

BEYOND THE BLUEPRINT: A MULTI-STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS OF THE PERCEIVED BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS OF ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT – A CASE STUDY OF CHRISTIAN AID IN SIERRA LEONE

Mattia Andrew Koi Dimoh

Mr., Central University of Nicaragua/ Texila American University, Sierra Leone,
ndemi4me@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

This study examines the practical application of Adaptive Management (AM) within the international development sector, a field marked by complexity and volatility. While AM is increasingly promoted as a flexible alternative to rigid, blueprint style project management, a significant empirical gap remains regarding its implementation across the aid chain. Using in depth qualitative research in Sierra Leone, the study draws on interviews and focus groups with three stakeholder groups: international NGO staff, local implementing partners, and community beneficiaries.

The findings reveal divergent perceptions shaped by each group's position within the development system. International staff view AM as a strategic imperative for donor accountability and project relevance. Local partners, however, experience it as an administrative burden and a new form of conditionality, facing a dilemma of responsibility without authority. Beneficiaries judge AM not by its formal methodologies but through the quality of frontline relationships and tangible responsiveness to their needs. Four interlocking dimensions emerge as critical: power and agency, structural and bureaucratic constraints, the tension between learning and accountability, and contextual cultural fit.

The study concludes that institutionalizing AM requires more than technical adjustments. A genuine shift demands fundamental changes to donor contracting, a deliberate devolution of decision making authority to local actors, and efforts to decolonize knowledge systems. The research contributes to project management theory by grounding the ideals of AM in the political and relational realities of practice, offering empirically grounded recommendations for more effective and equitable adaptive programming.

Keywords: Adaptive Management, Complex Project Management, International Development, NGOs, Stakeholder Theory, Perception, Christian Aid, Localisation, Power, Sierra Leone, Participation, Monitoring & Evaluation, Learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

The landscape of international development has, for decades, been fundamentally shaped by what scholars term the "projectification" of aid (Sahlin-Andersson & Söderholm, 2002). This phenomenon describes the process through which continuous, long-term development challenges are broken down into discrete, time-bound, and logistically manageable interventions known as projects.

The primary tool for governing this projectified reality has been the Logical Framework Approach, or log frame. Originating from American corporate and defines planning in the 1960s and subsequently globalized by major aid institutions, the log frame is more than a mere template; it is an embodiment of a particular managerial ideology, deeply infused with the principles of New Public Management (NPM) (Raimond, 1996; Gasper, 2000).

NPM privileges predictability, top-down accountability, standardized metrics, and the clear attribution of results to predefined activities. The log frame, in this sense, functions as a technocratic device intended to reduce the inherent ambiguity of social change into a linear sequence of inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impacts, thereby rendering development legible, manageable, and auditable for donors and implementing agencies alike (Scott, 1998; Mosse, 2005).

However, a profound and persistent critique has emerged regarding the efficacy of this dominant paradigm. The operational environments for development projects, particularly in contexts labelled as 'fragile' or 'post-conflict', are rarely linear or predictable. Instead, they are complex adaptive systems (CAS), characterized by political volatility, economic precarity, environmental fragility, and deep-seated, often opaque, socio-cultural dynamics (Ramalingam et al., 2008; Snowden & Boone, 2007). In such systems, cause-and-effect relationships are not straightforward; they are emergent, non-linear, and only fully understandable in retrospect. Interventions interact with the system in unpredictable ways, generating unintended consequences and feedback loops that defy the static assumptions of a log frame (Byrne, 1998; Chambers, 1997).

The well-documented failure of countless technically sound, well-funded projects has been widely attributed to this fundamental epistemological mismatch between the rigid, reductionist planning tools employed and the fluid, complex, and politically charged realities they seek to change (Easterly, 2006; Andrews, 2013; Mowles, 2011). Projects may deliver their predefined outputs on budget and on time, yet fail to generate meaningful or sustainable change because their design was incapable of responding to the evolving context.

In direct response to these limitations, Adaptive Management (AM) has emerged over the past two decades as a powerful counter-paradigm within the development sector. Its intellectual foundations are eclectic and robust, drawing from a synthesis of several interdisciplinary fields. From ecology and natural resource management (Holling, 1978; Walters, 1986), AM borrows the concept of managing resources amidst uncertainty by treating policies as experiments and using systematic monitoring to learn and adjust. From organizational theory and learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Senge, 1990), it integrates models of single and double-loop learning, emphasizing the need for organizations to not only correct errors within existing frameworks (single-loop) but to also question and alter the underlying norms, policies, and objectives themselves (double-loop). Furthermore, from the world of software development and business, AM incorporates principles from agile and lean methodologies (Conforto & Amaral, 2016; Ries, 2011), which prioritize iterative work cycles, customer feedback, and rapid prototyping over rigid, long-term planning.

Synthesizing these influences, Adaptive Management in development can be defined as a deliberate, structured, and iterative process of decision-making that enables teams to learn from experience and incorporate new information to improve the effectiveness of their interventions in complex and uncertain environments (Bond, 2016; Wild et al., 2020). It represents a fundamental shift in mind-set: from viewing a project as a blueprint to be executed to treating it as a hypothesis to be tested (Pritchett, 2019). This entails moving from a focus on proving (that a predetermined plan was followed) to a focus on improving (the intervention's relevance and effectiveness through continuous learning). Core practices associated with AM include iterative planning cycles, the use of real-time data and feedback for decision-making, empowering frontline staff to make context-specific adjustments, and creating psychologically safe spaces for honest reflection on both successes and failures (Gray, 2017; Valters, 2015).

The advocacy for AM has coalesced into influential movements such as "Doing Development Differently" (DDD) and "Thinking and Working Politically" (TWP), which argue that development interventions must be problem-driven, politically savvy, and locally led to be effective (Andrews et al., 2017; Hudson & Leftwich, 2014). Major donors, including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) with its Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) framework, the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), and the World Bank, have increasingly endorsed and promoted adaptive approaches, integrating them into their programming guidance and funding mechanisms (USAID, 2018; FCDO, 2019; World Bank, 2015).

Despite this high-level endorsement and compelling theoretical appeal, a significant chasm persists between the rhetoric of adaptation and its practical, consistent, and meaningful application on the ground. Critical

scholars and practitioners point to a "technocratic trap" where the language of adaptation is adopted without the concomitant shifts in power, resources, and accountability that genuine adaptability requires (Booth & Unsworth, 2014). The enduring architecture of the aid system—short-term funding cycles, rigid contractual agreements, results frameworks that prioritize easily measurable outputs over complex outcomes, and risk-averse organizational cultures—often actively stifles the very flexibility that AM promises (Banks et al., 2015; Eyben, 2013). This raises critical questions that form the impetus for this study: What does Adaptive Management look like in practice within the constrained reality of a major INGO and its partners? How do the institutional, contextual, and operational factors specific to a place like Sierra Leone enable or constrain its application? And ultimately, whose adaptation is it, and who bears the costs and risks of this new managerial paradigm? It is this gap between the potent promise of adaptive management and the complex reality of its implementation that this research seeks to investigate.

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite its growing prominence in policy rhetoric, donor guidance, and the strategic frameworks of major international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), a profound and consequential disconnect persists between the theoretical appeal of Adaptive Management (AM) and the realities of its practical implementation on the ground (Banks, Hulme, & Edwards, 2015; Valters, 2015). While the principles of flexibility, iterative learning, and contextual responsiveness are widely championed as an antidote to the failures of rigid, blueprint approaches, evidence suggests that the adoption of AM is often superficial, failing to catalyse the deep, systemic changes it ostensibly promotes.

Critical scholarship on this implementation gap points to a pervasive "technocratic trap" (Booth & Unsworth, 2014), a phenomenon where the language and tools of adaptation are symbolically adopted to satisfy donor demands and project an image of innovation, but without the concomitant and necessary shifts in underlying power dynamics, funding structures, and accountability mechanisms. In practice, this means that while project documents may feature the lexicon of adaptation—"learning cycles," "pivots," and "iterative design"—the fundamental architecture of aid remains unchanged. Decision-making authority over strategic direction and significant resource reallocation often remains concentrated with international actors and donors, who continue to demand reporting against predefined, quantitative indicators. This creates a performative contradiction where frontline staff are encouraged to be adaptive in principle but are held accountable for delivering on a fixed, linear plan, leading to what has been termed "isomorphic mimicry" (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2017): the adoption of the form of adaptive practice without its substantive function.

A significant limitation of the existing literature is its predominant focus on the perspectives of donors and Northern-based INGOs. This has resulted in a lop-sided, top-down understanding of AM that privileges the viewpoints of those who design and fund adaptive frameworks over those who are tasked with operationalizing them and those who are ultimately intended to benefit from them. Consequently, there is a critical deficit of empirical research that systematically and rigorously incorporates the perceptions, experiences, and critiques of local implementing partner organizations and community beneficiaries (Green, 2019; Ocwieja, 2018).

This omission is not merely an academic oversight; it has real-world implications. Local partners, typically national NGOs, are the primary actors translating adaptive rhetoric into practice. They are the ones who navigate the 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 (Punton, 2018). Similarly, community beneficiaries, the ultimate stakeholders in any development intervention, experience the direct outcomes – both positive and negative – 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 and legitimacy are vital yet largely absent from the evaluation of AM's efficacy.

This study directly addresses this critical gap in knowledge and practice. It moves beyond a donor-centric analysis to investigate the multifaceted reality of adaptive management through a multi-stakeholder lens. The research is guided by the central question: What are the perceived benefits, limitations, and unintended consequences of adaptive project management approaches from the perspectives of Christian Aid, its local implementing partners, and community beneficiaries in Sierra Leone? By foregrounding the voices and experiences of those at the "sharp end" of implementation, this research seeks to provide a more holistic, equitable, and empirically grounded understanding of the power dynamics, practical burdens, and contextual factors that ultimately determine whether adaptive management fulfils its emancipatory potential or merely reinforces existing inequalities within the international development system.

1.2 Research Objectives

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.

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, a choice informed by the country's post-conflict and post-Ebola context, which exemplifies the complex environments AM is designed to navigate. The research focuses on social development projects (e.g., governance, health, and livelihood programmes) active between 2020 and 2024. While findings are context-specific, the analytical themes are intended to offer transferable insights for similar settings.

1.4 Structure of the Article

This article precedes with a comprehensive literature review establishing the theoretical foundations of AM 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. Theoretical Genesis and the Evolution of Adaptive Management

The conceptual roots of AM are not native to development studies but were imported from ecology and natural resource management (Holling, 1978; Walters, 1986), where it was developed to manage environmental uncertainty through iterative learning. Its migration into development policy was driven by a confluence of factors: the critique of top-down planning (Scott, 1998), the rise of "doing development differently" (DDD) and "thinking and working politically" (TWP) movements (Andrews et al., 2017; Hudson & Leftwich, 2014), and the adoption of agile and lean methodologies from software development and manufacturing (Conforto & Amaral, 2016).

At its core, AM is a systematic process for improving policy and practice by learning from the outcomes of implemented strategies (Bond, 2016). Its key principles include:

- **Embracing Complexity:** Acknowledging that development challenges are complex systems with emergent properties, not complicated machines with fixable parts (Snowden & Boone, 2007).
- **Theorising of Change:** Treating the project design as a best-guess hypothesis that must be tested and refined in real-time (Pritchett, 2019).
- **Iterative Learning Cycles:** Employing rapid, structured cycles of planning, action, reflection, and adaptation (e.g., PDIA - Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation) (Andrews et al., 2017).
- **Devolved Decision-Space:** Pushing decision-making authority to the lowest appropriate level, closest to the context (Bond, 2016).
- **Context-Specific Evidence:** Using real-time data and M&E systems primarily for learning and adaptation, not just for upward accountability (Walters, 2015).

2.2 The Promised Land: Documented Benefits of Adaptive Management

The literature posits compelling benefits for AM. It is argued to enhance programme relevance and

effectiveness by allowing mid-course corrections that respond to ground truth (Wild et al., 2020). It can improve sustainability by fostering local ownership and building the capacity of local institutions to solve their own problems (Booth & Unsworth, 2014). Furthermore, it is seen as a more ethical and respectful mode of engagement, as it values local knowledge and participation over external expert prescription (Green, 2019).

2.3 The Implementation Gap: Critical Limitations and Critiques

Despite this promise, a robust critique of AM has emerged. Scholars identify a persistent accountability paradox: while AM requires flexibility, donors and NGOs remain accountable to rigid results-based frameworks and audit cultures (Banks et al., 2015). This creates a disconnect where adaptations must be justified within systems not designed to accommodate them.

A second major critique centres on power and agency. The rhetoric of "localisation" and "devolution" often masks the reality that the power to define what constitutes valid evidence, what adaptations are permissible, and what success looks like remains firmly with international actors (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Ocwieja, 2018). This can lead to what Valters (2015) terms "isomorphic mimicry," where local organisations adopt the façade of adaptive practice to secure funding but lack the genuine agency or resources to practice it.

The financial and transactional costs of AM are also significant. Iterative learning requires more frequent monitoring, communication, and re-planning, which demands staff time and flexible funding—resources often scarce for local partners (Punton, 2018). Furthermore, the socio-cultural context is often overlooked. As noted in studies of post-conflict Sierra Leone (Fanthorpe, 2006; Jackson, 2005), governance and social relationships are deeply influenced by patronage networks and traditional authorities. Imposing a hyper-rational, evidence-based adaptive model without understanding these relational dynamics can lead to failure or unintended negative consequences.

2.4 The Sierra Leone Context

Sierra Leone provides a poignant context for this study. Emerging from a decade of civil war and further devastated by the Ebola epidemic, its development landscape is the epitome of complexity. The country has been a laboratory for numerous international interventions, many of which have struggled with sustainability and impact (Zack-Williams, 2012). The government and NGOs have expressed commitment to more adaptive, locally-led approaches, particularly following lessons from the Ebola response (Shepler & Williams, 2017). Examining AM here allows for a stress-test of its principles in a challenging yet representative environment.

2.5 Conceptual Framework: Integrating Stakeholder Theory and Power

This study is framed by a synthesis of Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) and critical perspectives on power in development (Lukes, 2005; Gaventa, 2006). Stakeholder Theory compels us to identify all parties affected by a project and understand their distinct interests and perceptions. Critically applying this to the aid chain reveals stakeholders not as equal partners but as actors embedded in hierarchical power relations. Lukes' (2005) three dimensions of power – (1) decision-making power, (2) agenda-setting power, and (3) the power to shape beliefs and perceptions – provides a lens to analyse why certain stakeholders' perceptions of AM's benefits and limitations may be systematically privileged or silenced. This framework guides the investigation beyond a mere cataloguing of perceptions towards an analysis of the power structures that produce them.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Philosophy and Design

This research is grounded in an interpretivist philosophy, asserting that social reality is subjective and constructed through the meanings people assign to their experiences (Schwandt, 1994). A qualitative, instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995) was employed to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon (AM) within its real-life context (Christian Aid in Sierra Leone). This design is optimal for answering "how" and "why" questions about complex social processes (Yin, 2018).

3.2 Case Selection and Context

Christian Aid was selected as a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006): as a major INGO with a public commitment to adaptive and partnership-led approaches, it provides a robust setting to explore the challenges of operationalising these principles. Sierra Leone was chosen for its high-context complexity, as outlined in section 2.4. Two ongoing projects were selected for focus: a governance and accountability

programme and women's economic empowerment programme.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit 42 participants across three stakeholder groups to ensure diverse perspectives and information richness (Patton, 2015):

1. International NGO Staff (n=12): Christian Aid Country Director, programme managers, M&E advisors, and thematic specialists based in Freetown and UK.

2. Local Implementing Partners (n=18): Project managers, field officers, and M&E staff from four national NGOs and two community-based organizations (CBOs) that are direct implementing partners of Christian Aid.

3. Community Beneficiaries (n=12 for reviews; ~60 for FGDs): Project participants, including community leaders, members of village savings and loan association (VSLAs), and governance watchdog group members. Six FGDs (separated by gender where appropriate) were conducted across two rural districts (Bo and Bombali) and one urban settlement (Western Area).

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Data was collected over a 6-month field period between January and June 2024.

Semi-Structured Interviews (n=42): Conducted with all participants' using interview guides tailored to each stakeholder group. Interviews explored experiences, perceptions of benefits/limitations, decision-making processes, and power dynamics. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Focus Group Discussions (n=6): Held with beneficiaries using participatory rural appraisal (PRA) tools like problem trees and ranking exercise to elicit collective views and minimise power imbalances within the group.

Document Analysis: A review of project proposals, log frames, M&E frameworks, donor reports, and internal learning documents was conducted to triangulate interview data and understand the formal structure of Adaptive Management within the projects.

3.5 Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

The data was analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022), following a six-phase process:

1. Familiarisation: Repeated reading of transcripts and notes.
2. Initial Coding: Generating initial codes across the entire dataset.
3. Generating Themes: Collating codes into potential themes.
4. Reviewing Themes: Checking themes against the dataset and refining them.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Developing a clear definition and name for each theme.
6. Producing the Report: Weaving the thematic analysis into a coherent narrative.

NVivo 14 software was used to manage the coding process. Analysis was iterative, moving back and forth between the data, emerging themes, and the conceptual framework.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by Christian Aid, Network Movement for Justice and Development and SEND Sierra Leone. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed through the use of pseudonyms. Given the power imbalances, particular care was taken to ensure voluntary participation from community members and partner staff, with clear explanations that their relationship with Christian Aid could not be affected by their participation.

3.7 Positionality and Reflexivity

As a researcher from within Sierra Leone and Christian Aid, I actively engaged in reflexivity throughout the research process. My prior experience as a project manager in the sector granted me access and understanding but also created potential biases. I maintained a research journal to critically examine how my positionality influenced the research, from question formulation to interaction with participants and

interpretation of data. I worked closely with a research assistant from Njala University to ensure attention to cultural and contextual sensitivity and to mitigate the potential for extractive research practices.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The analysis revealed a complex tapestry of perceptions, which are organised into four overarching thematic dimensions.

4.1 Theme 1: The Duality of Power and Agency

This theme captures the starkly different experiences of agency within the AM process.

Internationalal Staff: Strategic Agency. CA staff framed AM as a tool of empowerment—for both themselves and their partners. A Programme Manager stated, "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 of adaptation.

Local Partners: Constrained Agency. Partners expressed a more nuanced view. While they valued the increased "room to manoeuvre" (Partner Manager, Freetown) compared to rigidly defined projects, they consistently described a "glass ceiling" on their decision-making power. Adaptations beyond a certain financial threshold or strategic direction required CA approval, replicating the very power structures AM seeks to dismantle. One partner director captured this succinctly: "The log frame 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."

Beneficiaries: Interpersonal Agency. Beneficiaries' sense of agency was not linked to formal AM systems but to the quality of their relationship with field officers. Their power was exercised through feedback during community meetings. A female VSLA member in Bo noted, "Before, they talked and we listened. Now, we can complain if the training time is bad for us, and they change it." This was a significant benefit, but it was perceived as a result of staff being "good listeners," not of an institutionalised adaptive system.

4.2 Theme 2: Structural and Bureaucratic Constraints

This theme encompasses the material and administrative barriers to practicing AM.

The Tyranny of the Log frame: All groups, including CA staff, identified the project proposal and log frame, locked in at the start of a funding cycle, as the primary structural constraint. A CA M&E Officer lamented, "We are trying to do agile, iterative programming with a five-year static results framework. The dissonance is exhausting." Every adaptation required laborious justification to ensure it could still be linked to the original, pre-defined indicators.

The Burden of "Learning": Local partners identified the increased reporting burden as the single greatest limitation. The demand for "real-time data for adaptation" created a parallel reporting stream on top of existing donor compliance reports. A partner M&E officer explained, "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." This finding directly challenges the assumption that adaptive learning seamlessly replaces compliance monitoring.

Inflexible Funding Mechanisms: Despite CA's best intentions, partners reported that donor funding was still largely tied to pre-approved budget lines. One partner recounted a story where rapid needs assessment during a flood suggested a shift from cash-for-work to direct unconditional cash transfers. "It took three months of emails and meetings with CA and the donor to get approval. By then the immediate crisis was over. We implemented the original plan. What is adaptive about that?"

4.3 Theme 3: The Learning Vs. Accountability Dilemma

This theme highlights the tension between using information for internal learning and external accountability.

Performance Pressure: International staff felt intense pressure to demonstrate success to donors. This created a perverse incentive to avoid documenting or sharing failures, which are a critical source of learning for adaptation. A CA 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.' This protects the programme and our relationship with the donor."

Fear and Risk Aversion: Among local partners, the fear of being blamed for "failure" was a powerful disincentive to be openly adaptive. A project officer from a local NGO in Makeni stated, "If I experiment and it goes wrong, will Christian Aid stand by me? Or will they tell the donor it was my mistake and I failed to

manage the activity? We stick to the plan because it is safer." This illustrates how power imbalances can stifle the entrepreneurial risk-taking that AM requires.

4.4 Theme 4: Contextual and Cultural Fit

This theme explores how the Western-originating concept of AM interacts with the Sierra Leonean context.

Beneficiary Perception of Change: For beneficiaries, frequent changes could signal incompetence or a lack of clear purpose. A community elder in Bombali 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 reveals a potential cultural mismatch where stability and predictability are valued leadership traits.

Relational vs. Technical Systems: The research found that the most effective adaptations often flowed not from formal M&E data but from strong, trusting relationships between field staff and the community. The formal AM system operated in parallel to, and was often slower than, this informal relational system. Effective AM in this context may depend more on investing in social capital and trusted intermediaries than on perfecting technical feedback loops.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the experience of Adaptive Management is fundamentally fractured along the fault lines of power and position within the development architecture. The perceived benefits and limitations are not inherent properties of AM but are socially constructed through these power dynamics.

5.1 The Mirage of Devolution: Power in Adaptive Management

The rhetoric of "devolving decision-space" is revealed to be partially illusory. While local partners experience more operational flexibility, the strategic "agenda-setting power" (Lukes, 2005) remains firmly with international actors who control funding, define evidence, and hold ultimate accountability. This creates a form of "managed autonomy" (Whitfield, 2009) where partners are empowered to execute within boundaries they did not set. This finding aligns with critiques of the localisation agenda, which often increases responsibilities for Southern NGOs without transferring real power (Banks et al., 2015; Ocwieja, 2018).

5.2 The Unpaid Costs of Adaptation

The research provides empirical weight to the theoretical concern that AM has high transaction costs (Punton, 2018). However, it shows that these costs are not borne equally. They are disproportionately downloaded onto local partners in the form of uncompensated labour (extra reporting) and unmitigated risk (fear of blame for failed adaptations). This functions as a hidden subsidy from under-resourced Southern NGOs to the international aid system, allowing INGOs like Christian Aid to demonstrate their adaptive credentials to donors without fully reckoning with the financial and human resource implications.

5.3 Reconciling the Learning-Accountability Paradox

The findings suggest that the learning and accountability functions of M&E are not just in tension but are often fundamentally incompatible within current donor-funded structures. The pressure to present a narrative of success to donors actively corrupts the learning process, as failures, the most valuable source of learning, are systematically airbrushed from official records. This supports Valters' (2015) assertion that until accountability to donors is replaced by accountability to beneficiaries and to learning, true adaptation will be stifled.

5.4 Towards a Contextually Situated Adaptive Practice

The Sierra Leonean context adds a crucial layer to the understanding of AM. The suspicion of frequent change and the primacy of relational systems over technical ones suggest that a one-size-fits-all model of AM is inappropriate. Implementing AM requires deep cultural and political economy analysis to tailor approaches that resonate with local conceptions of leadership, trust, and planning (Green, 2019; Fanthorpe, 2006). It must be decolonised, moving away from standardised Western management models towards hybrid practices that blend external tools with indigenous knowledge and communication systems.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the multi-stakeholder perceptions of Adaptive Management within Christian Aid's operations in Sierra Leone. It concludes that while AM offers a powerful corrective to the rigidities of

traditional project management, its implementation is deeply fraught. The benefits of increased responsiveness and relevance are real but are primarily accrued by those at the top of the aid chain who enjoy strategic agency. The limitations, increased burdens, persistent power asymmetries, and accountability fears, are disproportionately experienced by local implementing partners. Community beneficiaries experience the outcomes of adaptation positively when it occurs but remain peripheral to the formal system that enables it. Therefore, AM, as currently practiced, it risks becoming a new form of technocratic control that maintains the status quo of power relations, albeit in a more sophisticated and flexible guise.

6.2 Recommendations for Practice

6.2.1 For INGOs like Christian Aid

Here, the blueprint gives way to the living project. For international non-governmental organizations such as Christian Aid, this shift demands a fundamental reorientation of practice. It begins with the donor contract, which must be renegotiated as a genuinely adaptive instrument. This means advocating for results frameworks that privilege higher-level outcomes and impact over predefined outputs and activities, and championing proposals that include costed learning agendas and flexible budget lines. To make adaptation operational, organizations must formalize and finance decision-making space. This can be achieved by co-creating explicit “adaptation agreements” with local partners that clearly delineate autonomous decisions, those requiring consultation, and those needing formal approval, with dedicated budgets to support partner-led adaptation processes. Concomitantly, monitoring and evaluation systems require radical simplification and alignment. The emphasis should shift from compliance-driven reporting for donors toward joint, practical systems designed primarily for learning and adaptation, including protected space to document and learn from failure. Underpinning all these technical shifts is the need to invest in relational systems, recognizing social capital and trust as the bedrock of effective adaptation. This requires hiring and training staff for their interpersonal and facilitation skills alongside technical expertise.

6.2.2 For Donors

For donors, the imperative is to fund in ways that enable rather than constrain adaptive management. This involves providing block grants or funding tied to problems rather than predefined solutions, permitting significant resource reallocation across budget lines as learning dictates. Furthermore, donors must actively incentivize learning, not just success, by rewarding organizations for honest reporting and thoughtful analysis of failure and adaptation, rather than solely for achieving pre-set targets.

6.2.3 Recommendations for Further Research

Finally, to consolidate and advance these practical shifts, further research is needed. Longitudinal studies should track the implementation of adaptive management within a single organization across a full project cycle to understand its evolution and long-term effects. Quantitative analysis is required to develop metrics that measure the transaction costs of adaptive management and assess its correlation with project outcomes. Complementing these approaches, action research that partners directly with NGOs to design, implement, and study new hybrid monitoring and evaluation systems can offer grounded insight into how the goals of accountability and learning may be genuinely merged.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was made possible due to the support of the staff and leadership of Christian Aid, and the leadership of the local partners - Social Enterprise Development (SEND) Sierra Leone and Network Movement for Justice and Development (NMJD), whose insights and that of the stakeholders they work with were invaluable to this work. I am also grateful to Dr, Adewale Oshinowo for her review of this article and for all her support and encouragement this work. .

REFERENCE LIST

- Andrews, M. (2013). *The Limits of Institutional Reform in Development: Changing Rules for Realistic Solutions*. Cambridge University Press.
- Andrews, M., Pritchett, L., & Woolcock, M. (2017). *Building State Capability: Evidence, Analysis, Action*. Oxford University Press.
- Argyris, C., & Schön, D. A. (1978). *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective*, Addison-

Wesley.

- Banks, N., Hulme, D., & Edwards, M. (2015). NGOs, States, and Donors Revisited: Still Too Close for Comfort? *World Development*, 66, 707-718.
- Bond, A. (2016). *Making Adaptive Rigour Work: Principles and Practices for Strengthening Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning for Adaptive Management*. ALNAP/ODI.
- Booth, D., & Unsworth, S. (2014). *Politically Smart, Locally Led Development*. ODI.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. SAGE.
- Conforto, E. C., & Amaral, D. C. (2016). Agile Project Management and Stage-Gate Model - A Hybrid Framework for Technology-Based Companies. *Journal of Engineering and Technology Management*, 40, 1-4.
- Cooke, B., & Kothari, U. (Eds.). (2001). *Participation: The New Tyranny?* Zed Books.
- Easterly, W. (2006). *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*. Penguin Press.
- Fanthorpe, R. (2006). On the Limits of Liberal Peace: Chiefs and Democratic Decentralization in Post-War, Sierra Leone. *African Affairs*, 105(418), 27-49.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 219-245.
- Freeman, R. E. (1984). *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*. Pitman.
- Gaventa, J. (2006). Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis. *IDS Bulletin*, 37(6), 23-33.
- Green, D. (2019). From the Archives: The 'Doing Development Differently' manifesto. *From Poverty to Power Blog*, Oxfam.
- Holland, J. H. (1995). *Hidden Order: How Adaptation Builds Complexity*. Addison-Wesley.
- Holling, C. S. (Ed.). (1978). *Adaptive Environmental Assessment and Management*. Wiley.
- Hudson, D., & Leftwich, A. (2014). *From Political Economy to Political Analysis*. Developmental Leadership Program.
- Jackson, P. (2005). Chiefs, Money and Politicians: Rebuilding Local Government in Post-War Sierra Leone, *Public Administration and Development*, 25(1), 49-58.
- Lukes, S. (2005). *Power: A Radical View* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ocwieja, S. (2018). *The Localisation of Aid and the 'Fragmentation' of Sovereignty*. LSE Global South Unit Working Paper No. 3/2018.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Pritchett, L. (2019). *The Policy Irrelevance of the Economics of Education: And Why 'Adaptive Administration' Might Be the Choice that Matters Most*. RISE Working Paper.
- Punton, M. (2018). *Exploring the 'Fitness' of Adaptive Management*. ITAD.
- Ramalingam, B., Scriven, K., & Foley, C. (2008). *Innovations in International Humanitarian Action*. ALNAP/ODI.
- Sahlin-Andersson, K., & Söderholm, A. (Eds.). (2002). *Beyond Project Management: New Perspectives on the Temporary-Permanent Dilemma*. Liber Abstrakt.
- Schwandt, T. A. (1994). Constructivist, Interpretivist Approaches to Human Inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 118-137). SAGE.
- Scott, J. C. (1998). *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. Yale University Press.
- Shepler, S., & Williams, R. (2017). Sierra Leone's Ebola Outbreak and the Shadow of the Shadow State *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 55(3), 1-24.
- Snowden, D. J., & Boone, M. E. (2007). A Leader's Framework for Decision Making. *Harvard Business Review*, 85(11), 68-76.

- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The Art of Case Study Research*. SAGE.
- Valters, C. (2015). *Theories of Change in International Development: Communication, Learning, or Accountability?* Justice and Security Research Programme, LSE.
- Walters, C. J. (1986). *Adaptive Management of Renewable Resources*. Macmillan.
- Whitfield, L. (Ed.). (2009). *The Politics of Aid: African Strategies for Dealing with Donors*. Oxford University Press.
- Wild, L., Booth, D., Cummings, C., Foresti, M., & Wales, J. (2020). *Adapting Development: Improving Services to the Poor*. ODI.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (6th ed.). SAGE
- Zack-Williams, T. (2012). Sierra Leone: The Political Economy of Civil War, 1991-98. *Third World Quarterly*, 20(1), 143-162.