's case study of MUVA (2021: 7) emphasises the 'human' nature of these sessions: 'The process of learning together, with tools and processes which encourage and enable empathy to be built between all the actors involved, creates trust to work towards the achievement of a shared purpose.' In one reflection session for a teaching assistance project, MUVA project staff took part in a role-playing exercise with school staff to help navigate some difficult entrenched dynamics hindering the project (Riemenschneider and Selvester, unpublished).

3.2 Proximity of implementing staff and MEL staff

MUVA MEL staff and functions are all internal to the institution, not contracted out externally. These staff are well known to those implementing projects. Riemenschneider and Holland (2022) describe the relationship between the MEL team and the implementing team as one of 'semi-independence'. The MEL team has to be regularly engaged with and useful to implementing staff, but still able to ask challenging questions. MUVA attempts this set-up through focusing the MEL challenge role on objectives, measurement and mutually agreed theories of change, rather than monitoring project deliverables and timelines. Riemenschneider and Holland (2022: 9) describe the latter as a 'type of soft policing role that has cast monitoring and evaluation teams as enforcers, creates anxiety and defensiveness, and prevents learning rather than helps it'. MUVA deliberately tries to avoid this 'policing' and instead develop the MEL role as a critical friend with the same overall motivation of finding approaches that work.

Nonetheless, these perceptions are hard to shake off and require continual engagement and communication. As MUVA has grown it has recently expanded to a new city, Pemba, and is working with new implementing staff. The programme manager recounted the anxiety with which these new staff approached their first reflection session: they assumed they were being held accountable for something; it 'did not cross their mind that we were interested in what they had to say'. As 'the time was made for them to say what happened, you could see ownership grow' (Interview, 2022).

3.3 Structuring upwards accountability around justifying adaptations

Another enabling factor is how MUVA conceives of upwards accountability to the funder. Reflection sessions play an important role. The evidence discussed at these sessions is not just used to develop adaptations but also to explain the reasoning behind adaptations to the funder. According to staff, the programme was able to provide reassurance to FCDO by placing the MEL process into this institutional structure that provides information for accountability processes.

When, for example, a project was stopped or significantly altered, the data provided and discussions at the reflection session were the evidence to justify this decision. And in addition to project-level reflections, MUVA as a whole has its own regular reflection sessions to discuss the overall direction of travel, based on the aggregated evidence from individual projects and reflections.

The support for an adaptive approach is also embedded in the logframe indicators MUVA reports upon to FCDO. MUVA uses deliberately generic indicators, which have sufficient flexibility to allow the precise nature of projects to emerge and adapt. Initially the output indicator was simply 'number of approaches completed'. This was later refined to 'number of completed projects that test approaches towards greater female economic empowerment and build knowledge about effectiveness and scalability approaches adopted' (Riemenschneider and Holland, 2022). This captures MUVA's overall objective but does not tie the programme down to specific activities that might not always be relevant or most impactful.

4 Reflections on evidence-led adaptive management

We conclude this short working paper by taking stock of the key lessons from MUVA. We consider their relevance, or not, for other programmes that in different contexts or issue areas try to replicate a similarly evidence-informed approach to adaptive management.

Certainly, some features of MUVA made it especially conducive to an evidence-led adaptive management approach. Most importantly, the programme design focused on testing and learning from new ideas and came with a well-resourced commitment to the MEL function. This was substantiated by a funder that was supportive of the adaptive approach and did not apply overly prescriptive reporting requirements.

MUVA projects, by their nature, also lend themselves to data collection in a way that will not always be replicable. Not all development programmes can take a piloting approach where interventions are tested, refined, and then tested again (Pett, 2020). In situations of ongoing conflict, for example, adaptive programmes will need to focus more on understanding and navigating rapidly changing contexts than iterating intervention design. MUVA projects (which often have some form of training) commonly have easily identifiable participants receiving something tangible, who are then usually open to being interviewed or providing feedback. For other programmes, intended beneficiaries might be less identifiable or collecting feedback might be more sensitive.

Conducive contextual factors aside, we can nevertheless abstract key principles behind MUVA's MEL approach, that seem relevant for managing evidence-led adaptive programmes more generally.[4] These are:

- Invest time in developing a shared understanding of and commitment to programme objectives. Ask implementers about their motivations and objectives, and tie these into a coherent narrative and Theory of Change.
- Include implementers to help design MEL approaches that can inform improvements in implementation. When designing data collection tools, start with what implementers need to know to judge whether implementation is working effectively.

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4   Similar features have been applied in a technical assistance programme to the Government of Ethiopia to improve its shock response. This is a very different context to MUVA, focused on improving Government systems and policies rather than testing innovative interventions. Early indications as to the applicability of the principles are promising. For example, they have changed how programme objectives are articulated; proved useful in development of an accountability framework and communication with government; and informed learning workshops (Riemenschneider et al. unpublished).

- Synchronise data collection with a structure of decision points where projects will have a genuine opportunity to adapt.
- Use these decision points to reflect on what is working, involving those who implement activities and drawing on the best available evidence from multiple sources.
- Use this process of learning and adaptation to serve upwards accountability requirements. Document how evidence feeds into decision-making and leads to adaptation, and report on this to funders.

MUVA also raises some questions and trade-offs that other adaptive programmes should consider when trying to emulate such an approach.

Firstly, how should a programme strike the balance between prioritising actionable learning and sharing insights more widely? The MUVA example makes a strong case for emphasising actionable learning wherever possible, but it did so with a supportive donor and programme design. Other programmes will need to consider how to merge a learning approach within different donor reporting structures and demands.

Secondly, what is the optimum timeline for reflection and intervention-iteration? MUVA itself is starting to consider whether it should adjust its six-month timeframe for some projects that now have a degree of 'proof of concept' and are trying to scale. For other programmes, reflections could: (a) be more ad-hoc in response to major events (while balancing this with predictability for data collection); (b) occur more frequently as a regular check-in on operational issues; or (c) occur less frequently if initiatives are less explicitly innovative and in need of testing.

Finally, programmes will have to consider what data collection approaches are plausible given their MEL resourcing and the nature of their interventions. Baseline and endline surveys will not always be feasible given funding and time constraints. However, key informant interviews or focus groups with participants can be carried out at low cost. Monitoring data should also be available. Notwithstanding the challenges raised above, most programmes should be capable of a structured approach to capturing qualitative data from implementers and/or the community they are intending to benefit, with salutary effects.

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