Comparing adaptive learning networks | From Poverty to Power

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Props to Dave Algoso (left) and Alan Hudson at Global Integrity for making the effort to compare and contrast 9 different initiatives that are all heading in roughly the right direction in reforming aid

Aid, development, and governance practitioners increasingly recognize that change happens through iterative processes (trying, learning, adapting the approach taken, and trying again) as opposed to the linear assumptions that underpin much of the sector (do more X, get more Y). Pre-planned, linear, blueprint approaches to change fail in the face of contextual variations and shifting political interests. Progress occurs when efforts are more adaptive.

Several recent initiatives have brought together practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and others. Having multiple efforts as part of a movement can be very powerful, but the lines between these initiatives can be blurry; their missions, approaches, and stakeholders all overlap. As a result, there is a risk that participants in these initiatives end up unnecessarily splintering in competition over jargon and brand position (think Monty Python's

Are we DDD or TWP today?

People's Front of Judea).

To help clarify the overlaps and differences, we've compared nine different initiatives. Important caveats: This is non-rigorous and each initiative is evolving, with multiple stakeholders involved, such that pinning down the essence or core strategy of each is nearly impossible. But we are sharing the general gist of each based on our informal observations.

Each initiative in brief

Let's tackle them in batches of three, moving from the general to the specific.

Across the whole development sector

Initiative	What is it?
Doing Development Differently (DDD)	Community of researchers and practitioners convened by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and Harvard's Kennedy School. Has a core manifesto calling for development to focus on locally defined problems, tackled through iteration, learning, and adaptation.
Thinking and Working Politically (TWP)	Semi-regular convening of representatives from various donors, think tanks, and international NGOs that discusses the use of politically aware approaches to aid and development.
Global Delivery Initiative (GDI)	Cross-donor collaborative (spearheaded by the World Bank, which currently serves as the Secretariat) to deepen the know-how for effective operational delivery of aid and development.

Focused on governance and accountability

Initiative	What is it?
Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA)	Funds and convenes CSOs and governments on social accountability initiatives. Established by the World Bank in 2012.
Making All Voices Count (MAVC)	Five-year program (2013-2017) funded by multiple donors (DfID, USAID, Sida, and Omidyar) to find, fund, and learn from innovations that support accountable governance.
TA LEARN	Community of practice composed of transparency and accountability practitioners from many countries.

Focused on targeted aspects of the aid/development sector (but not governance/accountability)

Initiative	What is it?
ADAPT *(analysis driven agile programming techniques)*	Collaboration of two major NGOs (Mercy Corps and International Rescue Committee) to identify, develop, and spread the use of adaptive management approaches in complex aid and development projects.
Smart Rules	DfID's internal operating framework for programs, emphasizing how the agency adapts to and influences local context. Rolled out in 2014.
Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA)	USAID's framework and internal change efforts for incorporating collaboration, learning, and adaptation at its missions and implementing partners.

What we left out: This list is hardly exhaustive: among others, we left out Feedback Labs (focused on the specific issue of citizen/beneficiary feedback), Principles for Digital Development (guidelines for integrating technology into development programs), and the Open Government Partnership (multi-stakeholder initiative to open government).

Actors: Who's involved with each?

Many of the actors in these initiatives overlap, which has provided some cross-pollination of ideas. Researchers

and think tanks (especially ODI) have been active in all of these initiatives. But it's the mix of ownership by donors and practitioners that most shapes each initiative.

Mixed stakeholders: The governance/accountability initiatives (TA LEARN, GPSA, and MAVC) all have mixes of actors from multiple countries, though naturally most partners work in related issues such as open governance, transparency, citizen engagement, etc. The DDD community has a similar mix, with a slightly broader set of issues represented (though most of their work is still grounded in governance, institution-building, service delivery, or policy reform).

Leaning toward the donor side: Three of these initiatives are heavily anchored in donor agencies: CLA at USAID, Smart Rules at DfID, and GDI at the World Bank.

Implementer-focused: The ADAPT initiative is the only one led by and focused on non-donor agencies, in particular the IRC and Mercy Corps, though they have also engaged donors and others through pilot projects and events.

Focus: How central is adaptive learning? And working politically?

These initiatives see adaptive learning in different ways. To some, it's a central driver of how change happens and a core strategic pillar. Others use adaptive learning more tactically, as a way to improve traditional approaches on the margins.

We see this as closely related to another concept: the political nature of development. Especially in governance and accountability work, navigating the fog of political interests—both hard to discern and likely to shift—is one of the core reasons why adaptive learning is so critical.

However, these initiatives don't promote both concepts equally. We can expand on a spectrum that Duncan previously shared for TWP (from "evolutionary" to "revolutionary" uptake) into two dimensions.

All about it: Sees adaptive learning as central to better aid and development

As tactic only: Uses adaptive learning to tweak existing approaches

ADAPTIVE LEARNING

ADAPT
CLA
GDI
DDD
TA LEARN
GPSA
Smart Rules
TWP
MAVC
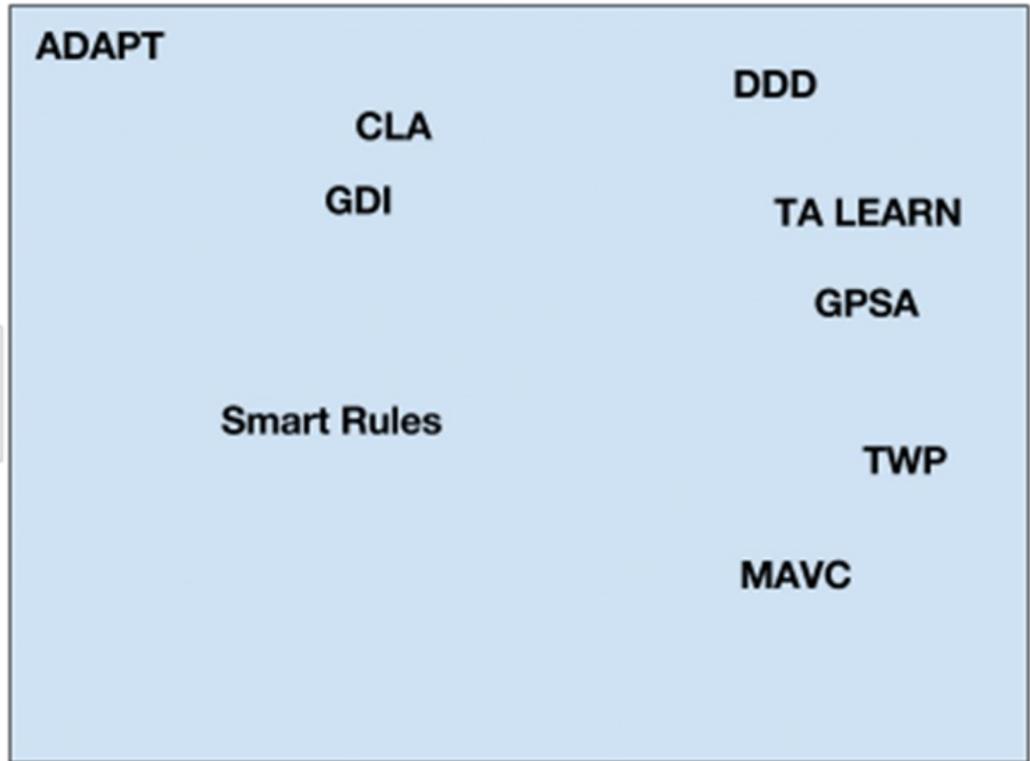
Evolutionary uptake: More attention to politics within traditional aid approaches

RELATIONSHIP TO POLITICS

Revolutionary uptake: Wholesale shift away from traditional aid approaches

Activities: What does each initiative do?

These initiatives' strategies—whether explicitly stated or inferred from their activities—fall into four general approaches:

Practices: Identifying, developing, and sharing cases, methods, and tools. Nearly all of these initiatives have developed sets of case studies, framed with necessary context (organizational, political, etc), as an antidote to the reductive tendency of "best practices".

Principles: Thought leadership, conceptual framing, and evidence. Nearly all of these initiatives are also working to provide the terminology and frameworks for furthering ideas.

Community: Cross-organization network building. Conferences and workshops create space for sharing practices and testing frameworks. Only GPSA and CLA actively encourage virtual exchanges separate from physical meetings.

Reform: Internal change at lead partner(s). ADAPT, CLA, and GDI all pair internal change at their lead organizations with external changes in the sector. Smart Rules has an exclusively internal focus.

Original plan

Actual plan
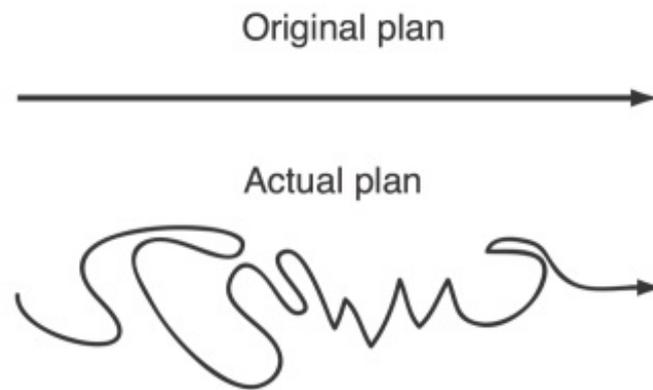
One approach seems relatively underutilized: Only GPSA and MAVC make grants of any kind to support project implementers who are developing practices. (Though some of the other initiatives also fund research.)

Conclusions (?): Where do we go from here?

First, we need clearer examples of adaptive learning in practice. We have a growing set of case studies, but few include a compelling counterfactual for what would have happened in the absence of adaptation.

Second, making the case with counterfactuals requires a bit more conceptual clarity. It's not clear that we're always talking about the same thing when we discuss "adaptation", "learning", or "working politically". We need to clarify how adaptive learning leads to change.

Relatedly, one of the key concepts requiring clarification involves ownership over learning and adaptation. Despite the mix of stakeholders involved in these initiatives, few meaningfully distinguish between learning by external actors and by local actors, and the ways one can support the another.

Finally, this mapping suggests a potential for greater connectivity across the initiatives. There are some actors overlapping several of these, but there were significant gaps until literally just a few months ago. Unfortunately, this is tied up a bit in issues of organizational ownership: some initiatives are only weakly owned, with no steering hand from the lead organizations, while others are so identified with a single organization as to leave others with no entry point. Efforts pushing the sector in broadly the same direction should push together.

Please let us know what you think of this mapping. This was not designed as a rigorous final say on these initiatives, but rather as a conversation starter. What did we get wrong? What did we leave out? Is it worth building on this with a more rigorous and perhaps broader version? Would a one-stop shop, or regular updates on what's going on in the various initiatives, be of use?