Using Program Theory and Complexity Science to Improve Adaptive Management

**CHART YOUR COURSE: Adaptive management at a glance:**

1. Determine your project's degree of complexity
2. Determine your strategy to respond to that degree of complexity
3. Determine leadership, staffing, and resource needs based on that degree of complexity
4. Establish your adaptive management process to Review, Reflect, Respond (RRR)
5. Implement, assess and revise your plan

**How can a program “do” evidence-based adaptive management?** Successful adaptation requires not only an effective monitoring plan that provide timely data, but also a culture of critical reflection, the right resources, supportive leadership, and a whole-of-team approach, among others.

Effective adaptive management also requires a system tailored to the unique needs of a program’s operating context, its objectives, and its implementation strategy. Pact has conceptualized adaptive management as an iterative process rooted in complexity science and program theory.

With program theory, Pact differentiates a program by its underlying theory of context, theory of change, and theory of action.

**Using a simple program theory questionnaire, Pact is able to categorize a project as either simple, complicated, complex, or chaotic:**

**SIMPLE**
- Simple operating environments and associated problems have moderately evidenced theories, so project strategy can rely on good practice.

**COMPLICATED**
- Complicated operating environments and associated problems have moderately evidenced theories, so project strategy must rely on emergent practice.

**COMPLEX**
- Complex operating environments and associated problems have low evidenced theories, so project strategy must rely on emergent practice.

**CHAOTIC**
- Chaotic operating environments and associated problems have little to no evidenced theories, so project strategy must rely on emergent practice and consistently test and adapt approaches.

**With clarification on the kind of system a project needs, a project team can then build its customized system based on Pact’s “RRR” process:**

**The RRR process:**

1. Review
   - Rapid assessments, performance monitoring, and in-depth research are all ways in which projects can rigorously collect and analyze data to generate useful evidence about the project context, theory of change, and implementation and operations.

2. Reflect
   - Through management meetings, learning summits, surveys, and focus groups, projects should review and analyze evidence to determine its meaning for the project’s progress and how it should proceed.

3. Respond
   - Use flexible grant or technical assistance mechanisms, strategically add or change approaches, activities, partners or geographies to attain the project’s ultimate goal and impact.

Based on a project’s degree of complexity, the project team can tailor its adaptive management system.

**ACTIVITY ADAPTATION**
- What level of adaptation should you expect for project strategies or activities?

**THEORY REVIEW**
- How often should you review and potentially revise the theory of context, change, or action?

**MONITORING FRAMEWORK**
- What monitoring framework is the most appropriate for projects with different adaptive management needs?

**EVALUATION DESIGN/APPROACH**
- What evaluation design is the most appropriate for facilitating decision-making and adaptation?

**BUDGET FLEXIBILITY AND CONTENT**
- How flexible does your budget need to be to allow for adaptation? What additional items should you consider including in your budget during project design or modifications?

For all of these steps, Pact has an Adaptive Management Toolkit with step-by-step guidance:

1. Adaptive Management Intensity Self-Questionnaire
2. Staff Roles and Responsibilities in Adaptive Management
3. Scenario Planning Decision Matrix and Template
5. RRR Meeting Agenda Template
6. RRR Slide Deck Template
7. How to Prepare for Learning Review Meetings
8. Decision Tracker for Adaptive Management


For more information, please contact Pact’s Results and Measurement team (rm@pactworld.org).