

Can PDIA Be Used At A Strategic Level In Multi-Donor Trust Funds And Across Various Phases Of Downstream Projects?

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Question

How can a Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation Approach (PDIA) be best applied at the strategic level for multi-donor trust funds and across various phases of downstream projects?

- *What are the key principles and lessons on how PDIA can be applied at the strategic fund- level and in the design, procurement, delivery and monitoring and evaluation of downstream projects?*
- *Are there any examples of the use of PDIA in multi-donor trust funds?*

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1. Summary

This rapid review investigated whether PDIA can be used successfully in Multi-Donor Trust Funds (MDTF) at a strategic level and also across various phases of downstream projects (Verheijen, 2017 and World Bank 2018). The review also identified best practices across the whole programme iteration cycle.

The review found that PDIA can be successfully used in MDTF's and across the various phases of downstream projects. There were few examples illustrating the use the PDIA approach in Multi-Donor Trust Fund interventions. The body of published research on the use of PDIA was relatively small. However, there was more literature on the use of PDIA in large scale interventions generally at system-wide level and lower down, at project level. Literature was mainly from grey sources, including case studies published by organisations; reports from multi-donor projects; university projects; online blogs; and annual reports from development and funding organisations. Sources for the review were quite recent, between the periods 2010-2021.

The following key findings emerged from this review:

- Key principles necessary for the successful implementation of PDIA include: a bottom-up approach; creating an authorizing environment; ongoing experimentation through the course of the intervention; engaging and expanding a network of role-players to develop solutions and facilitate acceptance and adoption of solutions (Andrews Pritchett and Woolcock, 2012).
- The process for implementing PDIA entails a number of steps, including: identifying a problem and deconstructing it into smaller parts, sequencing the intervention (solution), looking for more than one solution, building authorization, designing iterations and learning from successive iterations (Harvard, 2018)
- A number of recent case studies exist which offer instructive insights on the implementation of PDIA at a system level. The hourglass approach adopted by LASER (Legal Assistance for Economic Reform Programme) has been utilised successfully in a range of countries including fragile states (Manuel, 2016).
- Key lessons from the implementation of these interventions include the following:
 - Designing the intervention entails learning by doing and facilitation of local actors in identifying and deconstructing problems. The duration between design and implementation of the intervention programme can take between six to twelve months and this phase is important because it provides an opportunity to test assumptions and to identify all the variables which may affect the implementation of the solution (LASER, 2015).
 - Implementation/delivery is achieved through ongoing experimentation and taking small steps to achieve 'quick-wins'. Short feedback loops ensure that interventions can be adjusted rapidly, and changes incorporated into the next iteration. This process builds towards delivery of the intervention (Manuel, 2016).
 - Contracting and procurement processes are flexible and based on outputs and the contracting phase may overlap with design and implementation phases. Funds for predetermined outputs may not be provided up-front because this can distort relationships and incentives. Funding may be iterative, and output based.

A flexible approach to contracting which does not pre-specify all deliverables can be used (Manuel, 2016; Wild, Booth and Valters, 2017).

- A Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) approach is embedded into programme management. These are active learning mechanisms that enables new information to be quickly incorporated into subsequent iterations of an intervention. Flexibility in monitoring and evaluation can be facilitated by broad system-wide logframes and 'nested logframes with more specific indicators that are adapted frequently, lower down at project level. Outcome indicators can report stories of significant change retrospectively (Andrews et al., 2012, Manuel 2016)
- The Multi-Donor Trust Fund for Justice Support (MTDF-JSS) in Serbia offers an example of the successful use of PDIA in a Multi-Donor Trust Fund context. The approach was successful because it was able to adapt quickly to the changing political environment and changes in the Justice sector in Serbia over the period of the intervention. Besides having various delivery successes, the approach was able to prepare Serbia for European accession even with political changes that in the short term affected justice reform (Verheijen, 2017 and World Bank, 2018).

2. Principles and processes for using PDIA at strategic level and in downstream projects

This section focusses on the key principles and lessons that should guide the development initiatives to build state capacity at the broader strategic and implementation levels of projects.

Key principles of PDIA at the broader programme level

PDIA initially developed by Andrews et al. (2012), is based on four core principles distilled from successes and failures of interventions across diverse development interventions in different fields (p.3). The main principles of PDIA are (Andrews et al., 2012, p.8):

- PDIA is a bottom-up approach which aims to identify local problems with local actors and find solutions tailored to contexts and needs on the ground.
- Creating an 'authorizing environment' that facilitates decision making that encourages experimentation in finding solutions
- Entailing active, ongoing, experiential and experimental learning incorporating iterative feedback.
- Engaging broad sets of agents to ensure that reforms are local-context suited, practically implementable and politically accepted.

Bottom-up approach

Andrews et al. (2012) emphasise that working from the ground up to build state capability offers hope for sustainable success in interventions. This entails local actors identifying what the problem is rather than being offered a suite of pre-packaged solutions by external agents (p.9).

Creating 'Authorizing environments'

PDIA proposes that to escape 'capability traps', spaces for experimentation need to be created in which real solutions to government performance problems can be found. 'Capability traps' result from externally formulated development interventions and solutions, where public officials cosmetically adopt 'reforms' to improve performance, without practically implementing these reforms. Creating 'authorizing environments' enables deviations from standardised solutions in uncertain and complex environments. This tactic involves 'muddling through' by taking small incremental steps which gradually identify and tackle contextual challenges to find locally relevant and politically acceptable solutions to government performance problems.

Active learning and iterative feedback loops

The experimentation approach to problem-oriented reforms are most effective when there are rapid feedback loops incorporated into the approach to gauge the impact of iterative small steps. Trying out solutions through continuous testing enables lessons learned to be quickly incorporated into design discussions (p.15).

The importance of broad engagement

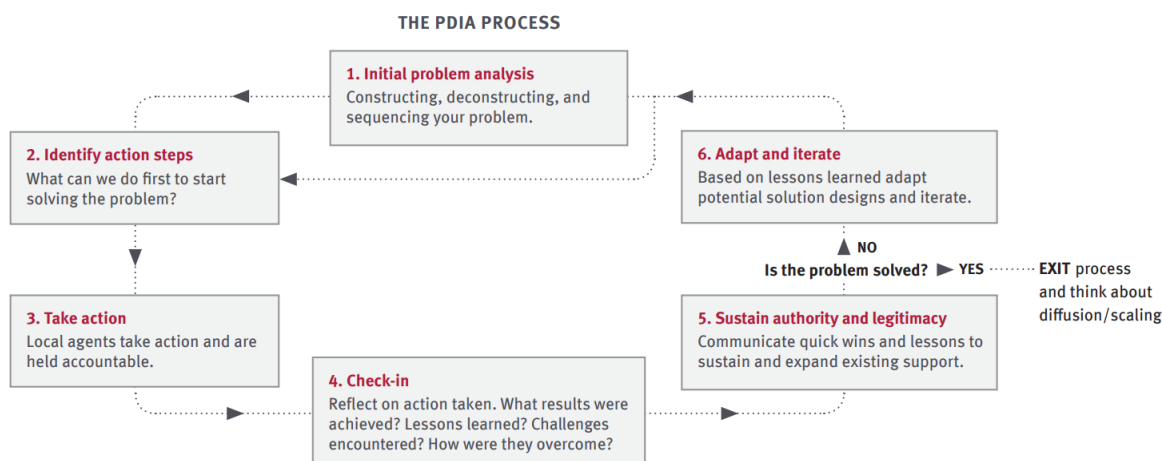
Andrews et al. (2012) argue for broad consultations with leaders/managers and implementers to avoid 'capability traps'. Vertical engagement improves chances of local solutions that will also be implemented by frontline workers.

The process of implementing PDIA meaningfully

The literature on practical steps to implement PDIA is scarce. This section highlights the PDIA implementation process using a PDIA Toolkit (Harvard University, 2018)¹. At the macro-level, the lifecycle of a PDIA intervention is illustrated in Figure 1. Figure 2 identifies specific steps in the process from identifying problems to developing and implementing iterations. These steps are a route-map of how to implement PDIA.

¹ Centre for International Development, Harvard University. PDIA Toolkit: A DIY approach to Solving Complex Problems, 2018. https://bsc.cid.harvard.edu/files/bsc/files/pdiatoolkit_ver_1_oct_2018.pdf

Figure 1: The PDIA Process



Source: Harvard University, Centre for International Development, PDIA Toolkit: A DIY Approach to solving Complex Problems. 2018, p. 7 reproduced under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0



Figure 2: Steps in the process of implementing PDIA

Source: Harvard University, Centre for International Development, PDIA Toolkit: A DIY Approach to solving Complex Problems. 2018, p. 9 reproduced under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Constructing the problem

PDIA utilises a problem driven approach, rather than a solution-driven one which imposes standardized interventions that do not tackle the root of the problem and therefore often fail to bring about real change. A well identified problem has a number of characteristics (p.9):

- The problem matters to key change agents and therefore cannot be ignored
- It motivates and drives change
- It can be broken down into smaller elements
- It allows sequenced strategic responses
- It is locally driven, defined, debated and refined by local actors who develop the problem statement through consensus

Constructing the problem has to be done by people inside the organisation and not by outsiders and answers to the questions have to be informed by data/evidence that is able to convince others of their validity and to enable the group to develop a compelling problem statement (p.9)

Deconstructing the problem

Complex problems are difficult to resolve and the 'right' solutions are hard to develop. This often leads agents to propose 'best practice' solutions that will not build real capability but at least provide an intervention. This risk is reduced by breaking the problem down into smaller components that can be used as focal points for engagements, leading to localised solution building. This can result in a more refined understanding of the problem. During this process, the use of different agents internal to the organisation who bring different perspectives to the problem is important as this leads to a more thorough deconstruction of the problem (p.15).

Sequencing

Developing effective sequencing is a third crucial step in developing solutions to the problem. This refers to the timing and staging of the intervention which is influenced by the context, including opportunities and constraints. Deconstructed problems provide a broad overview of the problem. This has to be unpacked to determine how to solve the problem and developing an intervention/s to ensure all causal strands are addressed. Effective sequencing facilitates this (p.21).

'Crawling' the design space for solutions

This step leads to answering the question as to what interventions are necessary. This is achieved through active iteration, experimentation and learning (p.31). In this process, answers cannot be developed theoretically, but rather actively through experimentation (with multiple alternative solutions), active engagement and feedback. 'Crawling' the design space facilitates the development of multiple alternative solutions. The real solution to complex problems usually comes from many small solutions to the many causal strands of the problem (p.15).

Building and maintaining authorization

This is an important variable in the implementation process and is necessary for any initiative aimed at building the capacity of the state. Authorising environments are complex and may vary vertically, with different authorising agents. It is often very difficult to know who the authorizing agent is in a given context. Authorizing agents can be both formal and informal and can be inconsistent. Identifying who the authorizing agents are is necessary for expanding the space for experimentation (p.37).

Designing the first iteration

This entails the use of a number of small steps/interventions in short cycles to gauge their effectiveness in addressing the problem. Each step offers quick action and should be relatively cheap to implement and adjust. Small steps also help to identify contextual challenges This step entails multiple solution ideas to be designed and implemented (p.43).

Learning from iterations

There is no separation from design and implementation in solving complex organisational problems. Experiential learning is embedded into the iteration process. Lessons from each action are quickly analysed to inform what happened and why and the next action or step incorporates these earlier learnings (p.49).

3. Illustrative example of PDIA in large scale programming

The section provides an example of the implementation of institutional reform programmes at scale, using PDIA. The example is based on the LASER (Legal Assistance for Economic Reform) programme which is implemented across developing country organisations to support institutional change to facilitate Investment Climate Reform (ICR) in fragile states (Manuel, 2016). The key focus countries in the LASER programme are Burma, Bangladesh, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somaliland and Tanzania (Manuel, 2016). LASER's approach is based on PDIA; system approaches; politically smart locally led development; adaptive programming; Doing Development Differently (DDD) and Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) (Manuel, 2016). Rogers and MacFarlan (2020) suggest that while there are differences in emphasis in these approaches, when their central elements are compared, they have many commonalities. These commonalities are (Rogers and MacFarlan, 2020, p. 8):

- Attention to political analysis and engagement at multiple levels
- Adaption to local conditions and local ownership
- Framing the work around problem solving
- Adaptation to changing conditions and new information

For example, in the figure below, PDIA is compared with Thinking and Working Politically (TWP), to illustrate the overlap in approaches.

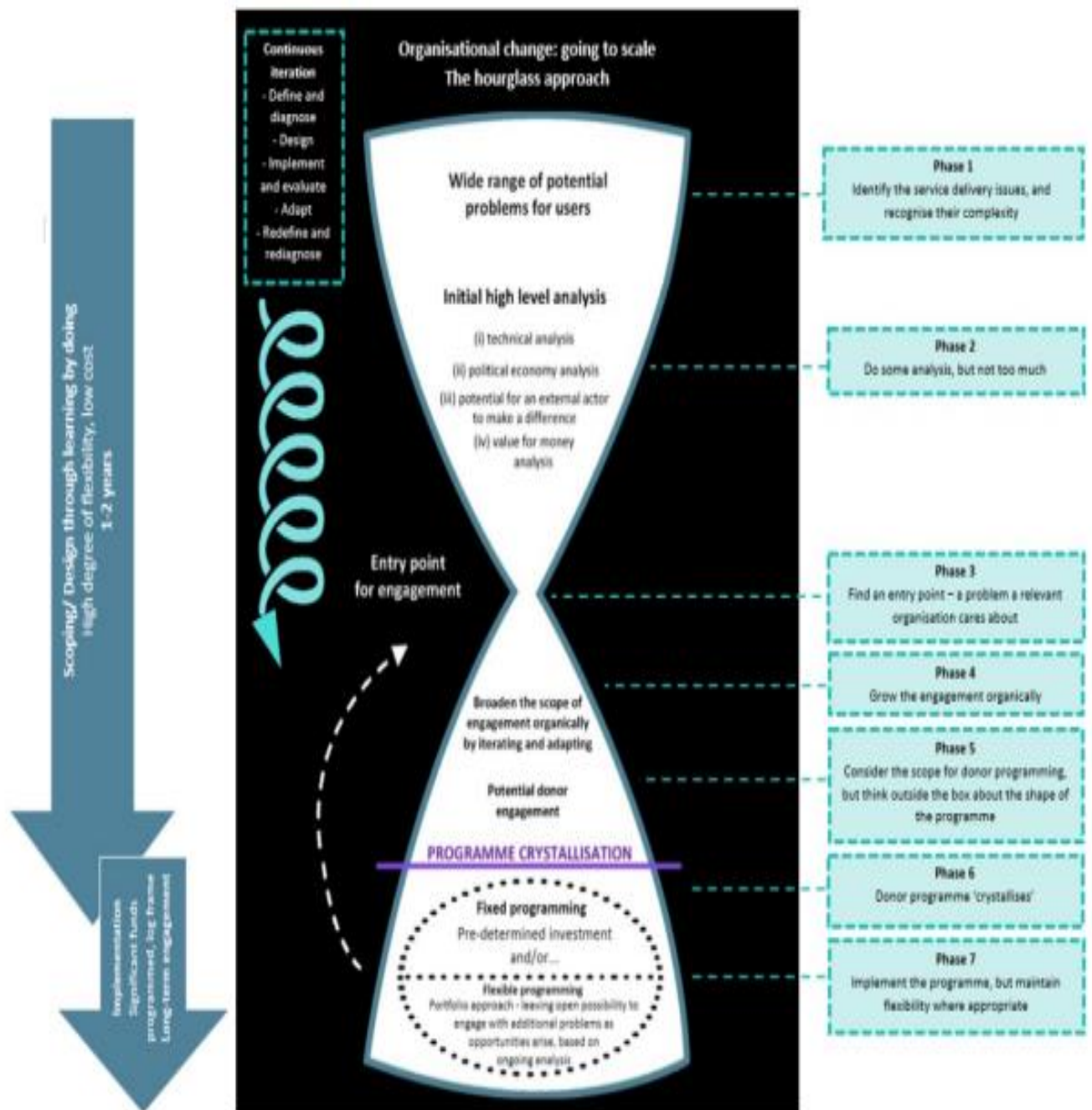
Figure 3: Key features of TWP and PDIA

	Attention to political analysis and engagement at multiple levels	Adaptation to local conditions and local ownership	Framing of problem	Adaptation to changing conditions and new information
Thinking and Working Politically <i>(Thinking, Working Politically CoP, no date)</i>	Focus on "power dynamics, interests, incentives and institutions" "Understand the network of stakeholders involved and facilitate coalitions of different interests, rather than relying on a 'principal-agent' relationship"	"Ensure as far as possible that locally-defined problems and proposed solutions are accepted as legitimate by all relevant stakeholders, thereby ensuring ownership"	"Focus on problems identified and articulated by local actors, not outsiders"	Allows "for sufficient flexibility and iteration in the day-to-day efforts to make progress towards goals." "continue to assess the local context, test original assumptions, and adapt programs based on new information and opportunities" "series of small 'experimental' or 'incremental' steps and monitor results."
Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation <i>(Andrews et al., 2017)</i>	"Engaging champions across sectors and organisations who ensure reforms are viable, legitimate and relevant."	"Locally driven, where local actors define, debate and refine the problem statement through shared consensus."	Avoiding "predetermined solutions" to focus on "local nomination, articulation and prioritisation of concrete problems" "emphasis on the process of solving problems"	"Promoting active experiential (and experimental) learning with evidence-driven feedback built into regular management that allows for real-time adaptation."

Source: Adapted from Rogers, P. and Macfarlan, A., *What is adaptive management and how does it work?* Monitoring and Evaluation for Adaptive Management. Working Paper Series Number 2, 2020. Adapted under CC BY-NC 3.0

Although there is no 'one-size fits all' to doing PDIA, LASER (2015) elaborates that the principles of PDIA can be used to assist development practitioners. These principles are distilled into a seven-phase hourglass implementation methodology (Figure 4), that details the steps to Doing Development Differently using PDIA.

Figure 4: The hourglass approach Institutional Reform at scale



Source: LASER. Second Synthesis Paper. Delivering institutional reform at scale: Problem-driven approaches supported by adaptive management. Manuel, C. 2016, p.10 reproduced under [Open Government Licence v3.0](#),

Country case study: Justice Performance Improvement Project (JPIP) -Kenya

The hourglass framework for implementing PDIA was retrospectively used in Kenya's Judicial Performance Improvement Programme (funded by the World Bank) aimed at improving the performance of the judiciary to provide its services more effectively (Laser, 2015). In the Kenyan case, the hourglass framework entailed the following phases (Laser, 2015, p.4-5):

Phase one: identify the issues (service delivery problems or deficiencies with the existing programme). LASER's problem-oriented approach engaged quickly with the judiciary to provide rapid support to A Locally-Driven Dispute Resolution Retreat (ADR) in the absence of any other support available.

Phase two: some limited analysis was undertaken around sector specific issues. Through linking in with local judiciary processes and taking a problem-led approach, structural and communication issues within the existing donor programme (JPIP) were identified. Examples of the kinds of analyses that could be undertaken are: technical analysis, political economy analysis; potential to utilise external actors to make a difference and value for money analysis (Manuel, 2016).

Phase three: finding an entry point that a relevant organisation is concerned about. The ADR retreat provided an opportunity to apply a problem-oriented analysis of the needs of the judiciary. This led to meetings with the World Bank and the identification of a further entry-point problem relating to World Bank low-project fund disbursement levels and need for the restructuring of the project. This phase may also utilise Thinking and Working Politically (TWP), working with or around constraints created by political or administrative variables (Manuel, 2016).

Phase four: growing the engagement organically through LASER's ongoing work with the Judiciary on various projects (for example, the court annexed mediation pilot project). This led to further iterations of interventions as the engagement dealt with constraints in political and administrative incentives. This process built towards the launching of the mediation pilot. These engagements expanded into simultaneous support to the JPIP team to refocus the project onto locally defined problems while still within the scope of the donor's (World Bank) own engagement framework (LASER, 2015).

Phase five: consider the scope of the donor programming, whilst stressing creative thinking about the shape of the programme. LASER supported the donor in restructuring JPIP from an input based, to an output focussed approach, with a restructured project framework incorporating PDIA characteristics.

Phase six: the programme was reconceptualised to incorporate an output focussed programme.

Phase seven: programme implementation and maintenance of programme flexibility is needed with the changing context in which JPIP is implemented, including the political context. LASER continued to support the programme through PDIA to ensure it continues to be output focussed and adaptive to user needs through maximum flexibility.

Key lessons and best practices

Manuel (2016, p.6) notes that there are an increasing number of case studies providing lessons where PDIA has delivered real change, even in difficult environments, involving small scale investments².

Some key lessons are highlighted below:

Designing the intervention

The design phase using the hourglass method to institutional reform entails a much longer time period than standard donor projects. The design phase is typically much longer than other types of development interventions (typically between 6 and 12 months). This phase entails 'learning by doing' and problem deconstruction. During this phase local and international development practitioners detected problems and facilitated local actors to find appropriate solutions. The design phase offered an opportunity to test assumptions and to identify political economy variables, and to take 'small bets' on potential solutions and, following this, make adjustments of potential solutions (iterate) before they were locked in. In this phase, LASER project funding was not offered upfront. Rather, the focus was on facilitation, problem solving and improving functionality.

The figure below highlights, contrasting approaches used by the hourglass, PDIA method and conventional approaches to institutional reform.

² For country examples, refer to Manuel 2015. LASER, First synthesis paper, DFID Legal Assistance for Economic Reform Programme. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/591c4fd940f0b63e0800002e/laser-first-synthesis-paper-investment-climate-reform-doing-it-differently.pdf>

Figure 5: Differences between the hourglass approach and conventional approaches

	Hourglass approach to institutional reform	Conventional approach to institutional reform
Design process	Long design process of 'learning by doing' to gain an understanding of the system	Design undertaken before programme form has crystallised during design missions using analysis/diagnostic tools or Design undertaken after programme form has crystallised
	Design is a process of discovery – learn by doing	Design is a process of analysis e.g. needs analysis tools and processes
Entry point	Start with a problem the institution cares about	Start with your analysis of the problem and then try to get buy in
Contractor skills	Contractors need facilitation/soft skills	Contractors need technical skills
Convening power	Convening power lies with a relevant organisation able to bring about change in the institutional framework (normally a state ministry, department of agency, or the Judiciary)	Convening power lies with the donor/donor programme which has its own institutional identity
Approach	Supports reform	Leads reform e.g. by convening coalitions of reform
	Oblique/indirect/ seeks to join the dots	Direct - clear goals and direction of travel
	Operates under the radar	Donor/programme has clear institutional presence and convening power
	No money on the table during design phase	Money is on the table – explicitly/implicitly

Source: LASER. Second Synthesis Paper. Delivering institutional reform at scale: Problem-driven approaches supported by adaptive management. Manuel, C. 2016, p.10 reproduced under [Open Government Licence v3.0](#),

Delivery, procurement and contracting

In more traditional approaches to institutional reform, the design work is contracted out first and once finalised the implementation phase is separately contracted (Manuel, 2016). This standard method is not well adapted to the hourglass approach for various reasons. Firstly, the long gap between the finalisation and the beginning of the implementation phases may negatively affect the relationships (between the development practitioner and local actors) that have been built up and, the context of the intervention may also have changed, making the design less effective. Manuel (2016), suggests that difficulties with the standard approach is that contracting funds have already been agreed to and this can distort the relationships and incentives. This aspect, in and of itself, can change the political economy of the intervention. A top-down, pre-packaged solution means that money and service supplier have been decided upon before the challenges identified by people working within the organisation have been explored properly (i.e., in the design phase of the intervention), and local solutions to these problems have been identified.

An approach to contracting that does not 'front-load' funds for packaged solutions, but rather one that is iterative and outputs-based (learning by doing), is particularly relevant in fragile state contexts involving highly political problems. A key aspect in the hourglass approach to contracting is the overlap of activities between scoping/design phases and implementation (see downward arrows on the left-hand side of hourglass figure 4 above). Manuel (2016) notes that

one possibility is for the team responsible for the initial work on the design of the intervention to also be included in bids for the implementation work. Wild et al. (2017) also suggest a flexible approach to contracting, entailing not completely specifying how much will be paid for what. In a flexible planning approach exemplified by PDIA a 'relational model' can be applied which defines the parameters and terms of the relationship instead of prespecifying all the anticipated deliverables as often occurs in a traditional development project (p.25).

Monitoring and Evaluation

The practical implementation intervention experiences in a variety of different projects and reform programmes (for example STAAC, 2021, 2020 and Laser 2015 and 2016); indicate that a key component in the monitoring and evaluation of PDIA development interventions is to have active learning mechanisms and iterative feedback loops. This can be described as “a problem driven, stepwise reform process” that results in concrete behaviour change within public bodies (Andrews et al., 2012, p.15). Based on their experiences rapid feedback loops with results from real-world experimentation (solutions) permits 'learnings' from many of these small-step interventions. Lessons are immediately incorporated into design discussions about change (Andrews et al., 2012). This approach differs from standard monitoring and evaluation approaches which are linear and only allow 'lessons' at the end of projects (Andrews et al, 2012). In the LASER interventions, to accommodate principles of flexibility in monitoring and evaluation, a broad overarching log frame was developed. Within this 'nested' log frames with more specific indicators, that are frequently reviewed and updated can be developed (Manuel, 2016). Log frames are meant to be changed/adapted frequently during the course of the intervention. This accommodates short planning cycles, designed for a problem driven adaptive approach where activities are changed on an iterative basis during the life of a programme. Outcome indicators are developed to accommodate stories of significant change to be reported retrospectively, without specifying in advance what these change indicators are meant to be. A Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL) approach was therefore embedded into programme management with ongoing learning loops as the programme evolved.

4. Large scale programming and use of PDIA in multi-donor Trust Fund Programmes and Projects

PDIA in the multi-donor trust fund for Justice Sector support in Serbia

Multi donor trust funds are aid financing mechanisms which pool resources in a trust. Resources are administered by a third party for distribution to achieve the priorities of a recipient country. Its funds are independently managed rather than being consolidated by a single donor (Barakut et al., 2012). A Multi donor Trust Fund for Justice support (MDTF-JSS) was established in 2009 to strengthen the justice sector in the Republic of Serbia in order to assist its integration into the European Union. The MDTF-JSS aims to improve aid effectiveness and donor coordination across the sector through a coordinated donor work programme (MDTF-JSS, 2015).

Verheijen (2017) identifies seven lessons of the intervention which have been critical to its success:

- The MDTF is fully integrated into a dynamic country portfolio and the judicial team worked with teams from various portfolios including: Finance and Markets, Trade and Competitiveness, Public Administration and the IFC on insolvency and business climate reform. In addition, the World Bank's involvement in the project and its expertise with investment climate reform provides key advantages which support judicial performance interventions (Verheijen, 2017).
- The MDTF engages with 10 different national stakeholders across the justice sector. These include: the ministries of courts, prosecutors, police, civil society organisations and training institutes.
- Through the pooling of contributions of donors, the impact of the MDTF is exponentially increased. Dialogue with the client is more detailed and focussed on reform because the client engages with one team, rather than an assembly of different projects, preferences and reporting arrangements characteristic of multiple donors. The costs of project implementation is also lower and the World Bank absorbs the burden of coordinating multiple donors.
- The flexibility offered by the PDIA approach allowed the intervention to be able to adjust to the changing political context. For example, after the trust fund was set up, the judiciary underwent significant changes, with divisive judicial reforms and the sacking of court officials. This caused a political storm, and the sector was rendered dysfunctional. In response to this the task team was able to continue its work by identifying practical reform opportunities in operational spaces where it was easier to intervene, until the political instability diminished. Once the situation became more stable, the intervention team was able to work more broadly across the sector, to include the Ministry of Justice but also judges, prosecutors, legal professional bodies and civil society organisations. Whilst political turbulence within the Judicial services was being experienced, the MDTF was able to switch its emphasis through its analytic work which helped Serbia prepare for accession to the EU. This foundational work, including the forming of relationships enabled the MDTF to respond quickly when the opportunities presented themselves.
- In the Serbian intervention, interagency coordination was achieved, and lessons learned were scaled up with other agencies across the judicial sector. A positive spinoff of this approach was the fostering of competition among other agencies. When one agency began to see progress and the benefits of reforms others also wanted to reap the same spinoffs and this is the way some of MDTF's most effective work was replicated and scaled up creating a virtuous cycle. The principles of continual improvement were also applied to the trust itself. For example, management committee meetings where donors and beneficiaries were asked to provide suggestions, were fed into the evolution of the programme and this has become a flexible and responsive vehicle.
- The intervention team also ensures that the donors are satisfied with the MDTF's work. For example, in 2017 the World Bank rated as 'highly satisfactory' implementation of Bank components of the programme. This rating resulted from the fast pace of disbursements, and progress being made against the results framework (World Bank, 2018)

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