

Supporting local learning and adaptation: understanding the effectiveness of adaptive processes



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Summary

This brief reviews the evidence from **Learning to Make All Voices Count** (L-MAVC), a programme funded by **Making All Voices Count**, and implemented in collaboration with **Global Integrity**. L-MAVC intended to support six **Making All Voices Count** grantees, working in five countries, in co-creating and applying a participatory, learning-centred, and adaptive approach to strengthening citizen engagement in governance processes in their contexts, including with respect to the **Open Government Partnership** (OGP).

The evidence from L-MAVC suggests that adaptive ways of working can strengthen the impact and effectiveness of efforts to open governance, especially when three conditions are met:

- implementers proactively interrogate their assumptions, and engage with local stakeholders and the contexts in which they are working;
- adaptive ways of working are integrated into existing systems and procedures in implementing organisations; and
- implementing organisations are able to maintain staff continuity.

These findings have ramifications for the broader community of actors working to support governance reform, especially donors and multilateral institutions. If these actors are to more effectively and consistently facilitate adaptive programming that contributes to reforms that affect citizens' lives, substantial changes – with respect to project management approaches and grant-making practices – may be warranted.

Introduction

Background

An increasingly compelling body of evidence suggests that governance reform is inherently political and complex, and that reform efforts are most likely to be successful when:

- local stakeholders are at the forefront of defining governance challenges, developing and implementing solutions, and pursuing sustainable change; and
- those stakeholders have the flexibility to learn and adapt as they go, especially when working in complex political contexts (see, for example, Levy 2011; Andrews 2010; Grindle 2005; Halloran 2014; Ladner 2015; Derbyshire and Donovan 2016).

Yet despite an emerging consensus on the importance of local ownership, and interest in adaptive programming, many donors and multilaterals that seek to support governance reform continue to employ linear, compliance-driven project and programme management frameworks. As a result, implementers and local partners often lack space for learning and adaptation (de Weijer and Hauck 2015). This disconnect between what is known and what persists in practice is driven by several lingering questions: are adaptive approaches even effective? What do successful adaptive approaches look like in practice? And how might external actors support their application?

The programme

The Learning to Make All Voices Count initiative (L-MAVC), a programme funded by Making All Voices Count (MAVC) and implemented in collaboration with Global Integrity, was an attempt to explore and address these questions. Global Integrity partnered with MAVC staff and six MAVC grantees in Tanzania, Kenya, South Africa, Indonesia, and the Philippines, to design and operationalise a participatory, learning-centred, and adaptive programme management methodology that aimed to:

- help grantees strengthen citizen engagement with governance processes, and OGP, in their contexts; and
- generate evidence on how external actors – including OGP, donors and multilaterals, and practitioners – might accelerate the emergence of transformative governance reforms, including under the auspices of OGP.

Global Integrity worked with each grantee, helping them to apply cycles of adaptive learning to their projects. Bilateral support was supplemented with quarterly reflective peer learning workshops. We took a reflective, adaptive approach to the L-MAVC programme itself, implementing significant changes to various elements of the programme in response to the evolving needs and interests of, and feedback from, grantees over the year in which we worked together.

All of the L-MAVC grantees adapted various elements of their projects – from the problem they intended to tackle, to their theory of change, to aims and activities – throughout the course of the programme. Some grantees adapted in response to shifts in their context. Others made adjustments as they learned more about the needs and interests of their partners and local stakeholders. Still others revised their strategies as they challenged their own assumptions and generated new insights, including as a result of exchanges with other grantees and Global Integrity.

Grantees rigorously documented every step of their adaptive learning journeys, and at the conclusion of the programme, distilled short case stories capturing the key features of their L-MAVC experience. L-MAVC therefore offers six evidence-based examples of adaptive learning in practice. Taken together, these projects, and the programme as a whole, are a small laboratory – a collection of experiments that explore how to work adaptively in pursuit of governance reform, and whether doing so supports the achievement of results.

Lessons from L-MAVC: what enables effective adaptation?

L-MAVC lasted roughly 12 months from start to finish. This compressed time frame limits the extent to which we can comprehensively assess the impact of grantees' work. The early indications, however, point to the value of well-executed adaptive learning approaches, and provide grounds for exploring the factors that enable effective adaptive practice. Table 1 provides a brief snapshot of each grantee's project, from initial goal to key adaptations to results achieved.

As explained in Table 1, five of the six L-MAVC projects leveraged the adaptive learning process to achieve good results in their contexts. The sixth project, implemented by DGRU, fared comparatively less well, and delivered few substantial achievements – though the DGRU team did report that applying the L-MAVC methodology improved their capacity to plan, reflect and communicate. The team also expressed confidence that, if they are able to work in similar ways in the future, they will be more successful.

What explains the variation in performance between the five successful projects, on the one hand, and the sixth on the other? An analysis of the evidence from L-MAVC suggests that three explanatory factors are especially salient in understanding why and how five projects applied the adaptive learning process more effectively, and achieved results that were, at least in part, enabled through that process.

Factor 1: the degree to which grantees proactively engaged with the system in which they were working, especially with the beneficiaries or partners they aimed to support.

The more grantees proactively interrogated the assumptions embedded in their project logic, and the more they involved local partners and local stakeholders in their efforts to do so, the more they were able to learn about, and adapt to, the complex political contexts in which they worked. Working with partners to understand local needs and local challenges, as well as regularly exploring local political dynamics and power relationships – who had power, how that power was exercised, the incentives that shaped the behaviour of key stakeholders – enabled five of the six L-MAVC

projects to respond to potentially debilitating shifts in their local contexts, and turn what might have been setbacks into new opportunities.

In contrast, the DGRU project – the least successful of those in L-MAVC – took a more passive approach to testing its assumptions, several of which were held not by implementing staff members, but by their superiors, who were not very involved with the adaptive learning process (more on this below). As a result of this approach, DGRU was unable to respond quickly to evidence indicating that their expectations regarding beneficiary needs, the usefulness of tech, and the incentives confronted by advocacy targets did not conform to contextual realities.

The experience of grantees demonstrates the importance of proactive engagement with local stakeholders and beneficiaries, and the dynamics that affect their behaviour. This is especially the case in efforts to open governance, which sometimes privilege off-the-shelf tech solutions, or blueprint approaches to reform, at the expense of accounting for the textured dynamics of local contexts.

Factor 2: the relative position, importance and size of the L-MAVC project, as well as the seniority of project holders, within grantees' broader organisational systems.

In five of the six L-MAVC projects, senior leadership in grantee organisations had fully bought into or was actually implementing the adaptive learning process. This meant that grantees in these projects could ring-fence time and space for learning and adaptation, as well as integrate and transfer L-MAVC experiences to the rest of the organisation, with good results. In contrast, the sixth project, at DGRU, was managed by mid-level colleagues, who were somewhat siloed from the rest of the organisation. This constrained the ability of the project manager to react to emerging lessons, especially as his boss – who was less involved in the adaptive learning journey – was not always part of the reflective processes from which lessons materialised.

Factor 3: The extent to which projects/grantee organisations maintained staff continuity.

Staff transitions are an inescapable part of working life, and affected the implementation of L-MAVC projects. Where staff could participate for the duration of the project – as was the case for five of the grantees – those projects tended to achieve greater outcomes. Staff continuity allowed for smoother administration, but also for the absorption and consistent application of the style and methods that support adaptive approaches.

The DGRU project was interrupted by the departure of the staff member in charge of day-to-day project

management and, to a lesser extent, by unexpected leave taken by a senior colleague. These events disrupted project implementation, and upset the accumulation of data and collective lessons from which successful adaptations derive.

In sum, the evidence from L-MAVC suggests that adaptive management processes are more likely to be successfully applied when factors 1-3 are present. If external actors, including donors and multilateral institutions, are to support the local learning and adaptation that might lead to greater impact on the ground, it is therefore worth considering whether and how they can encourage the emergence of these factors.

The implications of L-MAVC: how can external actors support effective adaptation?

The evidence from L-MAVC suggests that donors, multilaterals and other external actors might do well to accommodate more adaptive programming at an expanded scale. In supporting more learning and action by local partners, external actors could improve the effectiveness of governance projects and programmes, and contribute to transformative change at country level.

However, to do this effectively would necessitate changes, from high-level institutional policies down to the practices of individual employees, and back up, in order to ensure that external actors have mechanisms in place to support partners in implementing adaptive approaches.

Practically and, at the very least, effectively supporting on-the-ground learning and adaptation would require several adjustments on the part of donors, multilaterals and other external actors. These include:

- emphasising the 'L' (learning) in monitoring, evaluation, and learning

This would mean de-emphasising the 'E' in monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL), and instead, encouraging grantees and partners to focus on and rigorously document the 'L'. A learning-focused MEL system would help grantees to

continuously gather information on the context in which they're working, to regularly assess power and political dynamics, and to explore and iteratively revise their assumptions about how change happens. It would focus on outcomes, not outputs, and support strategic adjustments throughout a project and / or programme. Promoting and encouraging learning would also mean allocating more resources to the support of structured opportunities for cross-context peer reflection and sharing.

- operationalising flexibility in projects and funding models

This would entail programming and resourcing for person-to-person relationships and practices aimed at building trust between external actors and their partners. Stronger relationships, more regular check-ins, and more transparency on both sides would enable external actors and their partners to work together, reflect, learn, and adapt and justify changes to project plans and budgets when warranted. This would frame adaptation as a good outcome of learning, not a problem or deviation.

- reducing the prevalence of technical requests for proposals that limit local ownership and restrict space for learning and adaptation

Table 1. Adaptive learning in practice

Grantee	Initial project description/goals	Key adaptations in context	Results
Perkumplan Prakarsa (Indonesia)	Prakarsa intended to conduct participatory action research on the implementation of e-government initiatives in several subnational districts. They planned to explore the experience of those districts, generate evidence on whether and how e-government had improved the delivery of public services, and to identify the critical factors in implementing a successful e-government initiative. Emphasising the leadership styles of successful reformers, and their popularity, was a key component of Prakarsa's initial strategy. They would then use their findings to advocate for the inclusion and implementation of sound e-government commitments in upcoming policy processes, like the OGP National Action Plan.	Prakarsa had initially planned to use e-government initiatives carried out by the governor of DKI Jakarta as an exemplar of well implemented, reform-minded policy, and to encourage other politicians to model themselves after the governor. However, the governor's unexpected ejection from office, and subsequent imprisonment, meant changes were necessary if Prakarsa was to keep the project on track Prakarsa undertook a revised power analysis, and revisited their theory of change and engagement strategies. Prakarsa also held a policy dialogue with stakeholders from the central and subnational governments, including district agencies on local development planning, and women's groups. Using the grounded insights from these field reflections, they then held bilateral meetings with key officials from officials from several ministries, the Presidential Executive Office and the National Secretariat of Open Government Indonesia. Instead of focusing on Ahok's positive example, Prakarsa emphasised the benefits of e-government initiatives with respect to the service delivery concerns of each targeted audience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National policy-makers are now incorporating Prakarsa's findings into the development of plans to guide the design and implementation of national e-government policy, including with regard to OGP commitments.
JRIG (The Philippines)	JRIG intended to work with regional universities, and equip them to serve as 'infomediaries' that could support citizens and CSOs outside of Manila in learning about, engaging with, and putting to use the data made available under the Bottom-Up Budgeting programme (BuB was part of an OGP NAP commitment). JRIG also intended to support broader public awareness of, and engagement with, OGP writ large, as well as with other open government initiatives undertaken in the Philippines.	During the project, the government discontinued the BuB programme. JRIG consulted with local university partners and the OGP National Non-Government Steering Committee, and facilitated local workshops with CSOs and local government units to determine how to proceed. Based on the recommendations from these engagements, partners decided that universities would leverage data available under the Full Disclosure Policy (FDP) to develop products to enable CSOs and local citizens to better understand the city budget. They would also formalise working agreements with local partners for sustainability purposes. Partners and beneficiaries also requested that universities organise offline activities, such as policy forums, workshops, consultations, and CSO trainings, to support local citizens and CSOs in using available tools and tech to monitor government actions. JRIG then helped university partners develop and implement just such activities.	Regional reformers from various sectors have worked together to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> identify key open government challenges in their contexts; sign memoranda of agreement with one another; and use the tools and resources made available by JRIG to begin to address service delivery problems in their contexts.
InciteGov/ ANSA-EAP/ ULAP (The Philippines)	The project team – a multi-stakeholder consortium of CSOs and local government officials – intended to support the creation of a non-governmental OGP secretariat, pilot a participatory budgeting programme at provincial level, and broaden awareness of participatory budgeting throughout the country. They planned to leverage these activities in order to expand and strengthen the participation of citizens in OGP processes,	A key assumption of the project design was that the newly elected national government would continue its engagement with OGP. However, there was a risk that the new secretary of the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) would discontinue many of his predecessor's initiatives, including OGP. Although not in the initial project design, the project, together with other OGP champions and the OGP support unit, carried out several interventions to ensure that the new administration would continue maintain participation in OGP. At the provincial level, major adjustments in project implementation also occurred including, at the request of Bohol governor, expanding the coverage of the participatory budgeting initiative to ten times what was originally intended.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The renewal of Philippines' membership in the OGP, and the creation of a civil society OGP Steering Committee. Budgeting processes in Bohol are more citizen-centred, and other provinces are in the process of considering how to adapt and apply similar processes to their budget procedures. The incorporation of two subnational commitments – developed through

	and to inform the development of the third OGP NAP.	Lastly, plans to use social media to conduct voting for the priority projects in the participatory budgeting initiative failed to pan out because of connectivity issues, and a hostile, unverifiable and contentious social media environment. The project partners adapted, and instead conducted face to face voting, and facilitated an expanded number of subnational consultations and roundtable discussions.	consultations with provincial and local stakeholders – into the new OGP NAP
CRECO (Kenya)	CRECO intended to support the implementation of OGP NAP commitments in two counties. They planned to do this through training and mobilising Community Oversight Committees (COCs) in each county, to rigorously monitor and assess commitment implementation. CRECO also intended to leverage the results from that work to support advocacy around OGP in those counties, as well as at national level.	<p>In 2017, regional insecurity due to cattle rustling in one county and persistent drought in another made it difficult for COCs to hold planned community engagement forums, a crucial component of CRECO’s project. CRECO adjusted by helping COCs form WhatsApp groups, which they used to share information and coordinate action until in-person meetings became safe again.</p> <p>Further, the planned use of radio broadcasts for advocacy purposes could not be implemented due to the high costs of radio airtime, in part as a result of the Kenyan election campaign.</p> <p>During regular reflection sessions, planned activities were reviewed, and CRECO decided to develop a monthly online newsletter (in place of radio broadcasts), through which partners could share information on OGP and NAP II across their networks, including at the national level.</p> <p>CRECO also developed offline monitoring tools for use by COCs, and facilitated community meetings, in which COCs shared findings from their monitoring work, and discussed OGP and officials’ performance with community members.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvements in the extent to which citizens and CSOs in two counties participate in, and engage with, OGP processes, which may lead to improvements in the county-level implementation of NAP commitments. • Strengthened capacity of local activists to coordinate and engage in local advocacy. • More coordinated CSO activism on OGP issues at the national level, and more cooperation between the state and civil society on national-level OGP processes, which may help provide the groundwork for more representative, participatory, and relevant OGP processes in the future.
Tamasha /Oxfam (Tanzania)	Tamasha and Oxfam intended to support more accountable governance at district level. They planned to gauge awareness of OGP and open government among citizens in those districts. Then, in facilitating participatory action research (PAR), they hoped to help marginalised citizens mobilise around OGP-linked issues, and hold district officials accountable for addressing those issues. Tamasha / Oxfam also planned exchange visits for officials in two districts, one of which was the home of an OGP subnational pilot.	<p>During the project implementation, the political context changed radically, in part because of the overwhelming community response to PAR in one district, which revealed issues relating to national OGP priorities, including making visible differences in the priorities of women and men; young and old.</p> <p>Participation in group work and at the feedback meeting was unexpectedly high. In some cases, participants insisted on choosing the follow-up committees themselves, which transformed the status of the committees and gave them ‘political’ power and autonomy. As a result, they were able to engage more effectively with village authorities, and to tackle entrenched problems.</p> <p>In addition, although the PAR was only carried out in one village in each of the 10 wards, several other villages were inspired to set up their own committees. As a result of this work, the village assemblies regained some power and influence even outside of project districts.</p> <p>In response to local concerns, Tamasha and Oxfam have also pivoted to support discussions about the sustainability of the initiative.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In line with commitments on the second National Action Plan, Tamasha / Oxfam’s work has led to the identification of instances in which local officials misappropriated public funds, which they have now been forced to return. • Some government officials have also acknowledged other issues – from land rights to militia violence – raised by the people’s committees supported by the project, and have begun to work with them to address those issues. • Youth and women are far more involved in the functioning of local village assemblies.
DGRU (South Africa)	DGRU intended to support the implementation of an OGP NAP commitment focused on the provision of access to justice. They planned to do this through distributing legal resources to Community Advice Offices (CAOs) across the country, and through developing a mobile app containing legal information that CAOs could put to use. DGRU also hoped to coordinate other CSOs to collectively advocate for more civil society influence in the OGP process in South Africa.	<p>DGRU’s early attempts to distribute project materials via post were completely unsuccessful. Eventually, after trying several approaches to engaging with CAOs, the project team travelled to a few CAO offices personally, and worked with them to better understand their information needs and constraints.</p> <p>As the project progressed, confusion persisted about which government agency led OGP. A clear lack of engagement with or interest from government officials made it difficult for DGRU to identify advocacy targets, or to effectively mobilise CSOs to influence the OGP process.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participating CAOs report a positive contribution to their counselling work, awareness campaigns and training activities. Feedback from CAOs suggested that the resources provided by DGRU exceeded their expectations in terms of content, although this, along with improvements to the content, would have to be tested further with a bigger group and over an extended period. • No notable results were achieved with respect to the broader OGP process.

Instead of allocating support on the basis of technical requests for proposals, external actors might instead work with local stakeholders, and encourage them to submit proposals in which they describe processes for learning about, identifying, and solving local problems, including in partnership with intended beneficiaries.

- ensuring that internal management practices encourage stability and continuity in partners' project management

This would mean providing timely turnaround of contracts, disbursements and feedback, and demonstrating sensitivity to the various obligations under which partners and grantees exist, including around project and financial management. It would also require external actors to take a flexible and

adaptive approach to their own operations, while maintaining high standards of reliability, professionalism, and trustworthiness. These recommendations are, of course, simply good management practice – but are worth emphasising for the fact that their absence is likely to constrain local learning, adaptation, and effectiveness.

The evidence from L-MAVC suggests that adaptive programming, if effectively applied, can strengthen the capacity of local actors in their efforts to drive progress on governance reform. Applying the lessons from L-MAVC, as described in this section, would help external actors support the effectiveness of their partners as well as enhance their own ability to contribute to change that matters to citizens in countries and communities across the world.

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About Making All Voices Count

Making All Voices Count is a programme working towards a world in which open, effective and participatory governance is the norm and not the exception. It focuses global attention on creative and cutting-edge solutions to transform the relationship between citizens and their governments. The programme is inspired by and supports the goals of the Open Government Partnership.

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Research, Evidence and Learning component

The programme's Research, Evidence and Learning component, managed by IDS, contributes to improving performance and practice, and builds an evidence base in the field of citizen voice, government responsiveness, transparency and accountability (T&A) and technology for T&A (Tech4T&A).

About Global Integrity

Global Integrity champions transparent and accountable governance around the world by producing innovative research and taking action to inform, connect, and empower civic, private, and public reformers seeking more open societies. Undergirding our work is the knowledge that governance reform is inherently political and complex, and that there are thus few, if any, cookie cutter solutions to governance-related challenges. As such, we acknowledge that any efforts to drive progress towards more open, accountable and effective governance must be led by local stakeholders, navigating and shaping the political dynamics in their own particular contexts.

We support local stakeholders, including both government and civil society, with our assistance in putting adaptive learning – a structured, data-driven, problem-focused and iterative approach to learning by doing, which engages with local political realities while drawing on experiences from elsewhere – at the heart of their efforts to design and implement effective governance reforms. This helps reformers close the gaps between policy commitments and implementation and contributes to better governance and development outcomes. Further, we seek to support and enhance the effectiveness of other key players in the governance arena by sharing the insights generated from our innovative and exploratory work with local partners.

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