Beyond the Blueprint: A Multi-Stakeholder Analysis of Adaptive Management in International Development a Case Study of Christian Aid in Sierra Leone

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Abstract

The complexity of international development contexts has driven a shift towards Adaptive Management (AM), a flexible, iterative approach promising greater relevance and effectiveness than traditional blueprint planning. However, a significant gap exists between its theoretical appeal and practical implementation, particularly from a multi-stakeholder perspective. This study aimed to analyze the perceived benefits and limitations of AM within the operations of Christian Aid and its partners in Sierra Leone, capturing the distinct viewpoints of international NGO staff, local implementing partners, and community beneficiaries. A qualitative instrumental case study was conducted in Sierra Leone. Data were collected through 42 semi-structured interviews and 6 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with the three stakeholder cohorts, supplemented by document analysis. A reflexive thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. Findings revealed a stark divergence in perceptions shaped by power and position. International staff viewed AM as a strategic imperative for relevance and donor accountability. Local partners acknowledged potential benefits but experienced it as an increased administrative burden and a reinforcement of power asymmetries, characterized by constrained agency. Community beneficiaries valued tangible responsiveness linked to interpersonal relationships but remained disconnected from formal AM systems. Four interlocking themes were identified: the duality of power and agency, structural/bureaucratic constraints, the learning vs. accountability dilemma, and questions of contextual/cultural fit. The study concludes that without addressing fundamental power imbalances, inflexible funding, and misaligned accountability, AM risks becoming a new form of technocratic control. Recommendations include negotiating genuinely flexible donor contracts, formalizing and financing local decision-space, investing in relational systems, and decoupling learning from performance accountability.

Keywords: *Adaptive Management, International Development, Localization, NGOs, Power, Sierra Leone.*

Introduction

The international development sector has long been dominated by blueprint, logframe-based project management, an approach ill-suited to the complex, volatile, and politically charged realities of countries like Sierra Leone [1, 16]. In response, Adaptive Management (AM) has emerged as a counter-paradigm, advocating for flexibility, iterative learning, and contextual responsiveness to enhance effectiveness [4, 21, 17]. Despite high-level endorsement from donors and NGOs, a profound implementation gap persists. AM is often adopted superficially, falling into a "technocratic trap" where its language is used without shifting underlying power dynamics, funding structures, or accountability

mechanisms [17, 5, 20]. Consequently, a critical problem exists: the current application of AM fails to deliver on its emancipatory promise of locally-led, responsive development and may instead reinforce existing inequalities within the aid system.

Existing solutions proposed in literature and practice focus on refining the technical apparatus of AM. These include: 1) Developing better frameworks for iterative learning, such as Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) [2]; 2) Integrating agile project management tools from the software industry [19, 7]; 3) Advocating for "Thinking and Working Politically" (TWP) to ensure interventions are contextually savvy [12]; and 4) Promoting "Doing Development Differently" (DDD) principles that emphasize problem-driven, locally-led action.

Among these, the integrative principles of DDD/TWP, which combine political economy analysis with iterative, learning-oriented management, represent the most theoretically coherent solution. They address the root cause of the implementation gap by linking adaptive practices to the need for shifting power and engaging with local context, moving beyond purely technical fixes.

The specific objectives of the study are;

1. To critically analyse the theoretical underpinnings of Adaptive Management and its evolution within the international development sector.

2. To document and analyse the perceived benefits of AM from the multi-stakeholder viewpoints of international NGO staff, local partners, and beneficiaries.

3. To identify and critically examine the perceived limitations and unintended consequences of implementing AM in a specific development context.

4. To explore the power dynamics and structural constraints that enable or inhibit effective adaptive practice.

5. To derive theoretically informed and practically applicable recommendations for enhancing the equitable and effective application of AM.

However, these solutions face severe limitations in practice. They are constrained by the rigid architecture of the international aid system: short-term, output-focused donor contracts; inflexible budgeting; results frameworks that prioritize upward accountability over learning; and risk-averse organizational cultures [3, 5]. Furthermore, existing analyses are predominantly donor- or Northern NGO-centric, lacking the multi-stakeholder perspectives—especially of local partners and beneficiaries—necessary to understand why these technically sound solutions fail [11, 14].

This study directly addresses these limitations by providing an empirically rich, multi-stakeholder analysis of AM in practice. It moves beyond a technical debate to expose the political and relational dimensions of adaptation. Its primary achievement is the generation of grounded insights into how power, structure, and culture fundamentally shape the experience and outcomes of AM across the aid chain, offering a more holistic understanding of the barriers to genuine adaptive practice.

Materials and Methods

The research was 1 The research was conducted as an instrumental case study focused on Christian Aid's operations and its partner network in Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone was selected as a critical case due to its post-conflict and post-Ebola context, which epitomizes the complex, volatile environments AM is designed to navigate. The country's development landscape, marked by political fragility, economic hardship, and deep-seated socio-cultural dynamics, provides a stringent test for adaptive principles [8, 18]. The study examined social development projects (e.g., in governance and women's economic

empowerment) active between 2020 and 2024, operating in both urban (Western Area) and rural districts (Kambia, Kenema and Kono).

This qualitative study employed a multi-method approach for data collection over a 6-month field period (January – June 2024):

1. Semi-Structured Interviews (n=42): Conducted with three stakeholder groups: a) International NGO Staff from Christian Aid (n=12: head of programme, programme managers, M&E advisors); b) Local Implementing Partners (n=18: project managers, field officers from four national NGOs; c) Community Beneficiaries (n=12: project participants, community leaders). Interview guides were tailored to each group to explore experiences, perceptions, and power dynamics related to AM.

2. Focus Group Discussions (n=6): Held exclusively with community beneficiaries (~60 total participants). FGDs were segregated by gender where appropriate and utilized Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools (e.g., problem trees, ranking exercises) to facilitate collective discussion and mitigate internal power imbalances.

3. Document Analysis: A systematic review of project documents was undertaken, including proposals, logframes, M&E frameworks, donor reports, and internal learning documents from Christian Aid and its partners. This served to triangulate interview data and understand the formal structure of AM within the projects.

Data analysis followed a six-phase process of reflexive thematic analysis [6]:

1. Familiarization: Repeated reading of all interview transcripts, FGD notes, and documents.

2. Initial Coding: Systematic generation of initial codes across the entire dataset using NVivo 14 software.

3. Generating Themes: Collating codes into potential overarching themes.

4. Reviewing Themes: Checking candidate themes against the full dataset for consistency and refining them.

5. Defining and Naming Themes: Articulating the essence and scope of each final theme.

6. Producing the Report: Weaving the thematic analysis into a coherent narrative, supported by participant quotations.

The analysis was iterative, constantly moving between the data, emerging themes, and the study's conceptual framework integrating Stakeholder Theory [9] and theories of power [13, 10].

As a qualitative study, formal statistical methods were not employed. The research relies on analytical generalization and the depth of thematic insights rather than numerical generalizability. Rigor was ensured through methodological triangulation (interviews, FGDs, documents), purposive sampling for information-rich cases, and a transparent, iterative analytical process.

Results

The analysis yielded a complex, fractured picture of AM, organized into four interlocking thematic dimensions that directly respond to the research objectives.

Theme 1: The Duality of Power and Agency

Perceptions of agency within AM were fundamentally shaped by stakeholder position.

1. **International Staff: Strategic Agency.** Christian Aid staff consistently framed AM as a professional strategic tool. A Programme Manager noted, *"AM gives us the language to have an honest conversation with donors about why things change. It's our shield and our strategy."* They perceived themselves as advocates and facilitators, using AM to

enhance project relevance and demonstrate sophisticated accountability to donors.

2. **Local Partners: Constrained Agency.** Partners expressed a profound dissonance. While appreciating operational flexibility compared to rigid projects, they described a "glass ceiling" on their decision-making power. Adaptations requiring significant resource reallocation or strategic shifts needed Christian Aid approval. A partner director encapsulated this: *"The logframe is a prison, but with AM, we have been moved to a larger cell with more privileges. But it is still a cell. The keys are not with us."*

3. **Community Beneficiaries: Interpersonal Agency.** For beneficiaries, agency was not linked to formal AM systems but to the quality of relationships with field staff. Their power was exercised through informal feedback. A female VSLA member stated, *"Before, they talked and we listened. Now, we can complain if the training time is bad for us, and they change it."* This responsiveness was attributed to staff being "good listeners," not an institutionalized adaptive system.

Theme 2: Structural and Bereaucratic Constraints

Material and administrative barriers systematically hindered adaptive practice.

1. **The Tyranny of the Logframe:** All groups identified the static project logframe, finalized at the proposal stage, as the primary constraint. A CA M&E Officer explained, *"We are trying to do agile, iterative programming with a five-year static results framework. The dissonance is exhausting."* Every adaptation required justification to link it back to original indicators.

2. **The Unpaid Burden of "Learning":** Local partners identified increased reporting as the greatest limitation. The demand for "real-time data for adaptation" created a parallel stream on top of mandatory donor reports. A partner M&E officer said, *"Christian Aid asks for stories and quick updates for learning. The donor asks for quarterly reports against indicators. We are doing twice the work for the same budget. This 'adaptation' is burning out my staff."*

3. **Inflexible Funding Mechanisms:** Despite adaptive intentions, donor funds remained tied to pre-approved budget lines. A partner described a failed attempt to shift activities during a flood response due to a three-month approval process: *"By then, the immediate crisis was over. We implemented the original plan. What is adaptive about that?"*

Theme 3: The Learning Vs Accountability Dillema

A core tension existed between using information for internal learning and for external accountability.

1. **Performance Pressure:** International staff felt intense pressure to demonstrate success, creating an incentive to avoid documenting failures. A Sector Lead admitted, *"We might adapt away from a failing activity, but we would never call it a failure in a report. We reframe it as a 'strategic pivot.'"*

2. **Fear and Risk Aversion:** Local partners feared blame for "failed" adaptations. A project officer asked, *"If I experiment and it goes wrong, will Christian Aid stand by me? Or will they tell the donor it was my mistake. We stick to the plan because it is safer."* This fear stifled the entrepreneurial risk-taking AM requires.

Theme 4: Contextual and Cultural Fit

The Western managerial origins of AM clashed with local Sierra Leonean realities.

1. **Perception of Change:** For beneficiaries, frequent project changes could signal incompetence. A community elder

questioned, *"A good chief has a plan and follows it. If these people are always changing their mind, how do we know they are serious? How can we trust them?"* This highlights a cultural valuation of stability and predictable leadership.

2. **Relational vs. Technical Systems:** Effective adaptations often flowed from strong, trusting field staff-community relationships, not formal M&E data. The formal AM system operated more slowly than this informal relational network, suggesting that social capital is a more critical enabler of responsiveness than technical feedback loops in this context.

Discussion

The findings comprehensively address the research objectives. They document clear benefits (increased relevance, strategic value for INGOs, tangible responsiveness for communities) and severe limitations (increased burden on partners, reinforced power asymmetries, stifled learning) (Objectives 2 & 3). The analysis powerfully exposes the power dynamics and structural constraints—such as inflexible logframes, misaligned funding, and the accountability paradox—that enable or inhibit effective practice (Objective 4). This grounded critique challenges idealized theoretical models of AM (Objective 1) and leads to practical, equity-focused recommendations (Objective 5).

Consistency with other Research

The results strongly align with and empirically substantiate critical scholarship on AM. The finding of "constrained agency" for local partners confirms critiques of the localisation agenda, which often increases responsibility without transferring real power [3, 14]. The identification of high, unequal transaction costs supports Punton's [18] theoretical concerns, showing how these costs are downloaded onto local partners. The

learning-accountability paradox detailed here empirically validates Valters' [19] argument that these two functions are fundamentally incompatible under current donor pressures. Furthermore, the emphasis on relational systems over technical ones in Sierra Leone echoes calls for contextually situated and decolonised approaches to management [11], [8].

Further Research Necessary

This study raises several questions warranting further investigation:

1. **Longitudinal Studies:** Research tracking the implementation of AM over a full 5-7 year project cycle is needed to understand its long-term effects on organizational culture, partner relationships, and sustainability.

2. **Quantitative Analysis of Costs:** Developing metrics to quantitatively measure the "transaction costs" of AM (staff time, reporting overhead) and correlate them with project outcomes would provide powerful evidence for advocating systemic change.

3. **Action Research on Hybrid Systems:** Collaborative research with NGOs to design, implement, and study new M&E and funding models that genuinely attempt to merge accountability and learning is crucial for developing practicable alternatives.

4. **Comparative Case Studies:** Research comparing AM implementation across different cultural contexts (e.g., Sierra Leone vs. a Southeast Asian setting) would deepen understanding of how cultural norms around planning, authority, and communication influence adaptive practice.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Adaptive Management, as currently practiced within the constrained architecture of international aid, is

a deeply paradoxical endeavor. While it offers a necessary corrective to blueprint planning and can yield benefits of increased responsiveness, its implementation is fundamentally shaped by pre-existing power hierarchies. The strategic benefits are accrued by international actors, while the limitations – administrative burdens, accountability risks, and constrained agency – are disproportionately borne by local implementing partners. For beneficiaries, positive adaptation is experienced but is contingent on interpersonal relationships rather than systematic institutional practice. Therefore, without transformative changes to the underlying system, AM risks becoming a sophisticated form of "isomorphic mimicry," perpetuating the very inequalities it seeks to overcome.

Recommendations

For INGOs (e.g., Christian Aid):

1. **Negotiate Adaptive Donor Contracts:** Proactively advocate for outcome-focused (not output-focused) results frameworks with donors. Integrate and cost explicit learning agendas and flexible budget lines within proposals.
2. **Formalize and Finance Local Decision-Space:** Co-create "adaptation agreements" with partners that clearly delineate autonomous, consultative, and approval-required decisions. Provide dedicated budgeting for partner-led adaptation processes.
3. **Radically Simplify and Align M&E:** Drastically reduce redundant compliance reporting and invest in joint, practical M&E systems designed primarily for learning and adaptation. Create protected mechanisms for documenting and learning from failure without blame.
4. **Invest in Relational Systems:** Prioritize the hiring and training of staff for interpersonal, facilitation, and trust-building skills, recognizing that social

capital is the bedrock of effective adaptation in contexts like Sierra Leone.

For Donors:

1. **Fund Flexibility:** Provide block grants or funding tied to problems rather than pre-defined solutions. Allow for significant reallocation of resources between budget lines based on documented learning.
2. **Incentivize Honest Learning:** Reward organizations for transparent reporting that includes thoughtful analysis of adaptations and failures, not solely for achieving pre-set targets. Fund independent learning reviews.

For Further Research:

As outlined earlier, longitudinal studies, quantitative analysis of transaction costs, and action research on new hybrid accountability systems are critical next steps.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Ethical Approval

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would not affect their relationship with the supporting organizations.

Author Contributions

Mattia Andrew Koi Dimoh: Conceived and designed the study, performed all data collection, conducted the data analysis and interpretation, and wrote the complete manuscript.

Data Availability

The data supporting this study are not publicly available due to organizational restrictions and ethical concerns but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request and with permission from partner organizations.

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