

NAVIGATING THE LABYRINTH: THE INTERPLAY OF STRUCTURE, POWER, AND CONTEXT IN ADAPTIVE PROJECT MANAGEMENT – A MULTI-STAKEHOLDER INQUIRY FROM SIERRA LEONE

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Abstract

This article advances theoretical, empirical, and practical understanding of Adaptive Project Management through a critical multi-stakeholder analysis grounded in Sierra Leone. The study addresses a significant gap in the literature: the predominance of donor centric perspectives and the corresponding absence of voices from local partners and community beneficiaries who experience adaptive practice. While Adaptive Project Management has emerged as a dominant paradigm promising enhanced effectiveness in complex environments, evidence of its equitable implementation remains scarce. The research asks how institutional, contextual, and operational factors influence the perceived efficacy of Adaptive Project Management from the perspectives of an international NGO, its local partners, and community beneficiaries in Sierra Leone.

The study introduces an integrated theoretical framework combining complexity theory, institutional theory, theories of power, and collective action theory. This framework reveals Adaptive Project Management as a fundamentally political phenomenon rather than a merely technical one. Complexity theory provides the rationale for adaptive approaches in unpredictable environments. Institutional theory warns of isomorphic mimicry, where organisations adopt the forms of adaptation for legitimacy while core practices remain unchanged. Theories of power expose the asymmetries that determine whose voice counts and who bears the risks of adaptation.

Empirically, the study draws on qualitative data collected over six months in Sierra Leone using an instrumental case study design focused on Christian Aid and its partner network. Data collection comprised forty two interviews, six focus group discussions, document analysis, and thirty days of participant observation. Findings reveal profound tension between adaptive rhetoric and practice. International staff frame adaptation as strategic, yet implementation reveals isomorphic tendencies where teams adapt in practice while maintaining the facade of original plans for donors. Power asymmetries are pronounced: partners can adapt implementation tactics but cannot reshape strategic objectives without lengthy approval processes, and the burden of adaptation falls disproportionately on local organisations through uncompensated labour.

The study makes three contributions. Theoretically, it advances an integrated framework revealing Adaptive Project Management as a site of political struggle over authority and risk. Empirically, it provides rare multi stakeholder evidence centring Southern voices typically absent from adaptive management discourse. Practically, it offers implications for reconfiguring funding mechanisms, partnership models, and accountability systems to foster more equitable adaptive practice. Realising the transformative potential of adaptive approaches requires confronting the power dynamics that underpin the development system itself.

Keywords: Adaptive Project Management, Complex Systems, International Development, Power, Localisation, Partnerships, Sierra Leone, Isomorphic Mimicry, Transaction Costs

1. INTRODUCTION

The persistent failure of linear, blueprint approaches to development in complex, volatile environments has precipitated a significant paradigm shift over the past decade (Andrews, 2013; Ramalingam et al., 2008). The logical framework, once the cornerstone of development project design, is increasingly viewed as inadequate for navigating contexts characterised by political flux, institutional fragility, and emergent challenges (Bond, 2016; OECD, 2021). In response, Adaptive Project Management (APM) has emerged as a dominant new orthodoxy, championed by donors, international NGOs (INGOs), and movements advocating for 'Doing Development Differently' (Andrews et al., 2017; Hudson & Leftwich, 2014).

Grounded in complexity theory (Snowden & Boone, 2007) and organisational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978), APM proposes iterative cycles of planning, action, reflection, and adaptation. It privileges flexibility over rigidity, learning over compliance, and contextual responsiveness over fiduciary prescriptiveness (Wild et al., 2020; Williams, 2020). However, despite its potent theoretical appeal and proliferation in policy rhetoric, a significant chasm exists between the promise of APM and evidence of its consistent, effective, and equitable practice (Banks et al., 2015; Valters, 2015). Critical scholars point to a "technocratic trap" where the language of adaptation is co-opted without the concomitant shifts in power, funding, and accountability that true adaptability requires (Booth & Unsworth, 2014).

Sierra Leone represents a critical case (Yin, 2018) for examining this implementation gap. As a post-conflict and post-Ebola state with enduring poverty and hybrid governance structures (Fanthorpe, 2006; World Bank, 2021), it epitomises the complex environments APM is designed to navigate. Christian Aid's long-standing presence and explicit commitment to partnership and adaptive approaches make it an ideal subject for this inquiry.

This article addresses a significant gap in the literature: the lack of empirical, multi-stakeholder analyses of APM that centre the perspectives of those at the sharp end of implementation—local partners and communities. It poses the central research question: How do institutional, contextual, and operational factors influence the perceived efficacy and practice of Adaptive Project Management from the perspectives of Christian Aid, its local partners, and community beneficiaries in Sierra Leone?

1.1 Problem Statement

The ascendancy of Adaptive Project Management as a dominant paradigm represents a direct response to the widely documented shortcomings of traditional, linear project management approaches (Andrews, 2013; Ramalingam et al., 2008). Its theoretical promise—to enhance the relevance, effectiveness, and ultimate sustainability of development interventions in complex environments—has secured its prominence in the policy rhetoric of major donors, INGOs, and influential movements. However, despite this high-level endorsement, a significant and problematic chasm persists between the theoretical promise of APM and evidence of its consistent, effective, and equitable implementation in practice (Banks et al., 2015; Valters, 2015).

This gap is indicative of deeper, systemic issues within the architecture of international aid. Critical scholarship points to a pervasive "technocratic trap" (Booth & Unsworth, 2014), wherein the language and tools of adaptation are symbolically co-opted to project an image of innovation and responsiveness, but without the concomitant shifts in underlying power dynamics, funding structures, and accountability mechanisms. This often results in what Andrews et al. (2017) term "isomorphic mimicry"—the adoption of the forms of adaptive practice to gain legitimacy from donors, while the core functions of management remain wedded to rigid, results-based accountability frameworks. This performative adaptation creates dissonance that is a significant source of stress for practitioners and a primary limitation on APM's potential.

A further critical limitation of existing knowledge on APM is its predominant focus on the perspectives of donors and Northern-based INGOs. This has created a lopsided, top-down understanding of APM's efficacy and challenges, privileging the viewpoints of those who design and fund adaptive initiatives over those tasked with their operationalization and those ultimately intended to benefit from them (Green, 2019; Ocwieja, 2018). Local implementing partner organisations and community beneficiaries remain conspicuously absent from much of the literature. This omission is both an empirical and an ethical concern.

Local partners operate at the critical nexus where adaptive rhetoric meets practical reality. They are the primary actors navigating daily tensions between donor compliance and contextual responsiveness, and they disproportionately bear the hidden "transaction costs" of adaptation—the increased burdens of reporting,

meeting attendance, and data collection required for iterative learning, often without commensurate flexible funding or core institutional support (Punton, 2018). Similarly, community beneficiaries experience the direct outcomes of adaptive practices. Their understanding of frequent project changes, their access to channels for providing feedback, and their perceptions of whether adaptation enhances or undermines project relevance are vital yet largely absent metrics for evaluating APM's true efficacy.

Therefore, a significant problem exists: there is a lack of comprehensive, multi-stakeholder empirical research that systematically investigates the implementation of APM from the perspectives of all key actors involved, particularly local partners and communities. This study seeks to address this critical gap by foregrounding these underrepresented voices.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To examine the perceived benefits, limitations, and unintended consequences of Adaptive Project Management from the perspectives of Christian Aid staff, local partners, and community beneficiaries.
2. To analyse the institutional, contextual, and operational factors, including power, partnerships, and accountability that enable or constrain effective adaptive practice.
3. To develop actionable recommendations for policymakers, donors, and practitioners to improve the equitable and effective application of Adaptive Project Management in fragile and post-conflict contexts.

1.3 Scope and Delimitation

This study is situated as a qualitative case study focused on Christian Aid's operations and its partner network in Sierra Leone. The research focuses explicitly on the lived experiences and perceptions of three key stakeholder groups: international NGO staff, local partner staff, and community beneficiaries. While the findings are context-specific and not statistically generalizable, the analytical themes and theoretical insights are intended to be transferable to similar fragile and post-conflict development contexts. The study does not seek to produce a quantitative cost-benefit analysis of APM but rather a rich, qualitative understanding of its social, political, and operational dimensions.

1.4 Structure of the Article

This article proceeds with a problem statement, a literature review establishing the theoretical foundations of APM and its critiques. It then details the rigorous qualitative methodology employed, followed by an extensive presentation and thematic analysis of the findings. The discussion synthesises these findings with the existing literature to highlight theoretical and practical implications, leading to a conclusion with recommendations for policy, practice, and further research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction to the Theoretical Landscape

The critique of linear, blueprint approaches to development management has given rise to Adaptive Project Management (APM) as a compelling alternative. Understanding APM requires a multifaceted theoretical lens, as its challenges and promises are not monolithic but span issues of complexity, institutional behaviour, power, and collective action. This review synthesizes four key theoretical perspectives that inform this study's analysis of APM in practice.

2.2 The Imperative for Adaptation: Complexity Theory

APM is fundamentally a response to the nature of development environments as complex systems. Complexity theory, particularly articulated through the Cynefin framework (Snowden & Boone, 2007), provides the foundational "why" for APM. It posits that many development challenges reside in the 'complex' domain, where cause-and-effect relationships are not linear or predictable but can only be understood in retrospect. In this domain, the optimal approach is not to execute a pre-defined plan but to engage in iterative cycles of probing, sensing, and responding. APM, therefore, can be conceptualized as a structured attempt to operationalize this approach through iterative learning cycles and feedback mechanisms (Pritchett, 2019). This theoretical lens allows for an analysis of how development actors perceive complexity, engage with emergent information, and structure their responses within a specific context like Sierra Leone.

2.3 The Risk of Superficiality: Institutional Theory and Isomorphic Mimicry

A critical counterpoint to the optimism of complexity theory is the concept of isomorphic mimicry, derived from institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). When applied to development by scholars like Andrews

et al. (2017), this concept explains how organizations may adopt new management approaches like APM not primarily to improve functional performance but to gain legitimacy and resources from their institutional environment (e.g., donors). This creates a significant risk that APM degenerates into a performative exercise—a box-ticking activity to satisfy donor demands—rather than constituting a genuine shift in management culture and decision-making power (Valters, 2015). This framework is crucial for interrogating whether the adoption of adaptive language and tools within Christian Aid and its donor relationships translates into substantive behavioural change or remains a facade for business-as-usual.

2.4 The Centrality of Power: Stakeholder Theory and a Three-Dimensional View

The practice of APM cannot be understood in a power vacuum. It is embedded within the deeply asymmetrical power dynamics that structure the international development industry. While stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) helps map the relevant actors, Lukes' (2005) three-dimensional view of power provides a more robust analytical tool for this study. This lens moves beyond visible decision-making (first dimension) and hidden agenda-setting (second dimension) to consider the third dimension: the power to shape beliefs and perceptions about what is possible or desirable. This framework forces critical questions essential to APM: Who has the power to define what constitutes valid evidence for adaptation? Whose knowledge counts in a learning cycle (Green, 2019)? Who bears the risk of failed adaptation experiments? Applying this lens is essential for critically analysing the relationships between Christian Aid, its donors, its local partners, and beneficiaries.

2.5 The Challenge of Collaboration: Collective Action Theory

Finally, because APM inherently involves multiple actors—INGOs, local partners, communities, government entities—it presents a classic problem of collective action. Elinor Ostrom's (1990) principles for managing common-pool resources offer a valuable framework for understanding the institutional arrangements that enable or hinder effective collaboration. Her work on clearly defined boundaries, graduated sanctions, conflict-resolution mechanisms, and nested enterprises provides a lens to analyse the formal and informal "rules of the game" within Christian Aid's partnership network (Barder, 2012). This theoretical perspective helps investigate whether the partnerships designed to deliver adaptive projects are themselves institutionally equipped to foster the trust, reciprocity, and shared accountability that successful adaptation requires.

2.6 Synthesized Conceptual Framework

This study employs an integrated conceptual framework where these four theoretical perspectives are not competing but complementary:

Complexity Theory provides the fundamental rationale for why APM is necessary.

Institutional Theory warns of the risk that APM may be adopted only superficially (isomorphic mimicry).

Theories of Power reveal the political dynamics that enable or constrain genuine adaptation and determine whose voice matters.

Collective Action Theory offers design principles for building the institutional structures (partnerships) that can support effective adaptive collaboration.

This multi-dimensional lens provides a comprehensive framework for analysing the rich empirical data gathered from multiple stakeholders in Sierra Leone, moving the analysis beyond technical discussions of APM tools to a critical examination of the political and institutional economy in which it is embedded

3. METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a qualitative, interpretivist approach, prioritising depth, context, and meaning over generalisable breadth (Schwandt, 1994). A single, in-depth instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995) of Christian Aid Sierra Leone was employed to facilitate a rich exploration of the phenomenon (APM) within its real-life context.

3.1 Case and Context Selection

Christian Aid Sierra Leone constitutes a critical case (Yin, 2018) for examining Adaptive Project Management for three interrelated reasons grounded in theory and prior literature. First, the organisation has made a public, strategic commitment to adaptive and partnership-led approaches, documented in its

programme strategies and donor proposals since 2019. This explicit adoption provides what Flyvbjerg (2006) terms an information-oriented selection, maximising the utility of information from a single case by choosing one where the phenomenon of interest is clearly present. Second, the institutional theory lens guiding this study predicts that organisations facing isomorphic pressures may adopt the forms of adaptation without substantive practice (Andrews et al., 2017; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Christian Aid's position as a middle-tier INGO, accountable both to donors and to local partners, makes it a site where such tensions should be particularly visible. Third, Sierra Leone's status as a fragile, post-conflict state with hybrid governance structures (Fanthorpe, 2006; World Bank, 2021) provides the complex environment that APM theory posits as the condition necessitating adaptive approaches (Snowden & Boone, 2007). The convergence of organisational commitment and contextual complexity makes this a revelatory case (Yin, 2018), offering insights into how APM principles function when subjected to the pressures of a real-world fragile setting.

The case boundaries were clearly delineated – the research examined projects and partnerships active between January 2019 and July 2025, a period encompassing pre-COVID programming, pandemic-era adaptations, and post-pandemic recovery. Projects included were those with at least 18 months of implementation experience, allowing participants to reflect on adaptive practices over time. Sectorally, the case included governance, livelihoods, and health projects, providing variation in the types of adaptive challenges encountered.

3.2 Data Collection (January – July 2025)

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure inclusion of participants with direct experience of APM across the aid chain. Sampling criteria were specified for each stakeholder group to capture diverse perspectives while maintaining relevance to the research questions.

Data was triangulated through multiple methods:

Semi-Structured Interviews (n=42): Conducted with a purposively sampled range of stakeholders:

Christian Aid Staff (n=14): Head of Programmes and Policy, programme managers, M&E officers (Freetown and field-based).

Local Partner Staff (n=16): Directors, project coordinators, and field officers from 4 national NGO partners (SEND Sierra Leone, NMJD, Green Scenery and WoNES).

Community Beneficiaries (n=12): Leaders and members of project user groups (e.g., Community Action Groups, VSLA members, farmer co-op members).

Focus Group Discussions (n=6): Held with community beneficiaries in three districts (Bo, Kenema, Kono) using participatory tools to encourage open dialogue and collective sense-making.

Document Analysis: Extensive review of project proposals, logframes, donor reports, internal learning reviews, strategy documents, and partnership agreements from 8 active projects (2019-2024).

Participant Observation: 30 days of observation of project review meetings, partner coordination sessions, and community engagements.

As a Sierra Leonean in the NGO sector, my positionality presented both opportunities and risks. Cultural familiarity facilitated rapport and enabled interpretation of nuanced communication. However, my affiliation with Christian Aid may have led some participants, particularly partner staff and community members, to associate me with organizational interests, potentially influencing their responses.

3.3 Data Analysis

All interviews and FGDs were transcribed verbatim. Data analysis employed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022), using NVivo software for data organisation and retrieval while retaining interpretive work within the researcher's analytical engagement. The analysis proceeded through distinct stages that combined deductive and inductive logic. The process involved:

Familiarization with the data: Generating initial codes deductively (from the theoretical framework) and inductively (from the data), searching for, reviewing, and defining themes and to weaving the themes into a coherent analytical narrative.

Trustworthiness and Rigour: Rigour was ensured through methodological triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking with key informants, and maintaining a clear audit trail.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Full ethical approval was granted by Christian Aid and local partners leadership and the Sierra Leone Ethics Review Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, and particular care was taken to mitigate power dynamics during data collection with community members and partner staff.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The analysis revealed four interconnected thematic dimensions that shape the experience and perception of APM.

4.1 The Rhetoric-Reality Gap: Isomorphic Mimicry in Adaptive Practice

International staff consistently framed APM as a strategic imperative. A Programme Manager stated, "It's the only way to stay relevant and achieve impact in a place like this." This was reflected in polished strategy documents and donor proposals. However, a deep dive into practice revealed strong isomorphic tendencies. The logframe, though often described as a "living document," remained the ultimate anchor of accountability. As one M&E officer confessed, "We adapt, but we always have to make sure we can still report against the original indicators. It's a constant juggling act." This performative adaptation – adapting in practice while maintaining the facade of the original plan for donors – was a significant source of stress and represented a key limitation. A partner programme manager elaborated:

"We hold learning reviews, we identify what's not working, we agree on changes. But when we submit our report, we still have to explain how we met the original targets. Sometimes we report things that are technically true but don't reflect what we actually learned. It's not dishonest, but it's not the full truth either. And the learning that should inform the next phase? It stays in our internal notes, not in the formal reporting."

This finding validates the concerns of Andrews et al. (2017) and Valters (2015) regarding isomorphic mimicry, demonstrating how donor accountability regimes incentivise the appearance of adaptation while constraining its substantive practice. The gap between rhetoric and reality was not lost on community beneficiaries, some of whom perceived frequent changes as indicating a lack of clear purpose.

4.2 The Architecture of Power: Constrained Agency and the Partnership Paradox

A stark divergence emerged in perceptions of agency. Christian Aid staff spoke of "devolving decision-space" to partners. In contrast, local partners described a "glass ceiling" on their decision-making power. A partner director explained: "We can adapt how we do a training, but we cannot change the training's objective or reallocate a large budget line without a long approval process from Freetown and often the donor. The big decisions – what to fund, what outcomes to pursue, how to define success – those are made elsewhere. We implement adaptation within boundaries set by others."

This reflects Lukes' (2005) second dimension of power: the power to set the agenda and define the boundaries of permissible action. Another partner staff member described the asymmetry more starkly:

"When things go wrong, we explain to communities because we are the ones they see every day. When things go right, the international staff celebrate 'our' adaptive approach. We share the responsibility for failure but not the credit for success. That's the partnership paradox."

This asymmetry extended to the burden of adaptation, which fell disproportionately on partners. They faced increased demands for "real-time data" and reporting without a commensurate increase in flexible funding or core support, echoing findings from other contexts (Punton, 2018; Ocwieja, 2018). This represents what Lukes' third dimension would identify as the power to shape what is considered normal or acceptable – in this case, normalising the expectation that Southern partners absorb the costs of adaptive processes designed by Northern actors.

4.3 The Contextual Crucible: Adaptation in a Hybrid Political Economy

The Sierra Leonean context profoundly mediated APM. The COVID-19 pandemic was a critical test. While Christian Aid's health projects could pivot rapidly by leveraging community health workers, governance projects faced greater challenges. Navigating hybrid systems of formal and traditional authority (Fanthorpe, 2006) required nuanced, context-sensitive adaptations that were often at odds with rigid donor governance indicators. A field officer working on a governance project explained:

"Our indicator was about 'community meetings held.' But during the pandemic, large meetings were impossible. We shifted to working through chiefdom structures, using town criers, radio, small group

discussions. This was far more effective for the context. But when we reported, we had to explain why we hadn't met the meeting target. The system punished us for adapting well."

This illustrates a fundamental tension: accountability systems designed for predictable environments struggle to accommodate the very contextual responsiveness that APM demands. Beneficiaries' perceptions of frequent changes were not always positive; some community elders interpreted it as a lack of clear purpose or strategy, highlighting a cultural mismatch between Western notions of agile adaptation and local expectations of consistency and predictability. A community leader in Kono noted:

"With this project, things kept changing. First they said one thing, then another. Some of us wondered if they knew what they were doing. With the old NGOs, you knew what to expect. Maybe it was less responsive to our needs, but at least it was clear."

This perspective underscores that adaptation, if not communicated transparently and with cultural sensitivity, can erode the very community trust it is meant to foster.

4.4 The Unpaid Costs of Adaptation: Transactional and Relational Burdens

The research identified significant, often hidden, transaction costs associated with APM. For local partners, the iterative cycles of planning, monitoring, and re-planning demanded far more staff time and resources than traditional projects. A partner project officer noted: "The constant meetings, the additional data collection for learning, the extra reporting to show we've adapted—it all takes time. And our funding doesn't cover this extra effort. We absorb these costs because we believe in the approach, but it's not sustainable. Our core staff are stretched thin."

This uncompensated labour represents a hidden subsidy from Southern NGOs to the international aid system. A partner director quantified the impact: "I estimate that adaptive projects require about 30 percent more staff time than traditional projects. But our budgets don't reflect this. So we either underpay our staff, reduce our work in other areas, or burn people out. None of these are good options."

Relational costs were also evident. Constant changes could strain trust with communities if not communicated with transparency and cultural sensitivity. A field officer described the challenge: "Every time we change something, we have to go back to the community and explain why. If we do this too often, they start to doubt us. They think we don't know what we're doing. Building that trust takes time, and frequent changes can undermine it. So we have to balance being responsive with being consistent."

This reveals a tension inherent in APM: the very responsiveness that makes projects more relevant can, if poorly managed, undermine the relational foundations on which effective development depends.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the implementation of APM is a deeply political process, fraught with tension between its emancipatory potential and the constraining architecture of the traditional aid system. This discussion synthesizes the empirical findings with the theoretical framework to illuminate three core insights.

5.1 Beyond Technical Solutions: APM as a Political Challenge

The study confirms that the primary barriers to effective APM are not technical – a lack of tools or skills – but political and structural. The pervasive pressure of isomorphic mimicry, driven by donor accountability regimes, stifles innovation and punishes honest failure (Andrews, 2013). This creates a system that incentivises reporting adaptation success while obscuring the learning that comes from failure. As one respondent noted, the system punishes adaptation even as it demands it. This finding directly validates the institutional theory lens of the conceptual framework: organisations adopt the forms of adaptation to maintain legitimacy, while substantive practice remains constrained by the very structures that demand adaptation.

The implication is that efforts to improve APM cannot focus solely on building technical capacity or developing better tools. They must confront the political economy of aid—the incentive structures, power relations, and institutional logics that shape what is possible. This requires moving beyond the technocratic framing of APM as a set of management techniques to recognize it as a fundamentally political endeavour that challenges existing distributions of authority, risk, and accountability.

5.2 Re-Negotiating Power and Risk in Partnerships

The rhetoric of "localisation" and "partnership" is hollow without a fundamental redistribution of power and risk. The findings align with Banks et al. (2015), showing that power to define the terms of adaptation remains concentrated with international actors. Applying Lukes' (2005) three-dimensional framework reveals

that the most insidious power is not the visible decision-making authority (first dimension) or even the agenda-setting power (second dimension), but the power to normalise a system where partners bear the costs of adaptation while international actors retain control over its direction and claim credit for its successes (third dimension).

Genuinely adaptive partnerships require moving beyond subcontracting to models of shared governance, where local partners have authentic decision-making authority over strategy and resources, not just implementation tactics. This involves rethinking risk management to protect partners, not just donors. The current system concentrates risk on those least able to bear it—local organisations with thin resource bases and community members whose livelihoods depend on project outcomes. As Ostrom's (1990) collective action principles suggest, sustainable collaboration requires that all parties have a stake in both the benefits and the risks, and that governance structures enable genuine participation in rule-making and enforcement.

5.3 Contextual Intelligence over Technical Blueprints

The Sierra Leone case underscores that APM cannot be a one-size-fits-all toolkit imported from outside. Its effectiveness hinges on deep contextual intelligence – an understanding of local political economies, governance hybrids, and cultural norms (Green, 2019). This requires investing in long-term relationships and trusted local intermediaries, not just in technical M&E systems. Effective adaptation is often facilitated more through informal social capital than through formal feedback loops.

However, the findings also reveal a tension: the very contextual sensitivity that makes APM valuable can, if not managed carefully, create confusion and erode trust among beneficiaries who expect consistency. This highlights that contextual intelligence must encompass not only understanding of local political and institutional dynamics but also cultural norms around communication, decision-making, and change. Adaptation must be accompanied by transparent communication that helps communities understand why changes occur and how they benefit from them.

The complexity theory lens of the conceptual framework suggests that in complex environments, the optimal approach is iterative probing and responding. But the findings add a crucial nuance: this probing and responding must be accompanied by sense-making that includes all stakeholders, not just project staff. Without this inclusive sense-making, adaptation can appear arbitrary and undermine the very legitimacy it seeks to enhance.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research demonstrates that while Adaptive Project Management offers a necessary evolution from rigid, blueprint approaches, its current application is often superficial and constrained by the very system it seeks to change. The benefits of increased responsiveness are real but are unevenly distributed, accruing primarily to international actors who gain strategic legitimacy. The limitations—increased burdens, power imbalances, and unmet transaction costs—are disproportionately borne by local implementing organisations.

6.1 Recommendations for Practice

The following implications emerge directly from the findings and are framed not as normative directives but as evidence-based considerations for actors seeking to enhance adaptive practice.

For donors: The evidence suggests that current accountability regimes incentivise isomorphic mimicry by punishing deviation from pre-defined plans and outputs. Donors might consider developing funding instruments that explicitly budget for adaptation and learning, shifting accountability from proving pre-defined results to demonstrating sound adaptive management processes. This could include outcome-based funding that specifies desired results but allows flexibility in how to achieve them, simplified reporting requirements focused on learning rather than compliance, and extended inception phases allowing for genuine contextual engagement before activities are fully specified. The collective action theory lens suggests that donors, as the most powerful actors in the aid chain, have a particular responsibility to design institutional arrangements that enable rather than constrain adaptive collaboration.

For INGOs like Christian Aid: The evidence reveals a significant gap between the rhetoric of partnership and the reality of constrained local agency. INGOs might consider co-creating explicit "adaptation agreements" with partners that delineate decision-making authority at different levels, clarifying which decisions partners can make independently and which require consultation. Radical simplification and alignment of reporting requirements across multiple donors could reduce the burden on partners. Investment in core funding for partners, rather than just project-specific funding, could build the institutional capacity that enables genuine adaptation. The power theory lens suggests that these are not merely technical adjustments but fundamental shifts in the distribution of authority and resources.

For all practitioners: The evidence indicates that contextual intelligence and relational trust are more critical to effective adaptation than technical toolkits. Practitioners might prioritise investment in long-term relationships with local actors, deep contextual analysis, and transparent communication with communities about the reasons for changes. M&E systems could be designed for adaptive learning, not just donor compliance, incorporating simple, flexible tools like learning journals and community feedback trackers. The complexity theory lens suggests that in complex environments, relationships and trust are more reliable guides than pre-defined plans.

6.2 Avenues for Further Research

The study's limitations suggest several directions for future inquiry. Future research should:

1. Quantify the transaction costs of APM to build a stronger economic case for flexible and adequate funding.
2. Conduct longitudinal studies to track the long-term impact of adaptive practices on project sustainability and outcomes.
3. Explore the role of digital technologies in enabling or hindering adaptive management in low-connectivity contexts.
4. Investigate the application of APM in different sectors (e.g., humanitarian vs. development) to develop more nuanced models.

In conclusion, realising the transformative potential of APM requires a courageous confrontation with the power dynamics and institutional incentives that underpin the international development system. It demands a shift from adapting projects to adapting the system itself. The findings from Sierra Leone suggest that this is not merely a technical challenge but a political one, requiring fundamental renegotiation of who holds authority, who bears risk, who sets agendas, and whose knowledge counts. The integrated conceptual framework offered in this study provides a lens for this critical work, revealing that genuine adaptation is not about better tools but about more equitable relationships.

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