RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE PAPER 10

BRIDGING LEARNING AND ACTION: HOW DID CLARISSA'S PARTICIPATORY ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT APPROACH FOSTER INNOVATION, EFFECTIVENESS, AND STAKEHOLDER EMPOWERMENT?

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ABOUT THIS RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE PAPER

Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia (CLARISSA) is an evidence and innovation-generation programme funded by the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), responding to the challenge of the worst forms of child labour (WFCL) in Bangladesh and Nepal. It is a challenge characterised by a poor understanding of its drivers and a lack of evidence on what works to combat it. To handle such fundamental uncertainty, the programme adopts a child-centric and participatory action research approach, which is supported by an adaptive management model to respond better to challenges and opportunities.

From its inception, the programme needed to navigate shocks and challenges, such as Covid-19 lockdowns, political upheaval, and sustained budget cuts, which put its capacity to learn and evolve to the test. This paper shares insights emerging from evaluating CLARISSA's participatory adaptive management (PAM) practices, connecting them with current discussions on adaptive management. It provides an in-depth evaluation of CLARISSA's PAM approach, exploring how adaptive strategies were implemented and evolved throughout the programme's life cycle. Multiple cases of adaptation and misadaptation were selected and analysed through a series of in-depth interviews and review of programme documentation, allowing us to assess whether and how the adaptive management practices have been operationalised, the degree to which they led to enhanced decision-making and effectiveness, and their empowering effect on children and other programme stakeholders. Through conceptual analysis and real-world examples, the paper examines the key stages and critical dimensions of PAM, conveying the complexities and dynamism of adaptive management in development work, while highlighting both the successes and challenges encountered in operationalising PAM within CLARISSA.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AAR after-action review

AES adult entertainment sector

CLARISSA Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia

CSO civil society organisation

FCDO Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office

IDS Institute of Development Studies

M&E monitoring and evaluation

MEL monitoring, evaluation, and learning

NGO non-governmental organisation

PAM participatory adaptive management

PAR participatory action research

SP+ social protection-plus

WFCL worst forms of child labour

ASSESSING THE QUALITY OF CLARISSA'S EVIDENCE IN THIS REPORT

The Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia (CLARISSA) programme is committed to producing high-quality evidence. CLARISSA has developed criteria to assess the quality of its evidence from its evaluation research along five dimensions: transparency, triangulation, representativeness, uniqueness, and plausibility.

A summary of these dimensions is included in Table 1. A separate report describes the difference in a 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 assessment for each dimension (CLARISSA 2023). The lead authors of this report assessed each dimension and Table 1 documents their reasoning behind each assessment.

Table 1: Quality of evidence in this paper

Dimension	1	2	3	4	5	Reasoning behind the assessment
Transparency is about being open about where evidence for the change narrative comes from. Openness refers to who collected the data, who it was collected from and how it was collected, as well as how this was driven by a robust evaluation design.				●		There is a clear line of sight to the data that is mostly recoverable. The theory-based design that was used to inquire into adaptive management is robust and allows for methodological transparency. However, the writing style and need to guarantee anonymity of programme members interviewed has produced a compelling narrative but does not allow for full view of the analytical process undertaken to reach all conclusions.
Triangulation relates to use of multiple methods to build a nuanced understanding of change in complex systems, theoretical triangulation by working with multiple theories, and using data from different sources and lines of evidence.					●	The data that underpins the findings is based on an extensive review of more than 100 programme documents and 15 in-depth interviews of programme staff from all partner organisations, levels of involvement (from ground to country to global), and across all programme teams. The analysis draws on multiple theoretical frameworks.
Representativeness is defined based on the participatory ethos of CLARISSA. It refers to the extent to which the voices of those affected by an issue are central in the evidence that is presented, and how they have participated in different parts of the process that has generated the evidence (design, data-gathering, analysis, presenting).		●				Data was not directly collected from programme participants (children or other stakeholders); however, their views were included within programme documents reviewed, such as reflection sessions held with participants of the action research groups. These spaces were co-owned by participants. Data was directly collected from programme staff, who were participants of this evaluation; however, they were not involved in the analysis of this data due to the need to maintain high levels of confidentiality.

Table 1: Quality of evidence in this paper (cont.)

Dimension	1	2	3	4	5	Reasoning behind the assessment
Uniqueness is about the level of confidence we have in our proposed narrative of the actual contribution of the programme. It requires detailed and nuanced explanation of the link between the intervention and the outcome, identifying whether there is distinctiveness of effect and by trying to rule out other factors that may have caused the outcome.				●		The evaluation presented in the report was focused specifically on how the CLARISSA programme implemented its participatory adaptive management approach and what this contributed to. The evidence generated, therefore, is specific to the programme's journey of adaptive management providing nuanced understanding of a combination of causal factors. The high level of complexity and the multiple institutional, internal, and external dynamics involved in the adaptive processes over five years mean we cannot rule out all alternative explanations in full.
Plausibility The narrative of change described in the evaluation should provide a clear and logical thread that follows the data.					●	The theory-based approach to the evaluation and the high levels of triangulation and uniqueness (see above) provide for a high level of plausibility in the conclusions drawn about how the implementation of the adaptive management approach contributed to use of learning and programme effectiveness over time.

Source: Authors' own. Created using project data.

Section 1:

BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO CLARISSA

1 BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO CLARISSA

CLARISSA (Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia) is a large-scale participatory action research (PAR)[1] programme that aims to: (1) generate evidence on the underlying dynamics driving the worst forms of child labour (WFCL) in selected supply chains in Bangladesh and Nepal;[2] (2) promote effective multi-stakeholder innovative actions to tackle the drivers of WFCL and mitigate their worst effects (Burns, Apgar and Raw 2021); and (3) experiment with innovative social protection interventions that combine cash transfers to families with community-strengthening work (Roelen *et al*. 2023). CLARISSA was initiated in 2018 as a hybrid research and intervention programme with funding from the United Kingdom (UK) Foreign, Commonwealth &

Development Office (FCDO), and was due to end in March 2024 (Apgar *et al*. 2022).

As a participatory, adaptive, and child-centric programme, CLARISSA works directly with children and other relevant stakeholders (such as parents, business owners, and policymakers) to generate and analyse evidence and, subsequently, to develop innovative actions, by following a systemic and participatory action research process that constitutes CLARISSA's core implementation modality. According to CLARISSA's theory of change (see Figure 1), such a participatory approach is required because of the lack of evidence around what drives children into harmful work and the poor understanding

Figure 1: Programme-wide theory of change

Source: Apgar *et al*. (2022), CC BY 4.0.
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1   PAR is a process of inquiry and action that involves participants working together to identify their own challenges and to develop and take actions in response to them.
2   In Dhaka, Bangladesh, the programme focuses on the leather sector, and in Kathmandu, Nepal, on the adult entertainment sector (AES). The programme originally planned to work in Myanmar too, but due to a reduction in FCDO funding in 2019, coupled with the military coup in February 2021, Myanmar activities were discontinued.

of which interventions work to reduce WFCL (Apgar and Burns 2021; Oosterhoff *et al*. 2018).

In each country 400–405 life stories were collected and analysed by children themselves, to identify key causal dynamics of child labour to which they can respond (Sayem *et al*. 2023; Karki *et al*. 2022). Based on this and other analysis, 26 action research groups were started,[3] each aiming to intervene around particular causal pathways and their associated entry points for action. These groups were typically composed of 12–16 members, who met regularly for around 18 months and received support to gather additional evidence related to the causal dynamics they were inquiring into, and were encouraged to come up with their own innovative actions, intended to be tested and refined through a series of iterations (Apgar and Burns 2021). Later, as their understanding of the issues grew, the children and other stakeholders were supported to undertake their own advocacy and engagement activities. The PAR approach allows for the emergent adjustment of groups' activities, providing flexibility to react to all kinds of challenges and to make the most of emerging opportunities.

In CLARISSA, moreover, this adaptive ethos was extended to the overall programming and implementation efforts. The participatory adaptive management (PAM) approach facilitates systematic and continuous learning by the entire CLARISSA team, resulting from: (1) changes in the contexts in which the programme operates; (2) the appropriateness and effectiveness of programme actions; and (3) real-life challenges faced by the implementing teams. This learning is then used to improve the programme's plans, methodologies, and actions, allowing it to deliver value more effectively.

The programme is led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in coordination with a consortium of international partners, their national partner organisations, as well as a series of community grass-roots partners, which collaborated to deliver the various functions required by the programme. Each partner brought a unique historical background, different areas of expertise, and distinctive organisational cultures, structures, and procedures to the programme. Figure 2 shows the main partners involved in CLARISSA, and how they coordinated their work across different scales, from engaging with participants and grass-roots community

partners in PAR processes to providing accountability to the donor. The figure exposes the degree of organisational complexity involved, especially considering that, along the lifespan of the programme, significant changes necessarily affected partners, and many staff members left the programme.

Previous CLARISSA publications have detailed the programme's overarching design and methodology (Burns *et al*. 2021), as well as the evaluation design used to assess its different components (Apgar *et al*. 2022). This research and evidence paper is a part of that evaluative effort, and focuses on the programme's experience with PAM, providing a first-hand account of how the programme adapted through its different phases. The main audience for this paper includes researchers, development practitioners, and funders looking to enhance their adaptive management performance by learning from the best and most troubled parts of CLARISSA's journey of blending PAR with PAM.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 describes the evaluation's objectives and methodological approach, which is based on the examination of a series of case studies developed through an extensive documentation review and in-depth interviews with programme staff. Section 3 provides a narrative account of CLARISSA's journey by connecting multiple stories of its adaptations, and reflecting on its most important characteristics, thus allowing the reader to become familiar both with CLARISSA and the nature of its PAM approach. Section 4 starts to respond to the evaluation questions, reflecting on: how the PAM element was operationalised in practice; how the enhanced evidence-generation and learning influenced decision-making and the effectiveness of the programme; and, finally, how PAM contributed to strengthening children's and other programme stakeholders' capacity to influence programmatic decision-making in CLARISSA. This section links insights from the evaluation with current debates from the literature, to discuss key factors and tensions, and the potentials and challenges associated with PAM approaches. Finally, section 5 summarises key takeaways from the evaluation, and reflects on its implications for others willing to adopt PAM for their initiatives.

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3   Most of the action research groups were formed by children affected by WFCL, but there were some whose participants were business owners. Those were not part of the original plan but emerged as a possibility after conducting research on supply chains.

Figure 2: CLARISSA's organisational constellation

Main partners, team sizes and effort level

Partner type	Partner name	Team / # FTE
Bangladesh country partners	Terre des hommes Bangladesh	14 / 14
	Grambangla Unnayan Committee	5 / 5
	Dhaka Ahsania Mission	1 / 1
	BRAC Institute for Governance & Development	2 /0.8
Nepal country partners	Voice of Children	11 / 11
	CWISH	6 / 5.5
	Terre des hommes Nepal	1 / 1
International partners	Consortium for Street Children	6 / 3
	Terre des hommes Foundation	2 / 1
	ChildHope	3 / 2
Programme lead	Institute of Development Studies	17 / 9
Donor	FCDO (UK)	1 / 0.1

Layers of work and decision-making, coordination streams and partners' involvement focus
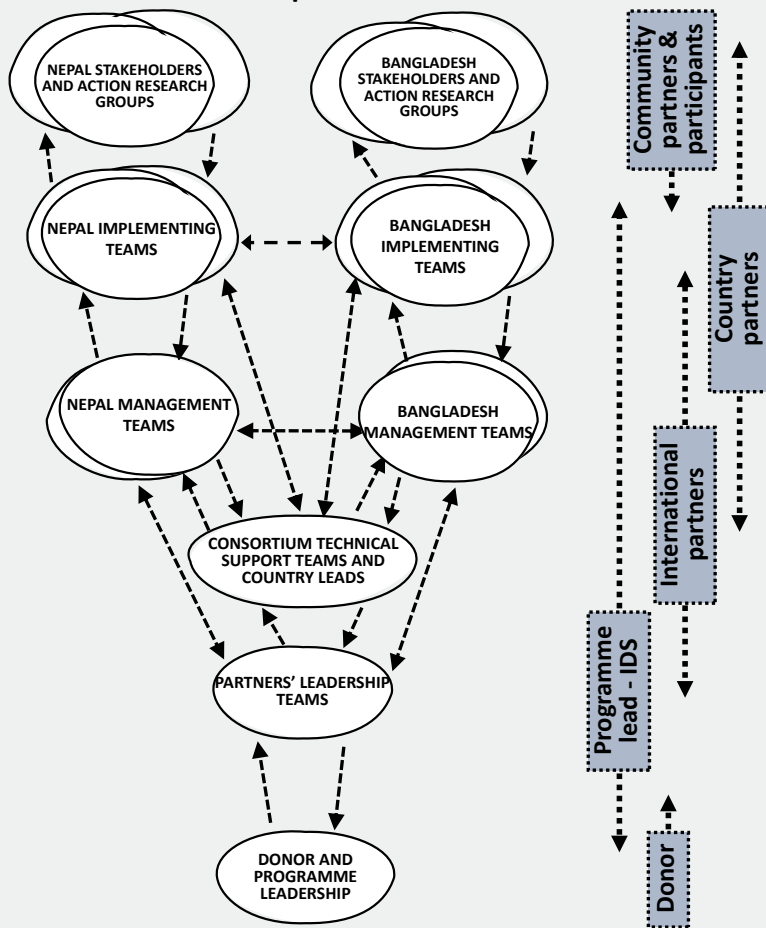
Source: Authors' own.

Section 2:

EVALUATING CLARISSA'S PARTICIPATORY ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT APPROACH

2 EVALUATING CLARISSA'S PARTICIPATORY ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT APPROACH

Given the intricate nature of WFCL and the insufficient evidence on how to address the system challenge, one of CLARISSA's central assumptions is that traditional linear programming modalities that emphasise 'achieving predefined results' would not be fit for purpose. Instead, as mentioned earlier, CLARISSA proposes that a participatory, child-centred and learning-oriented approach is required to generate effective innovations and to regularly adjust the programme plans and actions. CLARISSA's PAM approach engages key stakeholders – including children, their parents, business owners, and the local teams directly interacting with them – in processes that support learning and inform programmatic decision-making (Apgar *et al*. 2020).

The concept of adaptive management originated in the field of natural resource management and environmental policy. It is a management approach that recognises the complexity and uncertainty of ecosystems and aims to address these challenges by iteratively adjusting strategies based on ongoing monitoring and learning (Holling 1978). In the context of international development, adaptive management refers to a systematic and deliberate approach to 'learning by doing' that integrates planning, implementing, monitoring, and reflection and learning activities in a continuous improvement cycle, with the aim to learn about complex systems while making attempts to influence them (Prieto Martín, Apgar and Hernandez 2020). Such an approach is usually guided by an explicit theory of change that includes the intervention's main assumptions and inspires its learning agenda. If we understand development as a process of 'good change' or improvement (Chambers 1997), then adaptive management could be seen as a 'meta-process' that applies the principles of development to development programmes themselves: it seeks to enhance development initiatives, making them more effective and responsive within their operational lifespan.

Adaptive management cannot be considered a novel concept in the development field. Given the complexity and dynamicity of the contexts where international

development efforts take place, the multiplicity of stakeholders involved, and the ambitious and challenging aims they frequently pursue, experimental, participatory, and learning-oriented approaches to planning and implementation of development projects have been advocated as a must for many decades, under different guises and names (see, for example, Chambers 1974; Hirschman 1967). More than 40 years ago, Dennis Rondinelli, a recognised development scholar, argued that 'rather than providing a blueprint for action, planning should facilitate continuous learning and interaction, allowing... to readjust and modify programs and projects as they learn more about the conditions with which they are trying to cope' (Rondinelli 1983: 18).

The general adaptive management cycle, depicted in Figure 3, illustrates the emerging nature of action plans, emphasising the need for ongoing review and incremental development. This figure also shows how participatory forms of adaptive management demand the intentional development of stakeholders' capacity for structured reflection, as well as enhanced monitoring and data-management capabilities to support learning.

Figure 3: The participatory adaptive management process
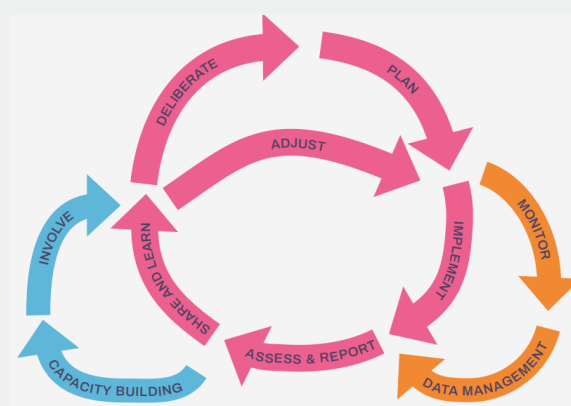
Source: Authors' own, adapted from Vugteveen *et al*. (2015), CC BY-NC 4.0.

2.1 ADAPTIVE LAYERS AND TRUST-ENHANCING FLOWS

Furthermore, adaptive management is used simultaneously at the multiple levels on which a programme operates: from the frontline operations that engage with the intervention's participants and stakeholders (adaptive delivery), through various levels of programme management at the location, country, and consortium scales (adaptive programming), to the sponsoring and strategising efforts performed in coordination with the funders, which create an enabling environment that authorises adaptions to happen on all the other layers (adaptive governance).

Table 2 and Figure 4 summarise the **main characteristics and activities** associated with these three levels of adaptive management, and how they mutually support each other through the **trust-enhancing loops**, represented in Figure 4 with blue and green arrows. These loops enable awareness and accountability to flow to the higher management levels and, reciprocally, channel support and resources toward the more operational layers. Figure 4 also indicates, finally, the **broad correspondence between the adaptive management layers and the multiple organisational scales** at which CLARISSA works, meaning that (for example) implementing teams and participants are mostly involved in the adaptive delivery layer, while the partners'

leadership teams focus their contributions at the adaptive delivery and adaptive governance layers.

Many key practices involved in PAR – such as the iterative and experimental planning, production of detailed documentation, use of reflection and learning events, and the adaptation of relevant aspects of the programme – are expected to occur across all layers, albeit at different paces. For example, although team reflection and course corrections at the delivery layer could happen continuously, reflection and adaptation at the programming layer would occur at set intervals, such as twice a year. In contrast, at the governance layer, this could be aligned with the annual reporting and accountability schedule with the funder.

Adaptive management approaches are themselves rather complex and cannot be easily conveyed. Although there are growing attempts to provide practical guidance on adaptive management (DT Global 2022; Ross *et al*. 2021; Teskey and Tyrrel 2021; Byom *et al*. 2020), its application still requires significant methodological tinkering to adjust general principles and practices to the particular programme, team, and context. This makes the evaluation of adaptive management programmes difficult. There are no standardised approaches for evaluating adaptive capacity or its effects on programme effectiveness (Gray and Carl 2022; Honig 2019, 2020; Bridges and Woolcock 2019) and existing case studies

Table 2: Adaptive management layers

Adaptive delivery	**Methods and activities that adapt programme delivery on the 'front line'**, which rely on field teams applying local evidence, emotional intelligence, and curiosity to stay nimble and flexible in the face of ever-changing conditions. Adaptive delivery requires an iterative process of engagement and learning for rapid adjustment of approaches.
Adaptive programming	**Structured learning processes and practices supported by the programme's monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) system**, which are headed by programme managers and country leadership. Cycles of iterative learning fit to regular evaluation moments to reflect and decide on what needs to be introduced, continued, changed, or stopped. In-depth analysis allows to reflect on programme effectiveness and changes in context and to make decisions for responding.
Adaptive governance	**Provides the enabling and authoritative environment for adaptive management**, which includes contractual arrangements with donors that allow for flexibility and adaptation, including the allocation of the budget. This level navigates the tensions between the delivery of predefined results and upward and downward accountability, supporting strategic learning that might demand shifting priorities and focus.

Source: Authors' own, based on Apgar *et al*. (2022).

Figure 4: Participatory adaptive management layers and the CLARISSA consortium's constellation
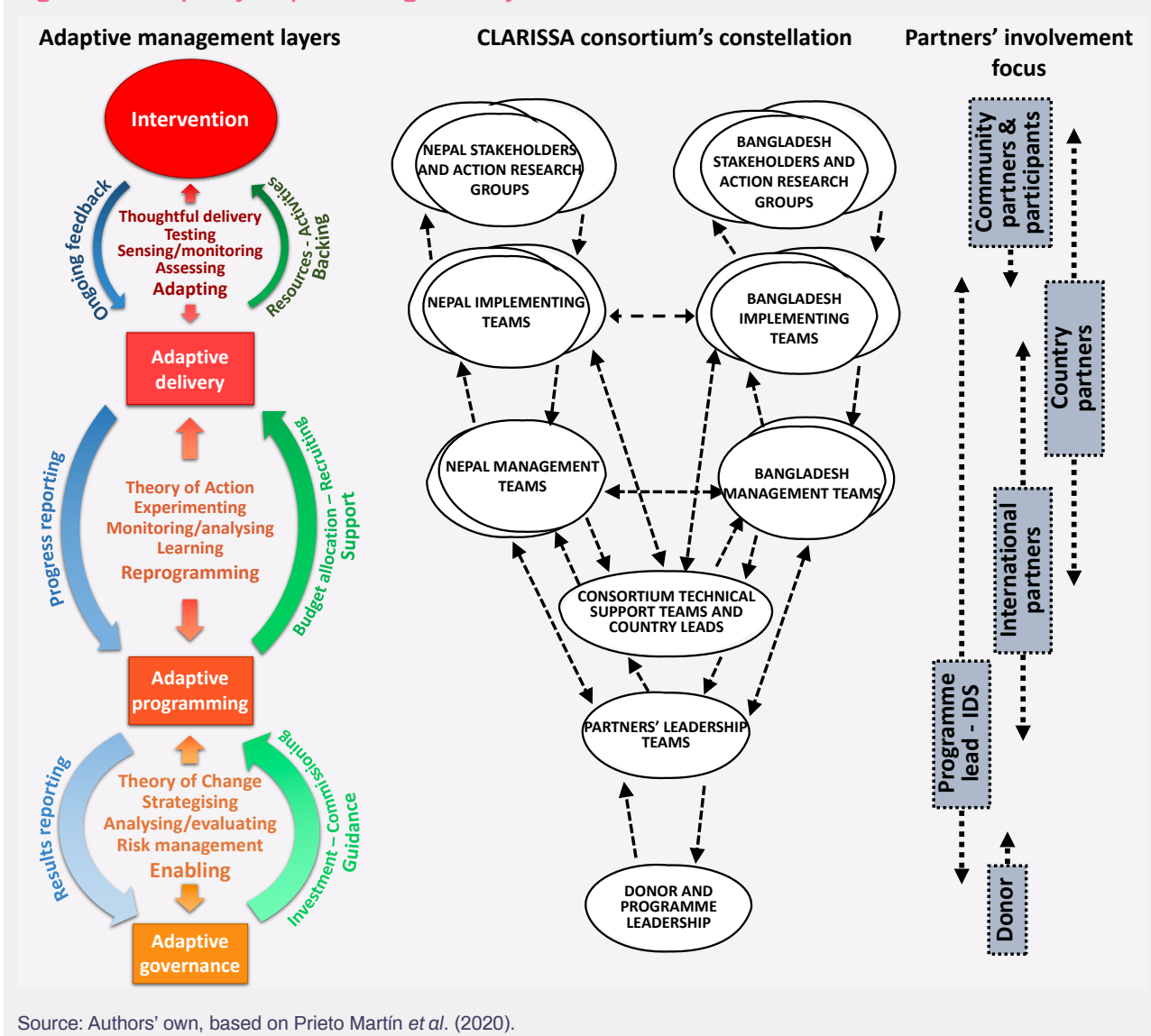
Source: Authors' own, based on Prieto Martín *et al.* (2020).

and evaluations remain inconclusive. As a result, the convenience of using more flexible and trust-based programming modalities to complement, enhance, or even replace traditional linear approaches remains contested. Against this backdrop of methodological uncertainty, the following subsections outline the main objectives and methodological design established for CLARISSA's PAM evaluation, to allow the reader to better assess the insights emerging from this paper.

2.2 EVALUATION OBJECTIVES

The evaluation design of the programme (see Apgar *et al*. 2022) details how its PAM approach is theorised to increase programme effectiveness (Figure 5). In essence: the intensified knowledge and evidence generated by all components of the programme and, particularly, through participatory activities with children and stakeholders as part of the PAR (I in the figure) are periodically channelled into regular reflection and learning events happening at the delivery, programming, and governance layers (II in the figure). These events facilitate in-depth analysis of the programme's effectiveness and the implications of changes in its operating environment (III). This participatory action learning, in turn, improves the planning and implementation of operational, tactical, and strategic aspects of the programme. The cumulative impact of these timely and evidence-informed adaptations throughout the programme's lifespan enhances subsequent rounds of action learning and evidence-generation, while contributing to increasing the effectiveness and long-term impact of the programme (IV).

The **focus of the evaluation lies within the area highlighted as a 'causal hotspot'**,[4] exploring how children and other stakeholders influence learning and decision-making at the delivery and programming levels. It also examines how the tactical and operational changes in activities contribute to improving the programme's effectiveness. Considerations of the adaptive governance layer and how institutional and strategic programmatic improvements paved the way for agility at the lower levels are integral to the analysis.

The primary evaluation questions are as follows:

- **How has the participatory adaptive management design been operationalised in practice, and what challenges were faced and overcome?**

- **What types of enhanced evidence-generation and learning have resulted from these practices, and how have they influenced programme decision-making and effectiveness?**

- **Did the participatory engagement of children and other stakeholders in learning and adaptation processes allow them to significantly influence decision-making?**

By addressing these questions, the intention is to contribute practically and empirically to ongoing debates around adaptive management theory and practice. Many development practitioners still see adaptive management as a very challenging and divergent approach to

Figure 5: Theory of change of CLARISSA's participatory adaptive management approach
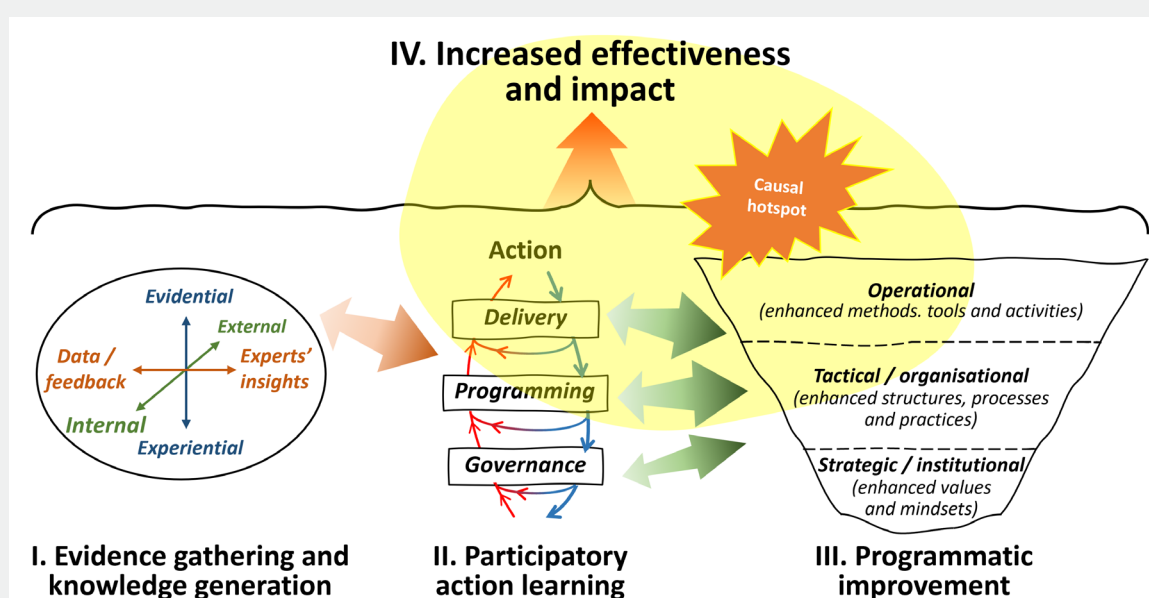
Source: Authors' own, based on Apgar *et al*. (2022) and Prieto Martín *et al*. (2020).

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4   A causal hotspot is a place in the theory of change where evidence is contested or where there is a gap in evidence, and where there is most value in undertaking evaluation to contribute to theory and practice (Apgar and Ton 2021).

programming that is only applicable for very special cases; others, more cynically, may understand it to be just another 'international development fad' with little value to offer or prospects to stick around – something they may just 'fake' for a while before returning to business as usual (Aston 2022; DT Global 2022). Our analysis of CLARISSA's experience could precisely contribute to 'demystifying' adaptive management and show how some degree of adaptiveness is relevant, and attainable, in most interventions. Plenty of what we observed in CLARISSA related to that very accessible characterisation of adaptive management as a form of 'thoughtful and curious rationality' that Holling (1978: 136) made when he first proposed the term in the context of environmental management, referring to it as 'not really much more than common sense… [including] all efforts to use information from the first stages to adapt the final outcome to greater advantage'.[5] The application of common sense in development interventions certainly demands a degree of the traditional, upfront design and planning, but it should be based on an acceptance of underlying uncertainties and an explicit recognition of the 'benefits derived from increasing information on unknown or partially known… effects' (Holling 1978: 20). This, in turn, requires some degree of adaptive capacity to be able to recognise and respond to emergent issues and opportunities, reorienting 'the perspective from one of assumed certainty to one of prepared responsiveness' (Holling 1978: 137). Studying the key tensions experienced within CLARISSA's PAM efforts – particularly those rarely mentioned in the literature – could help deepen and expand the current understanding of adaptive management.

2.3 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

CLARISSA's PAM evaluation is based on the analysis of a series of adaptation cases where programme-generated learning influenced decision-making, along with cases of failures to do so.[6] Interesting cases were identified through an extensive review of existing programme documentation and a few informal interviews. The documentation consulted included: papers, reports, blogposts, training materials, documentation

from the PAR groups, workshop reports (**particularly after-action review (AAR) workshops performed at the consortium, country, and team levels**), Miro boards, annual reports, bulletins, newsletters, meeting minutes, change requests, decision logs, data worksheets, and monitoring tools, among others. Hundreds of documents were scanned as part of the review, and 93 were analysed in detail.

The case studies spanned adaptive governance, adaptive programming, and adaptive delivery layers across both countries of operation (Bangladesh and Nepal), providing a comprehensive representation of learning, adaptation, and their associated challenges. We sought cases where learning seemed absent or was not transformed into action, to mitigate potential team bias towards positive stories.

The case studies were developed through a series of interviews with key staff and representatives of organisations involved in the programme. The interviews explored the causal processes involved in learning and adaptation, from gaining awareness of issues, through the various flows of communication, reflection, and learning that followed, to its translation into programmatic decision-making, while also considering its contribution to the programme's effectiveness and the challenges or energy-draining that hindered the materialisation of learning, debilitating action, or harming the sustainability of the new approaches. Special consideration was given to whose voices were heard throughout the learning and decision-making processes, and the pathways available to different actors to exercise agency.

In total, 15 in-depth interviews were conducted in May and June 2023, with an assortment of interviewees who, in addition to their relationship with the cases, would be able to provide distinct perspectives on the cases and, more generally, on CLARISSA's PAM approach. Interviewees included people from various partner organisations and different countries playing different roles (from programme, partner, and country leadership, through technical and methodological support, to the facilitators and documenters of the PAR work with children), relative newcomers to the programme and those involved from its start, different levels of

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5   Note that this could more generally refer to the pragmatic application of the 'scientific method' – a process of objectively establishing facts through testing and experimentation – to guide interventions as they unfold.

6   Most of the evaluation tasks were conducted by the first author of this report (Pedro Prieto Martín), supported by the programme's MEL team. Pedro was selected because of his expertise in adaptive management, built through work on multiple initiatives funded by organisations including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the UK's FCDO, and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). Although Pedro is a researcher at IDS, he was not deeply involved in the programme until he started the evaluation of the PAM component.

involvement in CLARISSA (full time vs partial dedication), as well as different genders.

Focusing on a few adaptation cases necessarily provides an incomplete account of the programme, because of the many more adaptations that happened that we were not able to investigate in detail. However, we are confident that our collection of cases provides a good enough representation of the kind of adaptations happening at different moments and levels within the programme. During the interviews, moreover, we allowed and encouraged cases to be raised that were not originally on our list, and some of the more salient were later analysed in-depth.

Interviews were transcribed and their contents tagged and, more generally, scrutinised for insights. The evidence basis for the evaluation was constructed by combining insights from the interviews with those arising from the programme documentation review. The analytical framework on key adaptive management, which provided the basis for the evaluation's theory of change (shown in Figure 5) (Prieto Martín *et al*. 2020) supported our initial analysis too, helping us to navigate the links between evidence-generation, action learning, programmatic improvement, and impact. The evaluation also considered ideas on enabling factors for adaptive management and core adaptive capabilities from the literature (Barnes and Lonsdale 2023; Apgar *et al*. 2022; Gray and Carl 2022) and generally drew upon a broad spectrum of recent adaptive management literature, integrating overarching themes and insights from across the field to inform our analysis.

To enhance the readability and coherence of the report, the main text does not include differentiated verbatim quotes from interviewees, nor does it explicitly indicate sources with phrases such as 'as described by one interviewee...'. It is important to note, however, that all factual and descriptive data presented was derived from the interviews and the documentation review, with the analysis and interpretation being the responsibility of the evaluation authors. Nonetheless, a significant portion of the report's text incorporates statements from interviewees, with an effort made to preserve their original wording as much as possible. This approach ensures that the report is both accessible and accurately represents the perspectives and insights gathered during the evaluation process.

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Section 3:

CLARISSA'S STORIES OF ADAPTATION

3 CLARISSA'S STORIES OF ADAPTATION

This section provides a first glimpse of CLARISSA's progression, allowing the reader to become familiar with the programme, the challenges it faced, and the kind of adaptations it required. The section explores, in the first place, the trajectory of the programme across its different phases: from its inception in the proposal writing phase, through the co-generation, set-up and implementation phases, to the final closure activities, which are happening at the moment of writing. It does so through a collection of stories of adaptation that give a sense of the programme's resilience in the face of unforeseen challenges, its capacity to learn and evolve, and the empowering effect it has had on its stakeholders. The stories set the scene for the evaluation, and are complemented by a deep-dive in one of the cases to show how each of the adaptation processes is in itself complex and involves intricate patterns of action and exchange by multiple actors. This understanding provides the basis for subsequent reflections on the general characteristics of adaptations in programmes like CLARISSA.

3.1 A BRIEF STORY OF CLARISSA THROUGH ITS ADAPTATIONS

Figure 6 gives an overview of the adaptation cases, situating them horizontally over the timeline of the programme, and indicating vertically which layers across the adaptive governance, adaptive programming, and adaptive delivery continuum were most impacted and, correspondingly, the types of partners involved. The colour of the hexagons refers to whether the adaptation resulted from external shocks (such as Covid-19, or the imposition of budget cuts by the funder, coloured in red/darker shade) or as a response to evaluative learning from within the programme (coloured in blue/lighter shade). The hexagons' length mostly refers to the recognition of the challenge or opportunity, initial awareness-raising and evidence-generation activities, early collective reflection and decision-making, and the first introduction of adaptive measures. Such adaptations, however, would generally become integrated into the programme practices and, in many cases, further refined

Figure 6: CLARISSA's timeline of adaptations across adaptive layers
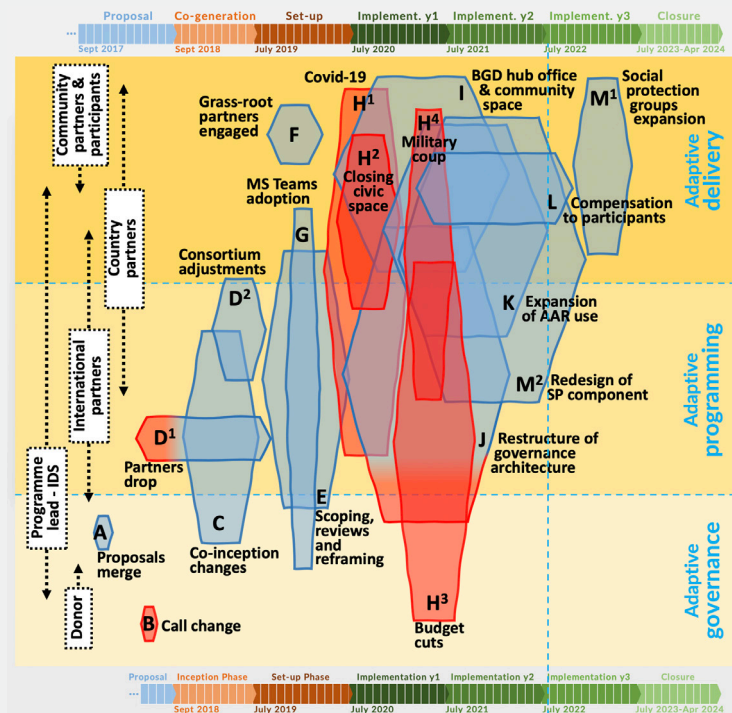
Source: Authors' own. Red (darker) hexagons represent responses to contextual demands; blue (lighter), to internal evaluative learning.

or complemented with additional changes. As a result, most adaptations continue to influence the programme throughout the remainder of CLARISSA's lifetime.

3.1.1 Key adaptations during the proposal design phase (until August 2018)

A – CLARISSA's dual genesis

The origins of CLARISSA can be traced back to its roots as a proposal submitted to the UK AID CONNECT fund, a funding mechanism designed to 'support consortia to create innovative solutions to complex development challenges that deliver real change to people's lives' (FCDO 2017). Officially, the participatory co-generation of CLARISSA started in September 2017 with a proposal design workshop attended by the main partners involved. However, the conceptualisation of CLARISSA originated earlier and, in fact, from two different birthplaces. The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex and the Centre for Development Studies at the University of Bath independently conceived the ideas that would converge into the programme. IDS envisioned the use of a large, child-centric and deeply participatory action research modality to obtain a systemic understanding of the dynamics of WFCL, as well as to generate innovation that could be propagated sustainably. Simultaneously, the Centre for Development Studies initiative focused on leveraging cash-plus approaches (Roelen *et al*. 2017; Save the Children 2017), which combine social protection, community engagement, and basic income components, to alleviate WFCL. Both institutions approached Terre des hommes Foundation as a potential partner, and later initiated conversations that culminated in the decision to merge their distinct streams into a cohesive proposal.

Although such preliminary adaptations cannot be categorised as adaptive management in a conventional sense, because when they happened the programme still did not exist, they are nonetheless of great consequence. In the case of CLARISSA, this dual origin would influence the configuration of workstreams, teams operating on the ground, the cohesion of the consortium partnership, and many other critical aspects of the programme. Understanding these foundational adaptations is crucial, as they laid the groundwork for CLARISSA's trajectory, even before the programme had fully materialised.

B – Geographical refinement in response to funder request

Another important adaptation during the proposal phase conditioned CLARISSA's geographic focus. Originally conceived to operate in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Ethiopia, CLARISSA's proposal garnered significant support from its reviewers. However, because of internal considerations from the funder about its portfolio of interventions, it was convenient to use a different funding stream, whose focus was limited to Asia, for CLARISSA. As a result, the Ethiopian component had to be removed – a shift that demanded a recalibration of the programme design and altered the composition of the consortium.

In this case, the motivation for the adaptation arose from an imposition from the programme context, which had to be adopted to survive. The previous adaptation case was different as the decision to combine elements from the two proposals resulted from internal reflection on the best, most effective, way forward. This distinction is important, and Figure 6 illustrates it visually through the colour of the hexagons representing each case: red/darker for the responses to changes in the context, and blue/lighter for adaptations resulting from internal evaluative learning.

3.1.2 Key adaptations in the co-generation phase (September 2018 to June 2019)

C – Collaborative inception of programme details

Although CLARISSA's initial proposal contained plenty of detail on every aspect of the programme, such as its aims, the partners involved, its budget, structure, main enquiry areas, and its activities and outputs, this was all framed in a 'process-oriented' manner. The proposal outlined the general process – the 'how' – for carrying out the work, yet it left the specific content of the actions – the 'whats' – rather open-ended, defining them in a way that allowed for emergence and adaptation. The innovative character of the programme was sufficiently justified: a research and action programme that aimed to address the complexities of WFCL clearly required a non-linear and innovative approach like the one proposed. The initial design thus established that CLARISSA would be deeply participative, child-centric, learning-focused, and adaptive, while operating at scale and with all the partners working in an integrated, tightly coordinated manner. Moreover, the programme would work iteratively and encourage the emergence of evidence-based adaptations at its multiple levels of operation: at the delivery level,

where most interactions with children and stakeholders take place, this would happen through a systemic PAR model, which would be supported at higher layers by decision-making structures guided by a PAM approach.

This process-oriented design, however, left an incredible number of questions pending to be defined when the programme started, including the types of WFCL that would be targeted in each country, the specific geographical areas where the programme would work, as well as key organisational aspects, such as how teams would be organised in each country. The main assumptions of the programme, which were crystallised in the original theory of change submitted in the proposal (see Figure 7), needed to be substantiated and contrasted with the evidence emerging from the target countries.

CLARISSA's co-generation phase marked a critical period in shaping the programme. Initiated after the programme's approval, this phase started with a co-design workshop in Brighton, UK, in September 2018, which was attended by the international consortium members and the funder, FCDO, followed by a phase of online collaborations structured around the four original

workstreams (see Figure 7), with all partners involved in each of the discussions. This led to a workshop in Bangkok in November 2018, which also involved some identified country partners. These workshops represented a key moment for the programme where the multiple workstreams and partners came together to think about what the intervention would look like.

During these foundational discussions, a lot of basic questions regarding what would be done, where it would be done, and even who with, were collectively established. For instance, debates unfolded around whether to focus on child labour in the agricultural sector in Bangladesh or prioritise the garment and leather industries. The decision-making process involved extensive dialogue and negotiation, leading to the selection of the leather sector, with a decision not to attempt to work everywhere but on the 'hotspots' of child labour, which are in the slums. Similar discussions took place in Nepal, where the focus went to the adult entertainment sector (AES).

This early engagement allowed the initial strategies to be adapted to the reality on the ground, leveraging the shared learning to collectively build a full programme

Figure 7: Original overarching theory of change included in the proposal
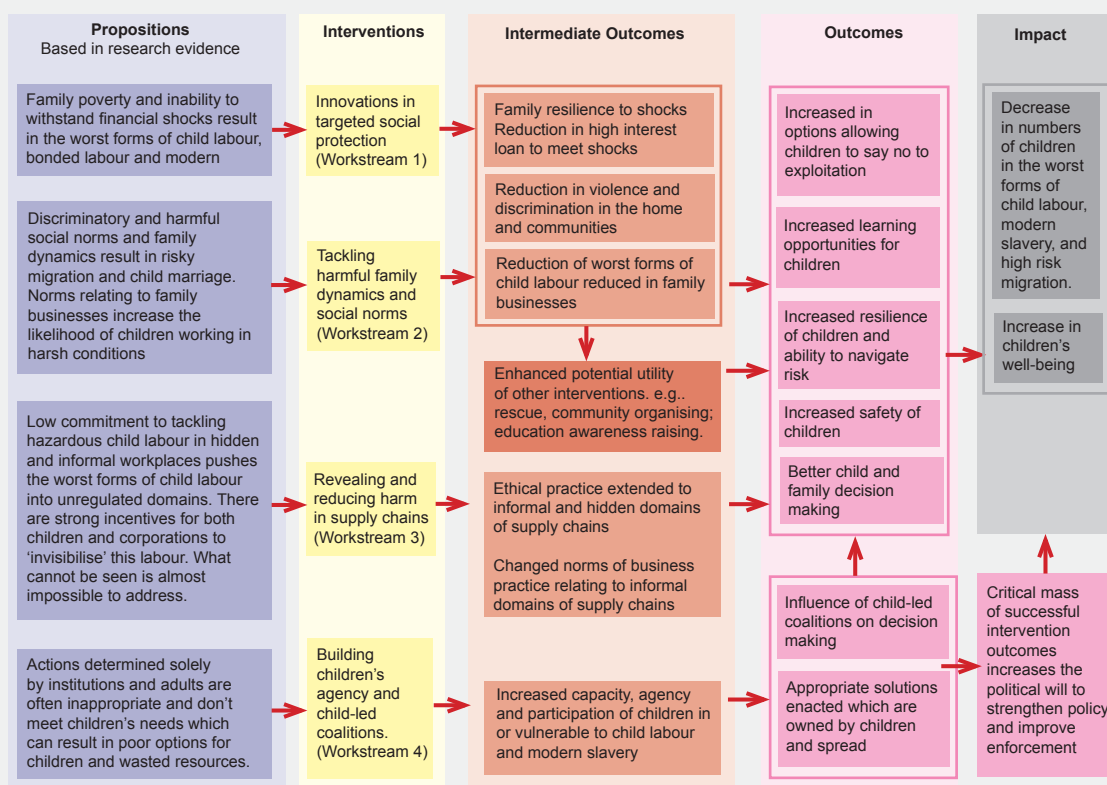
Source: CLARISSA's original proposal, internal document.

budget and a full workplan, and to define the roles and responsibilities of each partner. The teams also agreed on what additional research actions (such as surveying in the shortlisted slums) were needed to generate the evidence that would allow for further refinement of the scoping and workplans.

These early deliberations not only established the foundation for CLARISSA's future development but also served as a tangible illustration of its adaptive character, and its commitment to collaborative decision-making. Through the interactions in these events, the programme's culture and the ethos of the partnership began to take shape and permeate through the participating organisations. The co-design processes played a pivotal role in defining collective expectations within the teams, emphasising the programme's dedication to fostering collaboration and co-ownership by all participants.

D – Partnership adaptations

During the co-design phase, significant adaptations were made to the composition of CLARISSA's consortium, reflecting an evolving understanding of the programme and its changing focus and workplan. Notably, some initial key partners exited the consortium. The Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) left the programme as it became evident that CLARISSA's emerging emphasis on domestic markets and the informal sector no longer aligned with ETI's primary area of interest, linked to its work with major international fashion corporations. Similarly, the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) withdrew because its expertise in quantitative evaluation methodologies was no longer required by the programme. In fact, changes in the partnership had started earlier, before the programme was even approved: Save the Children, one of the key projected consortium members, was caught up in a high-profile sexual misconduct scandal at the time and suspended all its bidding for UK government funding.

These consortium changes come as an early example of how the emerging challenges a programme faces frequently also provide opportunities for positive strategic adaptations. In this case, the shifts in the consortium's make-up allowed for changes in the roles played by different organisations, with ChildHope, for example, being able to assume an unplanned leadership role in Nepal after thorough checks on the capacities and inclusion of its downstream partners. More generally, the co-design phase facilitated a more detailed definition

of the roles that each country partner would play in the programme.

3.1.3 Key adaptations in the set-up phase (July 2019 to June 2020)

E – Scoping activities, evidence review, and focused research

The **set-up phase** refers to a period of early implementation activities, including the setting up of in-country operational teams and a series of preliminary scoping activities, an evidence review, and research that led to the definitive identification of the urban locations for intervening through PAR and the social protection-plus (SP+) trial. The broad research questions that provided the starting point for the programme were refined to focus on the dynamics that drive supply chains to employ children, the urban neighbourhood dynamics that lead children into child labour, and the identification of leverage points to shift these underlying dynamics (Burns *et al*. 2021). A multitude of decisions, exploratory data-gathering, and planning refinements were required to evolve the programme design, which up to that point still had an eminent 'processual' character and comprised many unknowns and variables (see Figure 8), into more definite and grounded action plans.

The evidence on what was happening on the ground and all the knowledge generated in this phase challenged several of CLARISSA's initial assumptions and motivated conceptual shifts and gradual rearrangements at the strategic and programmatic layers, as part of a co-production process of the programme design. For example, in Bangladesh, the focus was moved from the global corporate brands to the informal and domestic markets for leather products (Apgar and Burns 2021), and in Myanmar the focus moved from waste management to fisheries, while for the social protection action, a delayed start was decided to allow for better targeting and increased rapport with the communities. This ability to choose sectors and adjust timelines at a late stage is quite unusual as funders would normally expect a full programme design after the co-creation phase. This flexibility, however, allowed the programme to consider more deeply its plans and the risks involved to ultimately improve its effectiveness. The approach taken meant that instead of jumping immediately into trying to 'do things right', there was an opportunity to gradually clarify which things were really the 'right things to do'.

Figure 8: Initial CLARISSA process overview, October 2019
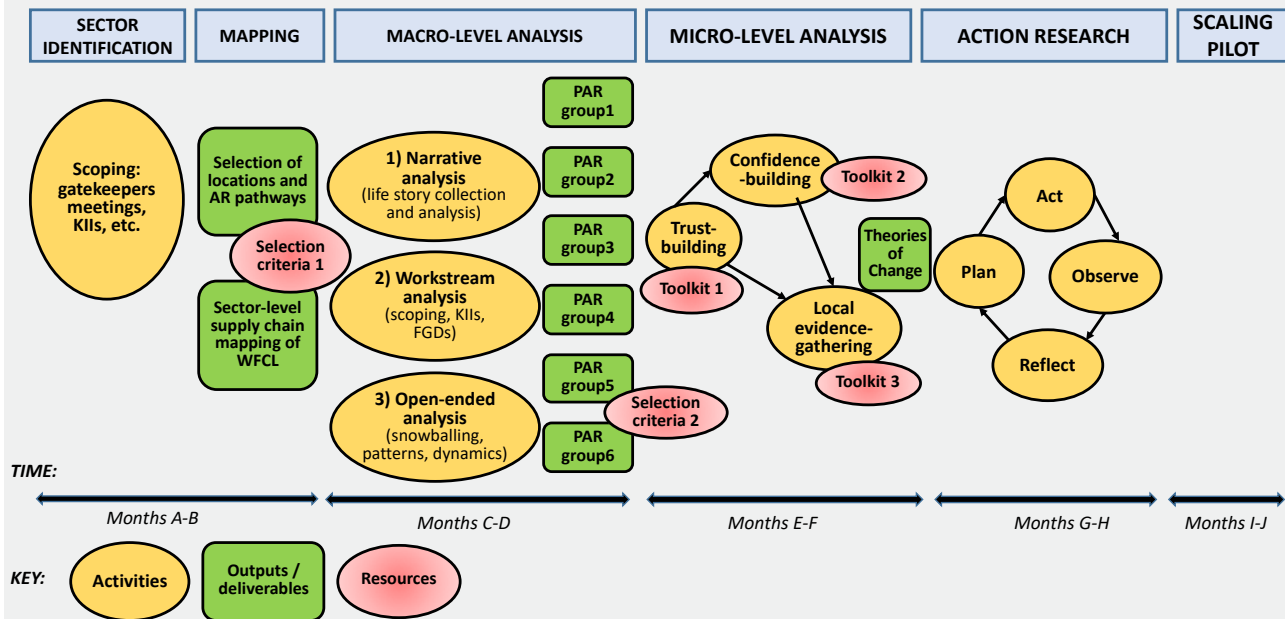
Source: Slides from a CLARISSA methodology workshop, internal document.

F – Involvement of grass-roots partners in Nepal

Nepal provides a good example of adaptations at the operational layer because of the way in which symbiotic relationships with grass-roots partners were established and leveraged. The AES, CLARISSA's focus in Nepal, involves very problematic, thorny topics, where the use of an inappropriate word could upset a person and their community. Establishing trusting working relationships is therefore a very important precondition for the quality of participatory processes, especially when children are involved. Trust needs to be built not just with individual children, but across all the surrounding stakeholders, such as their parents, guardians, local institutions and, more generally, the communities and neighbourhoods they are part of – all of which takes time.

Yet CLARISSA is framed as a relatively short-term intervention, which needs to set things in motion very quickly, given its ambitious aims. This is an approach that contrasts considerably with the way that grass-roots organisations (such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or schools) operate. They normally have a long-standing presence and commitment within their communities and have established relationships of trust with children and their parents and guardians.

Although the importance of building rapport with community members and gatekeepers was widely acknowledged by CLARISSA as a key first step to being able to subsequently engage children in activities, the programme's original design did not include explicit arrangements to involve grass-roots organisations deeply in the programme's activities. But as soon as the work of the local teams started, the need for closer links to communities, local organisations, and stakeholders (and, generally, local spaces) became apparent. The initial scoping activities included consultations and mapping of organisations implanted at the community level in various locations across Kathmandu, and when choosing the places where the programme would work, the existence of such grass-roots partners willing to cooperate with CLARISSA was considered critical, as a way to accelerate trust-building processes, given that there was not enough time available for CLARISSA to generate, on its own, the levels of trust required.

Initially, the grass-roots organisations provided a linkage with communities, and safe spaces where the interactions with children could take place. But as the programme developed, the relationships between the teams deepened and kept growing, as part of a mutually enriching, win-win process. CLARISSA benefited enormously from the grass-roots organisations' expertise

and experience, their counselling and mobilising capacities, their premises, their credibility with local government, and their linkages with relevant local officers and communities in general. The organisations, on the other hand, were compensated for their expenses, the use of their installations, and the work they did with children, and they were also involved in CLARISSA's capacity building, learning about life story collection and analysis processes, PAR, non-violent communication, and other relevant topics. With time, the organisations gradually felt part of CLARISSA, with a desire to support the programme as collaborative partners and to promote the sustainability of its actions once the programme ends.

G – Adoption of Microsoft Teams technology as the core knowledge-sharing infrastructure

As a research and innovation programme, CLARISSA was designed to be documentation-intensive and keep detailed records of all its activities, while ensuring that information gathered was transparently available to all teams. Moreover, with the programme's ambition to foster integrated teamwork across all partners, enhancing communication and coordination capacities became a necessity. In response to these requirements, the Programme Director made a strategic executive decision in the early phases of CLARISSA: Microsoft Teams, the collaboration system used at IDS at that time, would be adopted by the programme as its primary platform for knowledge-sharing, communication, and coordination. This approach implied that every document from each workstream in the programme would be stored in the shared Teams space, and team members from all partners in each country would need to work on Teams to stay up to date. This was one of the few strategic 'executive decisions' taken within CLARISSA that did not result from collective agreements with the partners involved, and it had far-reaching implications for the programme's operational dynamics. The decision reflected an understanding of the critical role of knowledge management in an action research initiative that aspired to comprehensively document all its activities.[7]

The Teams platform proved extremely useful for the programme, acting as its knowledge repository and a central hub supporting diverse activities, such as synchronous document editing, safe handling of sensitive information, ongoing real-time communication via chats and online calls, and coordination of activities through shared calendars. Shared practices were developed that contributed to aligning how different teams used the platform, including collaborative minute-taking during meetings, and the use of standardised templates for various activities such as the reflective journalling performed by PAR facilitators and the documentation of PAR meetings with children. The platform encouraged a culture of comprehensive documentation of all programme activities, both related to management tasks and to engagement and research activities involving children and other stakeholders. If somebody missed a meeting, for example, they could count on being able to consult the minutes immediately after it finished. And indeed, frequently people would check the minutes to check processes agreed upon or decisions taken. The platform thus maintained CLARISSA's institutional memory, ensuring that all programme documents and knowledge remained fully accessible through time – something that was especially useful when team members left or joined the programme.

It is not strange that big development programmes utilise such collaborative repositories, where lots of documentation, monitoring data, reports, photos, and all kinds of materials are stored. But there are rarely enough staff with the capacity, willingness, time, and analytical skills to make use of the information in real time. What set CLARISSA apart was not only the amount and depth of the data generated but also the programme's consistent and meaningful efforts to make good use of the evidence gathered. A strong monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) team and robust MEL approaches enabled all other teams in CLARISSA to engage with the relevant evidence through regular reflection workshops. Such an approach to evidence-gathering and use promoted high degrees of transparency and collaboration and, to some extent, enhanced accountability by providing a solid structure for participation: the consortium got used to reaching collective decisions that were supported by evidence, thus restricting the capacity of leading organisations or staff to exercise discretional and arbitrary power.

However, there were also some significant limitations associated with the adoption of Microsoft Teams. The disparities in technical know-how, network connectivity, available equipment, and even licences among team members and partner organisations were not

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7   A check conducted as part of the evaluation in May 2023, some three and a half years after the shared space was created, revealed that it contained 13,814 documents across the channels established by the different teams, including 5,697 Word, 1,000 Excel and 549 PowerPoint editable files, as well as 3,704 images, 222 audio/video files and 1,639 pdf documents.

comprehensively considered, resulting in an uneven capacity to access and fully benefit from the tools. It is possible that the introduction of the platform as an 'executive decision', with just limited preliminary discussion and exchange of perspectives, led to a failure to recognise potential risks and overlapping digital divides. With hindsight, it would have been important to consult on what system to adopt for information management, rather than assume that everyone involved would learn by doing. An explicit and comprehensive effort to understand the issues that all partners faced, and providing training and guidance on how to configure and make best use of the tools, would have enhanced productivity. For example, the lack of harmonised naming conventions and common approaches to organising and maintaining information across the different teams' spaces created accessibility challenges, compounding the existing capacity divides among the organisations and, in some cases, potentially contributing to strains in inter-organisational relationships.

3.1.4 Key adaptations in the implementation phase (July 2020 to June 2023)

H – Coping with multiple external disruptions
Shortly after the programme began its activities on the ground, a series of intersecting crises disrupted implementation. The most significant of these were the Covid-19 pandemic, a closing down of the civic space in Bangladesh, substantial budget cuts by FCDO, and the military coup in Myanmar. It was somewhat fortunate that these crises occurred during the early stages of CLARISSA's implementation when its strategic and operational approaches were still being tested and fine-tuned, allowing for more straightforward adaptations. The intentional adaptive design of the programme meant that CLARISSA was well placed to navigate ongoing uncertainty, and not just cope with the worsened conditions but be able to apply significant adaptations that, to some degree, reframed the crises into sources of opportunity.

Covid-19 pandemic crisis, and a shrinking civic space in Bangladesh
When the pandemic lockdowns commenced, the team in Nepal decided to provide support in the form of food packages to the children who had recently engaged with the programme. The support was channelled through the grass-roots organisations the programme had just started working with, aiming to help children endure a

very difficult period when workplaces were closed, and no earnings were available. It turned out that unplanned actions like these significantly helped build relationships and trust with both the children and the grass-roots organisations, later leading to the close cooperation described in the previous section.

The new reality created by the pandemic – with a reduction of personal interactions, sudden lockdowns, fears, unemployment worries faced by team members and stakeholders, and a prolonged travel ban for IDS staff – demanded ingenuity and determination from all partners. This was especially true for those delivering programme activities on the ground, as the entire workplan and the interactions with participants and stakeholders were disrupted.

When the Covid-19 restrictions started, teams initially felt shocked, and many thought the programme was not doable; it seemed impossible to visit the communities and conduct work in such circumstances. However, they quickly developed ideas on how to overcome each operational challenge. For example, they gave considerable thought to the safeguarding and operational processes used to get in touch with the children, obtain the required consents, and then conduct interviews. Masks, gloves, and hand sanitisers were used to provide phones to children, allowing remote interaction with researchers, and conducting and recording interviews using Facebook Messenger — the tool used in the communities.

As the intensity of the lockdowns diminished, one of the teams in Bangladesh established a makeshift 'interview studio' featuring a glass partition, with children on one side and researchers on the other. Plenty of other adaptations were developed by different operational teams, which were then quickly replicated and adapted by the other teams. These changes demanded flexibility from team members, pushing them to venture beyond their comfort zone. In some instances, they had to stretch their organisation's rules, like the prohibition of working after dark, to better accommodate the needs and schedules of the children. Obtaining permission for such deviations was always challenging, but all the organisations involved recognised the necessity of these adaptations and actively supported their implementation.

These efforts allowed the completion of preliminary research on supply chains and neighbourhood dynamics, instilling renewed confidence for the next phase involving the collection of the children's life stories. Capacity

building was redesigned, expanded, and moved online, utilising virtual training and webinars to support the knowledge and skills growth required for the fieldwork. This would later be complemented with in-country trainings with local facilitators on topics selected by the country teams.

In Bangladesh, the polarised political climate caused further disruptions to the plans. In the context of a shrinking civic space where civil society organisations (CSOs) felt pressured to avoid criticising government policies and where foreign-donor-funded CSOs faced increased scrutiny (Surie, Saluja and Nixon 2023; Siddiki 2022), it was decided to delay the publication of the supply chains research. The government had recently declared the export-oriented leather sector to be child labour-free and contradicting them could have effectively resulted in the closure of the programme.

So far, we have discussed adaptations to the activities and processes carried out by the programme. However, the Covid-19 situation also demanded a reinvention of how programme teams and staff coordinated with each other. During lockdowns, with everybody working from home, brief daily catch-up meetings were introduced for the country teams, allowing everyone to feel connected and coordinated. Regular meetings with IDS, three times a week, were used to review progress, discuss emerging challenges, share ideas and techniques applied on the ground, and allow everyone to contribute to ongoing decisions. These meetings were complemented with plenty of one-on-one calls with the leads of the different workstreams and programme areas.

Since IDS staff were not allowed to travel abroad for an extended period and were responsible for providing the programme leadership and most of the technical and capacity-development support, it was decided that a significant part of the leadership and decision-making would be done in-country. This aimed to fully leverage the resourcefulness and agility of the local teams. Moreover, CLARISSA used this situation to go full-scale with technology, radically restructuring its management and participatory practices so that everything was based on frequent relational meetings online, supported by shared documents and whiteboards. The incipient adoption of Teams was critical to allowing everyone to communicate continuously via chats, video calls, and shared documents and calendars. But after a quick scan and piloting of supplementary technologies, two other platforms were

rolled out for the whole consortium: Zoom, which provided enhanced online conferencing capabilities; and Miro, whose collaborative whiteboards were extensively utilised during meetings, workshops, capacity-building activities, and asynchronous collaboration exercises to support collective analysis, evaluation, and planning processes.

The adoption of these technologies enhanced the programme considerably. Those in international leadership roles were able to develop relationships with each team member, knowing them in a way that would not have been possible with previous management approaches, based on bi-yearly visits to the countries. Although these visits were very productive and intense, they offered limited opportunities for one-to-one interactions due to time constraints. For the teams in the countries, it meant that, as part of the revised capacity-development approaches, they could interact more regularly and intensively with experts from abroad, including through personal mentoring sessions. This created an environment where everyone felt more capable of providing feedback and insights that could influence programme decision-making.

Certainly, not every challenge could be turned into an opportunity, and Covid-19 also had negative impacts that could not be fully addressed, and which limited the programme's effectiveness. The reliance on technologically mediated remote interactions among teams and team members, along with the long-standing absence of in-country visits and physical exchanges, would carry disadvantages in the long term. These included limiting the development of relationships between partners and preventing early awareness and timely and effective interventions to address relational issues, which will be analysed further in subsequent sections.

Budget-cut crisis, and Myanmar military coup crisis
In early 2021, CLARISSA's members felt confident about their capacity to manage any additional challenges arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. The social protection workstream was on the verge of informing communities that all households would start receiving cash transfers in the following month — an accomplishment marking a key milestone for the workstream. However, a different challenge loomed: FCDO, the programme's funder, communicated a 50 per cent budget cut for that year (around £1.65m), with budgetary restrictions expected to

affect the following years as well.[8] This demanded that CLARISSA pause and reconsider all programme plans.

Such substantial budget cuts necessarily disrupted every aspect of the programme, forcing the consortium to make very difficult decisions. Nevertheless, CLARISSA managed again to turn the crisis into an opportunity, at least partially, by handling the cuts in a way that strengthened the participatory and inclusive spirit of the programme. Instead of resorting to top-down approaches often seen in similar international consortiums, where the leading partner unilaterally adjusts the budget, stripping whole sections of the programme and dismissing some partners, CLARISSA devised a 'participatory budgeting' process (Baiocchi and Ganuza 2014) to collectively decide what could be kept and what should be dropped. General principles were agreed upon across the consortium, and every partner contributed ideas on potential cuts. Each organisation proposed how best to approach their own cutbacks. This was not an easy or comfortable process, due to the extent of the cuts, which demanded significant adjustments across programme components, and to some extent created a sense of competition among partners to protect their interests. However, the participatory process managed to navigate these challenges constructively, ensuring that decisions on reductions were made collectively, without severely undermining mutual trust among partners.

Several elements – including a significant portion of the SP+ component (both in terms of staff and resources envisioned for cash transfers), and the entire Myanmar programme, where the recent military coup had made operations challenging – had to be abandoned. The coup, to some extent, eased the budget reduction discussions. Attempting to keep the programme running in Myanmar after the coup, even with the original funding, would have been extremely difficult. Similarly, achieving a 50 per cent reduction in the overall budget while maintaining operations in all three countries would have been very arduous. The two simultaneous crises somehow counteracted each other and helped the programme find a way out of this very tricky situation.

Another aspect that facilitated the financial deliberations was the nature of CLARISSA's budgeting approach: although the budget was quite detailed, it was allocated in a process-oriented way, around the structure provided by a systemic action research approach (Burns 2014), which was eminently iterative, emergent, and adaptive, meaning that details of the activities were still only roughly defined (see Figure 8). This allowed the discussion to happen at a 'processual' level of abstraction, which enabled meaningful evaluation and decision-making.

It is important to note that the participatory budgeting exercise we have described only involved the management teams from the different partners, excluding most of the staff delivering the programme on the ground. Given the serious implications of this type of decision, it was agreed early that downward communications would only happen once the new plan was agreed – something that caused high levels of anxiety among the operational teams, with rumours spreading on the intensity of the cuts across the different teams, which feared their component could be scrapped. Their direct managers also found this very distressing, precisely because of not being able to share any information.

Adapting staffing levels for the life story collection process

The life story collection and analysis process (Sayem *et al*. 2023) involved numerous steps – including locating children involved in WFCL, gaining their trust, inquiring if they wished to share their stories, consulting with their parents and employers, developing additional rapport with the children before the actual story collection, among many others – which were made even more challenging by the pandemic. Due to the delays caused by Covid-19 restrictions, and the programme's decision that a quarter of the stories would be collected by children themselves – an approach that demanded significant support and training from the local teams – the Bangladeshi and Nepali teams recognised that to deliver good-quality stories on time, they would need additional consultants to temporarily join the teams (Karki *et al*. 2022).

In Bangladesh, recent sociology and anthropology graduates with some research experience were contracted as documentation assistants and field organisers. After receiving training and orientation about the programme, they seamlessly integrated with the team, quickly bonding with the children and significantly contributing to the life story collection and analysis process. Their support allowed existing programme staff to focus on facilitating interactions with children.

In Nepal, the team initially engaged professional researchers and academics, anticipating that their expertise would be better suited to address the

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8   Over the lifetime of the programme, the overall budget cuts amounted to around 20 per cent.

demanding context. However, unexpected difficulties arose as the seasoned academics found it challenging to depart from their methodological habits and embrace the radically participatory style practised within CLARISSA, in which children played a leading role. Moreover, in some cases, the age difference hindered the children's connection with them. Nevertheless, these challenges also strengthened CLARISSA staff's confidence in their own capacity and expertise for leading participatory processes. A quick re-adaptation was triggered: CLARISSA discontinued the contracts with the researchers and instead recruited younger graduates, who performed exceptionally well.

This case marked one of the first significant occasions where staffing levels and effort were adjusted based on the improved understanding of conditions on the ground. Changes in team composition became a constant throughout CLARISSA's lifetime. The programme management team became accustomed to local teams communicating their specific needs based on an evolving perception of how things were working on the ground. The programme also learnt that some key processes – such as building trust and developing relationships with local gatekeepers – take time and require significant effort. A virtuous cycle of trust was gradually established, where IDS and the consortium partners provided flexibility and facilitated reflection and learning, while the local teams managed operational adaptations and expenses to produce the desired results.

I – Creation of CLARISSA's hub office and a community space in Bangladesh

Another paradigmatic case of adaptive management relates to the establishment of dedicated spaces for the programme in Bangladesh. CLARISSA's original proposal did not include plans to establish such spaces, probably assuming that staff could work from their organisation's premises or use the offices of Terre des hommes, the country's leading partner. However, once the target supply chains and communities were chosen, and the real work started, it became apparent that something needed to be done. Significant time and resources were being wasted in travel due to Dhaka's congested traffic, and work conditions in slum communities were challenging, lacking sanitary facilities and places for sourcing food. The decision was made to move away from the headquarters of Terre des hommes to a location closer to the communities, thus allowing teams to spend more time together while providing them with a neutral and safer space to build cross-partner collaboration. Budget originally allocated for in-country training lines –

which Covid-19 restrictions forced to move online – was repurposed, and in June 2020, CLARISSA's hub office was established. It comprised a couple of rooms primarily used by the country coordinator and the SP+ team but also regularly attended by other teams – for example, for the weekly 'coffee morning' sessions.

This logic was extended to lower, more operational levels, when creating a community space accessible to the various CLARISSA teams, where the PAR meetings with children could take place. During the co-generation phase, the programme had decided to avoid holding meetings with children in hotels, opting instead to rent local venues. However, when the early interviews were set to begin, even hotels were closed because of the pandemic. As mentioned in a previous section, this challenge led one of the country partners, the Grambangla Unnayan Committee, to experiment with the creation of an 'interview studio', establishing its offices within the community. Meetings with children continued there and, eventually, the initiative was propagated to the country consortium, by renting additional spaces within the same building.

Establishing offices in the slum contributed to building a close bond with the community, as it signalled a longer-term commitment and a more accessible disposition. For instance, in cases where children needed to have informal discussions with the team in a confidential or private setting, the office provided an opportunity for easy access, counselling, and advice. This approach also resulted in significant cost savings compared to other types of venue. By prioritising both efficiency and effectiveness, and focusing on accomplishing tasks creatively, at a low cost, while ensuring that essential aspects like safeguarding for children remained in place, resources could be spared and later redirected to addressing emerging needs.

In this case, as with many other future adaptations, the changes developed conversationally and iteratively, rather than through formal handling, such as an official communication from Terre des hommes to IDS expressing the need for a hub office. The original awareness of the need surfaced during casual conversations, perhaps amid Dhaka's traffic jams, and was later validated through in-depth analysis and discussions in team meetings. Subsequently, the idea was raised through quarterly budget forecast communications, where partners shared updates on spending levels, forecasts, and anticipated needs. In a display of entrepreneurial creativity, teams identified unspent resources and potential savings and

established a strong rationale for the need. Working together with programme management, they made the adaptations feasible. Born in mundane budget conversations, these changes resulted in invaluable assets and approaches that, in retrospect, the team considered essential for the programme and unimaginable not to have. This case highlights how operational changes often have far-reaching implications for the programme, as exemplified here by the realisation of CLARISSA's core values of inclusive and safe participation, which the hub office and the community space provided to children and country teams alike.

J – Programme governance model's reform towards a more country-led approach

CLARISSA originally set up a management and governance structure like the one shown in Figure 9, which was used during its first years of operation. This model followed a matrix approach that intersected the country programmes with four distinct workstreams, aligning with the main research themes: social protection; social norms; supply chains; and children's participation. These workstreams were supported by various working groups responsible for MEL, Communications, as well as Strategy and Operations. The workstreams were initially

defined at the proposal stage and broadly aligned with the academic interests of different participating researchers. To some extent, this structure fostered a somewhat top-down and IDS-centric approach to programme management, with workstream leads providing guidance and direction for different aspects of the country teams' work. This model proved particularly valuable during the co-generation phase, where the programme's main assumptions were tested and refined, laying the foundation for productive rounds of evidence-gathering and scoping research.

However, as the implementation work commenced in the countries, and multiple challenges and opportunities began to emerge, the limitations of this model became increasingly apparent to the teams, prompting a pressing need for adaptation. Coordination and communication among the workstreams and working groups was difficult, with decisions being made in meetings where not all affected partners were present. This created confusion regarding roles, responsibilities, and how each workstream related to the others. These communication issues, in turn, contributed to strained relationships between some partners and hindered effective collaboration. Moreover, early travel restrictions imposed

Figure 9: CLARISSA's original management and governance structure, 2018
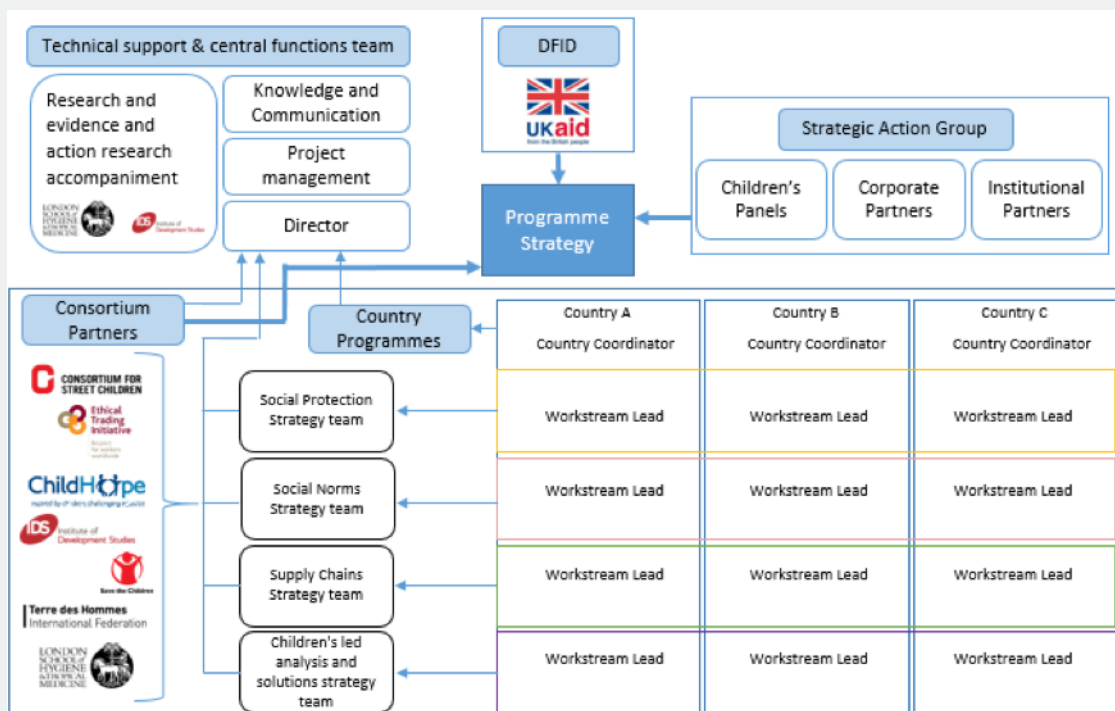
Source: CLARISSA proposal, internal document.

due to the Covid-19 pandemic rendered the original plans for frequent visits and hands-on support from IDS researchers unfeasible. This meant that a growing share of leadership and operational decision-making would need to be country-led. Lastly, as a result of the scoping research and, more broadly, through the interactions with the children and the insights gained from their life stories, the definition of what was essential for both research and action underwent a re-evaluation. Some of the initial workstream themes lost prominence, while a renewed focus emerged around urban neighbourhood dynamics.

During the initial round of after-action review (AAR) meetings held in both countries at the start of 2020, the need to shift from a workstream-centric model to a more country-led approach was already voiced and discussed. This transition was seen as a means to promote better communication among partners, enhance collaboration, and foster integrated teamwork. In the subsequent consortium-level AAR workshop, conducted online in October 2020, a draft for the new approach was already proposed. This was followed by a participatory process that engaged the entire consortium in a series of workshops. During these workshops, the proposal was debated, refined, and changed, clarifying the roles and responsibilities of the different teams, and what their relationships would be, as well as agreeing to periodically assess its effectiveness in the future and make necessary adjustments.

The new programme governance model reconfigured the existing workstreams and workgroups into a series of 'teams' that are described in Box 1. Careful consideration was given to team membership to ensure that no partner felt disconnected or excluded. The social protection workstream was retained as a core element of CLARISSA, but most of the interests from the remaining three workstreams were consolidated into a new, more

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Box 1: Reconfigured programme governance through teams

Individuals from the different organisations work closely together in the different teams that have responsibility for co-creating the programme. These teams, and their roles, are as follows:

- **Process Design team**: **Design and oversee CLARISSA's approach and participatory processes.**

- **Social Protection team**: **Design, implement, and evaluate the cash-plus intervention in Bangladesh.**

- **Thematic Research team**: **Design and implement a rigorous and coherent research agenda for the overarching themes of supply chains, urban neighbourhood dynamics, social norms, the impacts of Covid-19 on WFCL, and children's agency.**

- **Country teams**: **Manage country programmes and country-level operations.**

- **Programme Management team**: **Oversee project management, budget management, partnership management, and reporting functions of the programme. Timetable, sequence, and organise events.**

- **Strategy Board**: **Govern the strategic direction of the programme through regular bi-monthly meetings comprising IDS senior managers and consortium partner leads. Serve as a forum for trouble-shooting and crisis response.**

- **MEL team**: **Design and implement the monitoring, evaluation, and learning agenda and infrastructure. Produce rigorous evidence to respond to programmatic evaluation and learning questions and to support adaptive management.**

- **Communications and Advocacy team**: **Shape and inform the communications and advocacy approach. Help to steer the uptake and engagement strategy.**

- **Safeguarding team**: **Develop and implement safeguarding processes. Lead and support operationalisation of the psychosocial wellbeing approaches within CLARISSA.**

Source: CLARISSA guidance, internal document.

agile Thematic Research team. A newly formed Process Design team brought together experts in children's participation and participatory process design, creating an integrated forum where all partners could contribute to programme design. The MEL team was also strengthened to support evidence-generation and learning. Overall, these changes facilitated a realignment of the consortium, promoting transparency and providing a clear logic for where different discussions should happen and who should be involved in them. This way, responsibilities were distributed to different groups of people, which met at different times, and managed to build strong relationships and maintain ongoing collaboration. This clarity allowed teams to develop organically, encouraging open communication and trust-building, as opposed to relying solely on large meetings, which is often the case in large programmes.

This adaptation case represents a profound restructuring of the programme's management structure. The primary driver of this critical change was the evident dysfunction of the previous model, which was no longer fit for

purpose. However, the adaptation was facilitated by contingent factors that created a window of opportunity – a special moment that was seized to make the necessary changes. On the one hand, the pandemic and budget cuts represented significant external crises that compelled a comprehensive review of the programme and somehow legitimised the introduction of such drastic changes. On the other hand, a series of concurrent minor crises caused three of the workstreams to lose their leadership roles around a given moment,[9] opening up space for a smoother restructuring.

K – Evolution and expansion of the use of after-action reviews

A key tool underpinning CLARISSA's PAM approach was the AAR workshops (Ramalingam 2006; Darling, Parry and Moore 2005). These structured, simple evaluation processes – when applied systematically and facilitated in ways that enable open and honest reflection – can significantly enhance organisational learning (Apgar *et al*. 2020). Box 2 provides additional details on how AARs work.

Box 2: After-action reviews as a reflective and evaluative tool

The after-action review (AAR) is a structured, yet simple, facilitated evaluation process. It is employed by groups – whether implementation teams or broader stakeholder groups – to capture outcomes and lessons from past successes and failures, aiming to improve future performance. The AAR offers a valuable opportunity for groups to reflect on projects, activities, events, or tasks, thereby transforming learning into actionable strategies for improvement.

AARs enable teams to step back from day-to-day tasks and take time to assess their achievements. An AAR is a versatile tool that can be used for various contexts, ranging from brief post-activity reflections (e.g. a half-hour session following a day of fieldwork) to more extensive reviews (e.g. a three-day workshop for an implementation team evaluating a year's worth of programme activities).

The process typically begins with a set of generic questions that guide reflection: 1. What was expected to happen?; 2. What actually happened, and why were there deviations?; 3. Which aspects worked well, which didn't, and what are the reasons for each?; 4. How can we improve for next time, and what specific steps should be taken?

These questions serve as a foundation for the group to discuss, analyse, and draw lessons, facilitating a collective understanding and strategy for enhanced future performance.

Source: CLARISSA guidance, internal document.

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9   Most departures were due to personal reasons, but there was also the case of an unusual redundancy caused by a financial crisis within one partner organisation.

CLARISSA scheduled consortium-wide AARs annually, which were strategically sequenced to build on insights arising from the six-monthly AAR workshops carried out in both countries. These AAR workshops were part of the programme learning infrastructure and were organised, facilitated, and documented by the MEL team in close collaboration with country teams (Apgar and Snijder 2020). Participants typically reflected on progress and the evolution of the internal and external contexts, identified roadblocks and capacity-development needs, suggested plan modifications, and pinpointed areas requiring further research or experimentation. Key inputs for these discussions included the programme's monitoring data, insights from children's PAR groups, results from the partnership rubric assessment (Snijder *et al.* 2023a), and observations from regular meetings and informal conversations (Apgar *et al.* 2022; Burns *et al.* 2021). Each AAR culminated in a learning report that translated insights into actionable steps. Box 3 shows the agenda from a country-level AAR, as an example.

Recognising the value of AARs in promoting reflection and learning, implementing teams experimented with a scaled-down version called 'mini-AARs'. These were applied to specific programme implementation activities such as the life story collection and analysis process, capacity development, and the social protection workstream. These meetings, which took place either tri-monthly or linked to project milestones such as the piloting of a new approach or activity, were facilitated by the MEL focal person in each country.

When the mini-AARs were first introduced, however, even their promoters were not convinced they would work. There was also some reluctance from the teams, as they initially viewed these reflection sessions as an additional task in their already busy schedules. However, once people engaged in the practice, they realised that AARs were not only easy to conduct but helped them a lot to work effectively, enabling them to make numerous operational adaptations and to meaningfully adjust their

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Box 3: Structure of a country after-action review

Learning summary

Introduction and context

Objectives, process, and outputs

Day 1
Session 1: Reconstructing the timeline, identifying big moments, and high and low points
Session 2: About personal-level talent
Session 3: Adaptations made and learnings
Session 4: Team-building activities
Session 5: Reflecting on celebration of team's achievement
Session 6: Key learning on child-centredness

Day 2
Session 1: Team-building activities
Session 2: Country-level advocacy planning
Session 3: Reflections on the team capacities
Session 3a: Sharing the results of the partnership self-assessment rubric
Session 3b: Capacity development priorities
Session 3c: Capacity development plan
Session 4: Reflection on critical actionable learning

Participant feedback/facilitator's reflections

Source: CLARISSA Bangladesh AAR-3 report – February 2021, internal document.

immediate plans and activities. A practical adaptation (to give one example) that emerged out of the mini-AARs was the simplification of consent forms used with parents and employers, which helped reduce their mistrust. Mini-AARs also provided valuable opportunities for interaction and team-building, given that team members frequently worked in different places.

The use of mini-AARs quickly spread throughout the programme areas and across both countries, and the AAR templates were included in all the toolboxes created to support team activities. The process to increase the granularity at which the AARs were used evolved further, as the AAR logic connected very naturally with the ongoing reflection and learning cycles that characterise the work of the PAR groups. Thus, the AAR format was applied within the action research groups, where children and stakeholders devised responses to specific child labour issues, and within the micro-teams supporting these groups. At these grounded operational levels, AARs worked in a more informal and organic way, and were conducted without MEL team involvement or formal documentation. In a way, the journalling that facilitators were encouraged to perform after meeting with children, and the notes that documenters took during the sessions, served as a form of personal-level AAR reflection, which then supported discussion among the two team members as part of their daily debriefing conversations, promoting the continuous improvement of their actions.

Interestingly, the success of AARs in CLARISSA has extended beyond the programme. The positive experiences with learning and adaptation have influenced partner organisations' programming practices, to the extent that AARs are now budgeted for in all their projects.

L – Compensations to action research group participants in Bangladesh

The question of whether and how to compensate children participating in the action research groups presented a complex dilemma for the Bangladesh team. In the first stages of the programme, children engaged in the life story collection processes were compensated with money to offset their lost earnings, as missing work often resulted in severe penalties (such as losing an entire day's salary for an hour of absence). However, during the transition to the action research group phase, which required strong ownership from the children, a debate

emerged regarding the use of compensation, revealing contrasting views between the two main implementing organisations.

One organisation, influenced by a previous negative incident, opposed monetary compensation, fearing it might undermine the participatory essence of the groups. They were concerned that children might participate solely for financial gain, rather than genuine interest in the group activities. The other organisation, recognising the children's sacrifice of work hours and their income loss, argued in favour of compensation, and they favoured monetary payments because this was also the children's preference. This disagreement led to extensive discussions within management forums and an AAR workshop, with both sides firmly upholding their stances. IDS, which led the programme, remained neutral and advocated for the decision to be taken locally.

After nearly a year of deliberation, a compromise was reached in early 2022: it was decided that all action research group participants would receive compensation, but in-kind rather than monetary, in the form of monthly food packages.[10] This solution worked well, though it introduced a substantial administrative and logistical burden for the teams. Children were informed about the reasoning behind the approach and continued to appreciate the support. However, there were still some cases of children whose engagement remained weak, who seemingly kept participating mainly because of the food packages.

This adaptation case underscores, to some extent, how the process of reaching agreements that satisfy multiple parties can require significant effort and considerable amounts of time. Yet, there was a consensus among all involved that the issue could have been solved faster. The experience in Nepal, where cash compensation encountered no opposition and did not lead to any issues, suggests that the Bangladeshi programme could have learnt from Nepal's approach. Therefore, the case also highlights a lack of agility in learning from different contexts, adapting to participant preferences, and exploring various solutions. While IDS's neutrality helped maintain relationships with the partners, it may have been more effective to adopt a more proactive, process-oriented approach. Engaging 'critical friends', for example, to provide additional perspectives (Gray and Carl 2022) might have facilitated quicker resolution.

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10 This would later need to be adjusted for the business owners' groups, as for them it was demeaning and condescending to be given food (like it was charity) instead of monetary compensation for their time.

Ultimately, the conflict between two principled stances presented an opportunity for experimentation that aimed to address and reduce the legitimate concerns both sides had, which was overlooked in favour of prolonged deliberation.

M – Increase in social protection community groups and themes by mobilisers

The social protection component of CLARISSA aimed to trial and evidence an innovative social policy intervention for tackling poverty, improving wellbeing, and addressing WFCL, which combined community mobilisation, casework, and unconditional and universal cash transfers. Over the programme's lifespan, the intervention underwent several rounds of redesign, due to external shocks (such as budget cuts, the pandemic, and delays in receiving government approval) and other adjustments derived from the programme's contextual and evaluative learning. Originally envisioned as a cash transfer scheme complemented by the relational community work (Roelen *et al.* 2023), the intervention evolved into an SP+ intervention, where the emphasis lay on the community support work, with cash acting as a complementary element.[11]

The community mobilisers, a team of more than 20 members, were generally empowered and had been encouraged to take the actions they deemed best (see Figure 10). Moreover, SP+ decisions were always based on their feedback, the evidence they collected, and their experience in the field. In fact, some vital SP+ decisions were made through voting on options that had been developed collectively. However, this adaptation case highlights how reserves of capacity frequently lie untapped, for both communities and local teams, and the important role that spaces for 'structured reflection' play in activating these reserves, leading to transformative adaptations and outcomes.

The community mobilisation component of SP+ operated mainly at three levels: the individual, the family, and the group. At the group level, two formal community groups – one for children and one for adults – were established to address pressing community issues identified through participatory needs analysis and prioritisation. These groups focused on environmental issues and adult–child relationships respectively. However, during a two-day reflection workshop that took place in Dhaka in November 2022, and was attended by the entire SP+ team, community mobilisers presented additional community needs beyond the scope of these formal groups. As part of the review of the different impact pathways included in the intervention's theory of change (see Figure 11), the mobilisers surfaced a desire from the community for more group activities addressing topics like income-generation for single women, female health, and challenges faced by adolescent boys. They wondered if they could respond to these demands by organising group activities around

Figure 10: CLARISSA social protection reflection workshop, November 2022

Photographer: © CLARISSA.
Source: CLARISSA social protection reflection workshop – Learning report, internal document.

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11   Cash transfers were intended to last for 18 months, but had to be reduced first to 12 months, and then to 6. The whole intervention had, nonetheless, transformative impacts (Roelen *et al.* forthcoming; Neupane 2021).

Figure 11: CLARISSA cash-plus intervention – theory of change

Source: Roelen *et al*. (2023), CC BY 4.0. © Institute of Development Studies.
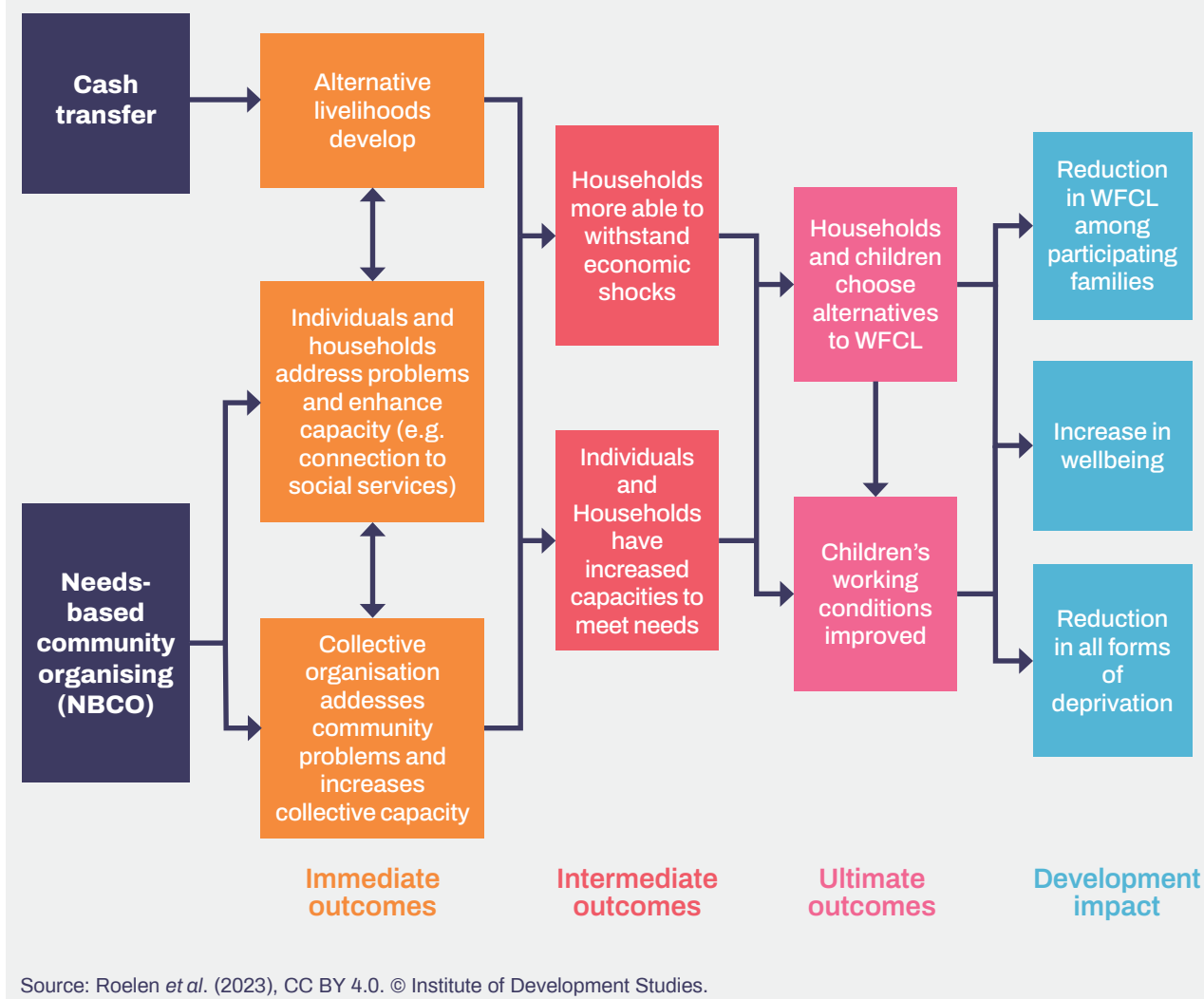
such topics, or they should keep the focus on the established formal groups.

The programme leads responded with an enthusiastic 'Go for it, and don't get wasted by being timid!', encouraging the mobilisers not to worry about the formality of the groups. Empowered by this support, the mobilisers formed various groups that initiated many new activities, from sports competitions to bringing NGOs to the community to provide basic health-care services.

This burst of communal activity was driven by the mobilisers' deep understanding of local needs and the reassurance they received at the workshop. They shifted from a more structured, top-down approach frequently associated with case-management work, to one where they felt autonomous and responsive to community needs, unlocking their potential and creativity. To some extent, the kind of empowerment and resourcefulness

that mobilisers aimed to promote among these group participants became instilled into themselves, thus increasing the harmony across the programme's operational levels.

Another key aspect to consider in this adaptation was the impact of physical interaction. The workshop we have referred to was the first face-to-face meeting for the whole team, after years of virtual coordination with the leads due to Covid-19 travel restrictions. While the SP+ leadership was always open to supporting new initiatives, it was not until the workshop allowed for prolonged face-to-face interactions that the mobilisers felt comfortable enough to share their ideas. The structured reflection space, coupled with the spontaneity of face-to-face interaction, allowed the familiar faces from the screen to turn into full-faceted, embodied human beings, and this allowed both people and teams to become aligned and energised

in a different way, sparking ingenuity and catalysing a serendipitous development. The case thus underscores the limitations imposed by virtual interactions during the pandemic, and suggests that the programme could have benefited from in-person exchanges much earlier.

3.1.5 Key adaptations in the closure phase (July 2023 to April 2024)

Adaptation cases from the closure phase of the programme, which spanned July 2023 to April 2024, were not included in this evaluation due to their overlap with our evaluative work. Nevertheless, this final phase was characterised by significant adaptations, primarily aimed at ensuring the sustainability and legacy of the programme post-completion, while also capitalising on emerging opportunities. Partners undertook efforts to secure alternative funding sources to continue key activities and avert the disbanding of teams. Much of the work in this phase focused on maximising the programme's advocacy impact, as well as ensuring that the programme's closure was managed ethically and with consideration for all stakeholders.

3.2 AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE COMPLEXITY OF ADAPTATIONS

The adaptation cases described previously represent only a small fraction of the numerous adjustments made by local and international partners across the governance, programming, and delivery layers of the CLARISSA programme (Figure 4). Many of these adjustments were later deemed crucial for the programme, and became part of its core design assumptions, to the point that team members now find it difficult to imagine the programme functioning without them.

In particular, the local teams demonstrated remarkable capacity and reliability in managing the operational and organisational dimensions of the programme (see Figure 5) and gained considerable trust and autonomy from the consortium. Through regular collective reflection, these teams effectively assessed and adjusted their plans at both the organisation and country levels, introducing numerous improvements with limited involvement of higher management levels. Examples of these changes include the strengthening of teams' collaboration and

relationships, enhanced support for action research groups, engaging business owners in the action research, innovations in capacity development (Prieto Martín 2022; Widmer *et al*. 2022), repurposing monitoring data for a quasi-experimental evaluation of SP+ impacts, tailoring facilitation and documentation processes to stakeholders' needs, and the ongoing refining of tools, methods, and templates.

However, while CLARISSA's PAM approach enabled significant adaptability to complex challenges, there were also instances where the programme failed to recognise issues promptly and adequately, cases where it was unable to respond to them, or where the response given did not lead to the desired results, or these were not sustainable. Each adaptation process is complex in itself, and our analysis of case studies revealed, moreover, the difficulty in categorically distinguishing between positive and failed adaptations. Successful adaptations often do not entirely resolve issues and may involve some bits of missed opportunities, such as actions that could have commenced earlier or been done more rapidly. Conversely, less successful adjustments or unresolved issues can, at times, end up inadvertently enhancing the future collaborative and adaptive capabilities of partners.

To illustrate the inherent complexity of adaptation processes, we could inspect in more detail one of the cases introduced in the previous section. Figure 12 shows the process that led to extending the use of AAR approaches to more granular levels than initially envisioned. The numbered circles in the diagram indicate the key stages involved, and the green and blue arrows represent, respectively, the flows of awareness across the actors involved in the programme and the flows of support provided by the different layers of management (see Figure 4). To support a deeper analysis of adaptation processes, such a diagram could include additional elements normally involved in adaptation processes, like notes on the main sources of awareness, the key reflection, learning, and decision-making moments, contextual factors influencing the different stages, or the issues and blockages faced while applying the adaptations.[12] But for our illustrative purpose, the diagram is already complex enough: it shows how even a relatively simple adaptation required significant amounts of time to take place and involved a multiplicity of actions and engagements across the whole consortium.

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12   These factors are discussed in the next section and schematised in Figure 13. As part of the evaluation, those elements were considered for the detailed analysis of selected adaptation case studies.

Figure 12: Expansion of the use of AARs – stages and flows (September 2020 to June 2022)

1	1.1 Identification of a strong demand for operational flexibility and adaptation by the Bangladesh team.
2	2.1 MEL lead in Bangladesh raises awareness among the implementation teams regarding the potential of applying AARs. 2.2 Provision of support for the implementation of mini-AARs linked to key activities, enhancing teams' reflexivity and responsiveness. 2.3 Local teams recognise that AARs are straightforward to conduct and significantly beneficial for improving their work efficacy.
3	3.1 Successes in using AARs in Bangladesh are discussed with the MEL lead in Nepal, encouraging replication.
4	4.1 Nepali implementation teams are informed about the potential of mini-AARs for programme enhancement. 4.2 Mini-AARs are supported by the MEL lead in Nepal. 4.3 The utility of mini-AARs is communicated across the country and technical support teams.
5	5.1 Local teams experiment with the use of AARs at higher levels of operation, such as within the children's action research groups (ARGs).
6	6.1 Programme leadership becomes fully aware of the innovative use of AAR and acknowledges its positive impact. 6.2 Active authorisation and promotion of wider adoption of AAR.
7	7.1 Mini-AARs and micro-AARs are established as standard practice within the programme. The approach influences partners' activities beyond the CLARISSA programme.

Source: Authors' own.

As mentioned earlier, the initial recognition of the opportunity to deepen the use of AARs emerged through experimentation on the ground, in Bangladesh, in a context marked by the impact of Covid-19 and budget cuts. A trialling of mini-AARs helped to mature the approach and establish its potential, and led to its uptake in Nepal, while also attracting growing support throughout the consortium. At the end, the extended use of AARs was embraced by the whole team and became part of the mindset of all staff, to the point that some partners expanded its use to other programmes beyond CLARISSA. The AAR approach thus gradually progressed from being a rather constrained approach to becoming core to organisation (Kumpf and Jhunjhunwala 2023).

The process was further reinforced through the practice of reflective journalling by the facilitators of the children's action research groups, which is part of the PAR approach. Their journals were private, and were updated after each meeting with personal reflections on how

everything went and what could be improved. To some extent, they worked as an additional level of reflection, whose insights provided the input, the evidence base, for the mini-AAR and AAR discussions, and (for example) allowed reflections about the milestones achieved by the action research groups, how and why things happened in the groups, and the specific requests, concerns, and learning from the participants.

The inherent complexity of adaptations illustrated by this example is furthermore compounded by the fact that they do not happen in isolation. The effects of programme adaptations keep influencing each other, and together contribute to generating new challenges, opportunities, and limitations, both when they are successfully introduced and when they fail to materialise as envisioned. As a result of this interconnectedness, the adaptive capacity of development programmes like CLARISSA is heavily path-dependent (Fortwengel and Keller 2020), meaning that it is much affected both

by fortuitous events and by the effects of its previous decisions and adaptations. This is clearly visible when reflecting, for example, on how the programme's response to the Covid-19 challenges opened up a whole set of programme design possibilities that were not available – not even thinkable – before the pandemic emerged.

Adaptive management in such dynamic contexts resembles an adventurous expedition. Not so much like a trip across a static landscape where hidden challenges and opportunities may await to be encountered, but rather akin to a ship voyage across a forceful and unpredictable 'seascape'. It is a journey that demands a continuous reassessment of your location, strategies, and practices, and even of your purpose and identity, while confronting challenges and opportunities arising from the external context – those troubling thunderstorms, pirates, and sea dangers – but also from internal programme factors, which remain mostly unseen – like dangerous creatures that lurk beneath the water's surface, subtly conditioning the possibilities for the journey.

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Section 4:

# KEY STAGES AND CRITICAL DIMENSIONS OF PAM

4 KEY STAGES AND CRITICAL DIMENSIONS OF PAM

So far, we have examined the general trajectory of the CLARISSA programme and how it adapted to many different challenges, concluding with a brief illustration of the inherent complexity of each of the adaptation cases. Drawing on insights collected from the evaluation's interviews, we now aim to distil key characteristics present in the adaptation efforts undertaken by development programmes similar to CLARISSA. This involves characterising the stages typically followed when actively introducing adaptations, alongside the consideration of critical dimensions and tensions related to these stages, paying special attention to features that have hitherto gained less attention in the adaptive management literature (Barnes and Lonsdale 2023; DT Global 2022; Gray and Carl 2022; McLarnon, Gayles and Deepan 2021; Sharp and Wild 2021; Teskey and Tyrrel 2021; Byom *et al*. 2020; Arora *et al*. 2019; Bridges and Woolcock 2019; Brinkerhoff, Frazer and McGregor 2018; Desai *et al*. 2018; Derbyshire and Donovan 2016; Valters, Cummings and Nixon 2016; Allana and Sparkman 2014; Bekkers and Roggekamp 2014; Loveridge 2007). At the same time, we will reflect on the key questions established for the evaluation, which were presented in section 2.

Figure 13 illustrates the progression pathways that each of the adaptation processes the programme engages in would follow until it, hopefully, results in a novel and improved way of doing things that diverges from the original plans. As observed in section 3.1 and Figure 6, adaptation processes often overlap, and while ideally adaptations should be introduced swiftly to address issues that have surfaced, the reality is that they may sometimes take months to materialise. PAM reveals itself as a dynamic and cyclical process whereby, at any given time during the lifespan of the programme, a multiplicity of challenges, opportunities, and demands for adaptation coexist and need to be considered and handled, simultaneously, by the different teams and partners involved in the programme.

The question marks beside the name of each stage in the diagram (Figure 13) emphasise that the gradual progression to the next stage is conditional, not guaranteed. The green arrows would only be followed upon satisfactory completion of a stage, while the orange and red arrows indicate alternative paths should challenges prevent progression.

Figure 13: Pathways involved in an active adaptation process
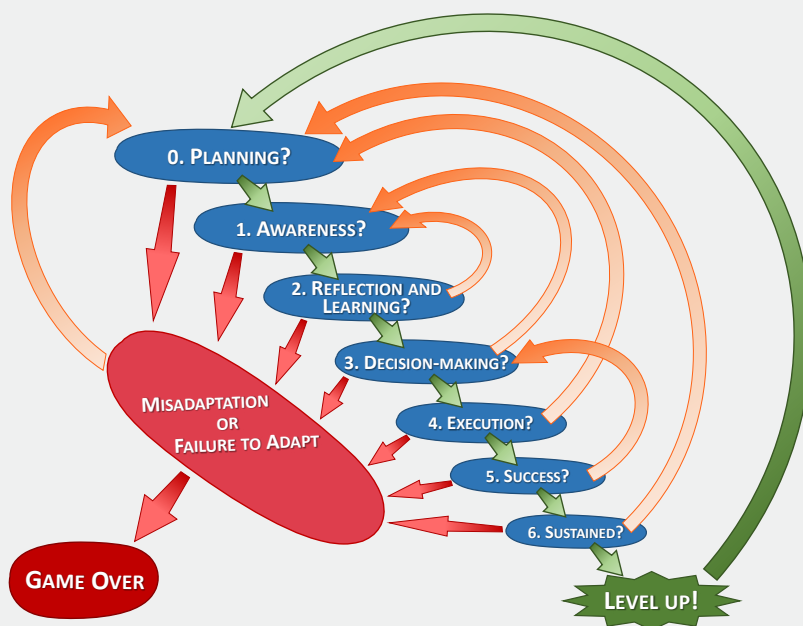
Source: Authors' own.

In Figure 13, the green arrows trace the primary positive cycle, which connects sequentially the main stages that need to be traversed from an initial, incipient awareness of the need to depart from the previous plan, through to the moment when a successful and sustained adaptation is established. The departure point is provided by the **'Planning' stage**, which represents the strategic intention of the programme, its design, and the conditions and constraints in which it is expected to operate. It then progresses to **'Awareness' stage**, where the need to adapt is first acknowledged, perhaps because of the monitoring of the programme's performance or a sudden contextual shift. The ensuing **'Reflection and learning' stage** is when the team pauses to understand better where they are, and to re-evaluate previous assumptions and strategies. This leads to a **'Decision-making' stage** in which collective choices are made on the best course of action available to address the challenges. During the **'Execution' stage**, those agreements are further developed and put into practice. The following **'Success' stage** allows to assess the degree of success achieved, as adaptation plans frequently do not yield the anticipated outcomes. Afterwards, the **'Sustained' stage** contemplates whether the initial successes are sustained and institutionalised within the programme. The final **'Level up!'** stage celebrates the programme's capacity to adapt and evolve, yet also signals a return to the departure point, where new challenges and opportunities await.

The red arrows represent a blockage, a failure to progress, leading to **'Misadaptation' or 'Failure to adapt'**. A series of missed opportunities to adapt may culminate in a **'Game over'** block, where programme objectives become unattainable. In contrast, the orange arrows represent situations where an inability to advance to the next stage is met with the resolve to revisit a previous stage, ensuring that the conditions and momentum required for progression are achieved in subsequent attempts. For instance, a failure to make decisions may suggest the need to involve higher levels of management, leading back to the 'Awareness' stage, where the understanding of the issues can be deepened and extended to additional partners and decision makers. Similarly, if the outcomes of an adaptation fall short of expectations, the journey could revert to the 'Decision-making' stage to explore alternative courses of action. Each of these backward transitions embodies the iterative nature of adaptive management processes, whereby setbacks are reconceived as

learning opportunities that allow the development of more robust strategies.

The following sections briefly discuss each of the stages, analysing related adaptive dimensions through the prism of both positive and less successful adaptations from CLARISSA. Instances will be presented where, for example, cautionary signals emerging from the field were not sufficiently considered, where learning occurred but failed to influence subsequent decisions, or where insights only affected some levels of decision-making but were not sufficiently propagated to inform higher-level decisions. Critical tensions inherent in PAM are also considered, illustrated by instances where different adaptive principles conflicted with each other – such as in the earlier cited case of participatory decisions around budget cuts, which paradoxically necessitated the exclusion of field team members.

4.1 STAGE 0: PLANNING

Every development programme and each of its different components and tasks needs to be guided by some kind of planning that provides ideas about its goals, the resources and time available, and the tentative actions that will lead to achieving its aims, as well as indicators that allow progress to be tracked. In Figure 13, planning provides the starting point (stage 0) of the adaptation cycle because adaptations always need to be performed on top of a pre-existing plan to be effective. Otherwise, we would be referring to pure improvisation, which neither provides reliable outcomes nor supports structured learning. An old military aphorism states that 'plans are useless, but planning is indispensable'. And indeed, it is the thorough effort devoted to creating a plan, and the relationships forged while agreeing about its approaches, which later allow teams to produce meaningful and swift adjustments of the strategies and to learn from them.

Plans are ubiquitous in development work, and planning needs to operate everywhere: certainly at the programme level, but also guiding the actions of partner organisations, operational teams, and even individuals, which need to start the week knowing what they intend to achieve in the next days. Each of these actors should recognise, however, the need to re-assess plans to accommodate emerging learning, meaning that plans should ideally be designed in ways that support some degree of emergence. This flexibility is seldom straightforward, because both organisations and the people working within them, once they commit to a

plan, tend to see it as their recipe toward success and visualise it as a straight pathway to be followed, whose predefined steps will gradually bring them to their aims. Yet, as anyone reflecting about their personal evolution and life experiences would recognise, this is rarely the case; progress is typically achieved through wavy or jagged trajectories that include circular loops, rather than a straight and regular path. Not every step takes us forward, as sometimes one step backward is needed to then advance two ahead.

It is possible, though, to reframe planning processes in ways that acknowledge non-linear progress patterns. Whereas traditional plans are activity-based and predefine all kinds of details and the chains of actions to be executed, the CLARISSA programme exemplifies an alternative form of 'meta-planning', which details at a higher level the logic of the processes to be followed rather than prescriptive activities (Wadley 2017). This

allows for a big part of its actual materialisation, including its areas of focus, timelines, and other details, to be fleshed out adaptively later, as knowledge accumulates.

4.1.1 Rigid, flexible, and adaptive programming modalities

One key dimension of adaptive management linked to the planning stage, which was exposed by our evaluation, refers to the spectrum of flexibility available for programmes to deviate from the original plans. This spectrum ranges from extreme rigidity (where deviation is not allowed or it is so difficult to get permission that teams may not even try), through some degrees of flexible and contingent management, to the systematic use of intentional, experimental, and evidence-driven adaptation processes (Neupane 2021), as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Programming modalities across the rigid-flexible-adaptive continuum

RIGID	FLEXIBLE		ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT (AM)	
Inflexible linear management	**Reactive repair capacity**	**Opportunistic adjustments**	**Passive AM**	**Active AM**
Plans are considered fixed, including most budget allocations. Reviews are rather exceptional and may only be allowed in special moments (such as a mid-term evaluation), provided their impact is limited.	Plans expected to be followed. Even minor adaptations require ad hoc and time-consuming requests, and explicit high-level approval.	Recognises need for flexibility and change when context shifts, but management focuses on executing the plan and achieving its objectives. Learning is rather accidental and subordinated to implementing efforts.	Some monitoring and reflective capacity in place to detect context shifts and challenges. Plans can change to still achieve desired outcomes. Programming not guided by pursuit of learning, which is considered a useful byproduct.	Intentional and systematic experimentation to validate assumptions and test alternative strategies, addressing imperfect knowledge and reducing uncertainty. Learning considered a key objective of management.
For example: 'The plan doesn't work as expected. Let's try harder. Otherwise, we need to tweak it without telling anybody, or cancel operations.'	For example: 'Covid-19 forces us to alter our planned community engagement actions to get back on track.'	For example: 'Since travel is not allowed, let's leverage virtual tools for our capacity development plan.'	For example: 'Significant time and resources are wasted in travel. We need to establish a hub office closer to the communities.'	For example: 'Our pilots show that earning trust from communities is harder than expected. Let's double down on our engagement with grass-roots partners.'

Source: Authors' own, based on Prieto Martín *et al.* (2020) and CLARISSA's internal training materials.

The adaptive management literature frequently presents the tension between traditional and adaptive programming approaches as a dichotomy, recommending that either of the approaches is adopted depending on the programme's aims, degree of uncertainty, the complexity of its implementation context, etc. (Barnes and Lonsdale 2023; Byom *et al*. 2020). It is, however, more realistic to see this tension as a duality, where elements from the rigid-flexible-adaptive continuum get combined. Programmes operating under challenging conditions may extend their adaptive capacities yet remain still chained to some traditional programming constraints. Because of the way development programmes are funded and implemented, a significant degree of rigidity is always to be expected (Sharp and Wild 2021). Moreover, within a single programme, the need for adaptiveness can vary across components and moments within its lifespan, favouring a dynamic amalgamation of traditional and adaptive elements.

Even for highly adaptive programmes like CLARISSA, which benefit from both internal capacities and an authoritative environment conducive to undertaking active adaptive management, many adaptations are still reactive and opportunistic in nature, addressing immediate challenges faced by the teams, rather than being the result of the structured analysis of the evidence generated by the programme. Moreover, CLARISSA's adaptations often emerged from a confluence of factors, making it difficult to establish whether some changes were introduced (for example) as a reaction to external pressures like Covid-19, or attempting to leverage a propitious moment, or as the result of collective analysis of evidence. For instance, the decision to run fewer action research groups than planned was motivated by a combination of time squeezes linked to Covid-19 restrictions and multiple delays caused by the budget cuts, but also because of the feedback from teams, and emerging learning arising from AARs. All these factors, combined, convinced the team that it was best to reduce the number of groups in each country while allowing them to work for longer periods of time, focusing on high-quality processes. Similarly, it was decided to spend much more time than intended on capacity building, because country staff members could not go into the field as planned due to the prolonged lockdowns. In a way,

this decision was forced on the programme, but it ended up influencing the programme's culture profoundly, to the point that it was later impossible to imagine what it would have been like to send those teams out to collect life stories and do participatory processes six months after the programme started, as originally envisioned. These examples illustrate how development projects tend to be messy and involve a lot of serendipity, due to the inherent uncertainty associated with their design and implementation processes; as a result, emerging difficulties sometimes force changes that end up having significant and unexpected positive effects (Feinstein 2020; Hirschman 1967).

In the contexts of flows from Figure 13, a traditional programming mentality focused on delivering according to plan and with a poor regard for learning would act as a barrier situated in each of the stages, which hindered the progression toward the next stage. Likewise, adaptive management approaches could be seen as devices that stimulate the flow across the stages. Our evaluation interviews highlighted the need to strike a balance between the two, to avoid, on the one hand, a blockage of the programme's adaptive capacity but also, on the other hand, overwhelming teams with a flood of excessive possibilities. Staff at all levels confirmed that having plenty of flexibility resulted in confusion and ineffectiveness. Implementing partners – accustomed to be guided by a logical framework[13] (DFID 2011) and clear directives from senior management – initially struggled with CLARISSA's expectation for self-guided adaptation. It took time, and significant capacity-building efforts (Widmer *et al*. 2022) for the teams to feel comfortable with this way of working, but once they got used to it, they could not imagine doing things differently. Teams established a creative tension between fixed processes and adaptive innovation by integrating reflective practices like AARs with plenty of routine management activities, such as coordination meetings that focused on sharing updates and monitoring progress and challenges in the field. Establishing such balance between its adaptive disposition and more traditional management and delivery modalities was crucial in operationalising CLARISSA's PAM approach, which did not see adaptive and planned as opposed, rather considering that continuous planning provided the scaffolding that sustains adaptiveness.

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13   The logical framework is a programme management and evaluation tool developed in 1969 for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), drawing heavily from experience gained in systematic engineering efforts, such as early satellite programmes (PCI 1979). Despite its widespread adoption as the main accountability tool in the international development sector, it has attracted criticism for its limitations in addressing the complexity of human relationships, organisational cultures, and politics, which are intrinsic to development initiatives (Freer and Lemire 2019; Hummelbrunner 2010; Gasper 2000).

4.2 STAGE 1: AWARENESS

A journey of adaptation begins with the awareness of the need to adapt, a recognition of the convenience to deviate from the original plan, enhancing it. Without this realisation there is a risk of persisting in ineffective or misguided approaches, leading to a waste of time and resources or, more gravely, impairing the programme's effectiveness, and reducing its chances of success.

Three key aspects were highlighted during our evaluation that help explain how development programmes acquire this initial awareness of something not being totally right, which demands further consideration by the team, and the exploration of alternative potential responses.

4.2.1 Context of emergence of awareness

It is first important to identify the context the awareness originated from, thereby discerning the main motivation for change. Our discussions with CLARISSA staff and partners revealed three primary domains where significant events or more subtle shifts may occur, requiring adaptation from the programme. The first is the **'external context'** in which the programme operates, with national, regional, and local dynamics directly impacting programme operations, including major emergencies or political shifts like the ones described in section 3.1. The second is the **'partnership context'**, involving institutional arrangements and dynamics within and between the organisations, partners, and funders engaged in the programme. Examples include the budget cuts imposed by FCDO or the withdrawal of one of the partners because of a scandal. Finally, the **'intervention context'** focuses on actors directly involved in the intervention, such as implementing and supporting teams, stakeholders, and participants. Examples include the issues regarding participants' compensation or the demand to expand the themes covered by community groups.

Although the adaptive management literature often emphasises the importance of responding to external and operational challenges through constant monitoring of the programme's context and assessing the effectiveness of strategies and actions (see, for example, Serpe, Ingram and Byom 2022; Ross *et al*. 2021; Teskey and Tyrrel 2021; Byom *et al*. 2020; Desai *et al*. 2018), it tends to overlook the importance and complexity of the relational dynamics within and across the partnership and intervention contexts. Recent articles have identified these dynamics as critical and recognise that the aid industry's operational

model, with heavy reliance on 'consortiums' of disparate organisations, significantly limits the adaptive capacity of development programmes (Barnes and Lonsdale 2023; DT Global 2022; Bridges and Woolcock 2019). However, they stop short of calling for dedicated monitoring and explicit management of these relational dynamics to complement those proposed for the external and operational domains (Snijder *et al*. 2023b).

Our evaluation underscored the critical role of relational aspects within the 'partnership' and 'intervention' contexts for an adaptive programme's success. Trust, communication, and the evolution of partner relationships are pivotal – often more so than external factors. Relational issues can be challenging to identify and address, particularly because emergent communication and trust issues could themselves complicate the discussions about these problems. Disruptions in communication, such as the prolonged reduction of face-to-face interactions due to Covid-19, can exacerbate issues, significantly undermining the programme. In the case of CLARISSA, the continued and flexible use of the partnership rubric and the partnership self-evaluation process linked to AAR (Snijder *et al*. 2023a; Apgar *et al*. 2022) played a key role in mitigating challenges in these critical domains.

4.2.2 Awareness mechanisms

In each of the contexts mentioned above, the occurrence of a crisis or shocks would typically attract attention from the programme, raising awareness of potential challenges and opportunities. However, subtler, more nuanced developments may also have crucial implications for the programme, necessitating proactive discovery before adaptations can occur. We observed various mechanisms being employed by CLARISSA to leverage different types of evidence and enhance the programme's situational awareness:

- **Evaluative mechanisms** involve monitoring and assessing the effectiveness of the programme's strategies and actions through the collection and analysis of diverse data types, including monitoring information, participant and stakeholder feedback, and insights from experiments and piloting efforts.

- **Evidential mechanisms** seek external evidence relevant to guiding programme actions, integrating current academic research and insights from other programmes. Scoping exercises, which CLARISSA did implement, and short pieces of dedicated research, such as applied political economy analysis or thematic research, can be conducted as part of the programme to inform its implementation.

- **Experiential mechanisms** capture insights from team members' expertise and their immersion within the programme's thematic and operational contexts.

- **Visioning mechanisms** focus on forecasting and scenario planning, engaging in future-oriented strategic thinking that may highlight discrepancies between the current trajectory and the desired outcomes.

- **Principled mechanisms** represent a form of sensibility driven by the values embraced by the programme, fostering awareness of issues and decision-making motivated by a commitment to those values. For example, some of CLARISSA's decisions aimed to equalise power relationships and distribute responsibility more evenly across the consortium.

All these mechanisms are interrelated, as part of dynamic processes of awareness-raising and reflection. For instance, during an AAR workshop, a review of the results from activities alongside team members' experiential insights arising from their exchanges with participants in the communities prompted the re-evaluation of some of the assumptions underlying the programme's theory of change, which then revealed the need to undertake targeted dedicated research and experiments.

4.2.3 Operational level of awareness

The operational level at which awareness emerges – adaptive governance, adaptive programming, and adaptive delivery (see section 2) – often determines who identifies the issue and in what context, and significantly influences the adaptation trajectory required to address the challenge. In instances where actions need to take place at a different level from where the issue was identified, awareness must be communicated to all relevant actors. For example, some of the issues experienced by staff working with children in the PAR groups, as in the case of compensation to participants or the troubles affecting consent forms, eventually necessitated the involvement of the programme's leadership.

Table 4 outlines how CLARISSA operationalised its PAM approach to foster awareness, reflection, learning, and adaptation at each of the levels of adaptiveness. These levels, which were represented graphically in Figure 4, need to be deliberately interconnected to ensure mutual support, facilitating upward flows of awareness and requests for assistance, while trust and support flows cascade downward.

Table 4: Participatory adaptive management design in CLARISSA[14]

Adaptive delivery	Learning from PAR groups (children and stakeholders) is captured through programme-supported documentation of the PAR process, including monitoring qualitative and quantitative indicators to assess how the groups are working (performance and facilitation) and what they are achieving (innovations and outcomes). Local implementation teams (facilitators and documenters) periodically review the learning to adapt implementation in consultation with the country-level team. Regular management meetings and ad hoc mini AARs support the piloting and adjustment of approaches.
Adaptive programming	Facilitated AARs are conducted on a six-monthly and annual basis within each country and across all countries, with monitoring data and learning from programme activities – including PAR groups and the partnership's self-evaluation process – serving as main inputs. AARs examine the programme's main assumptions and produce actionable learning reports. The sequencing of AARs ensures that learning is communicated from the country to consortium level, allowing programme plans to be adapted accordingly.
Adaptive governance	Actionable learning is constantly fed upwards to the programme's leadership, and annually to the donor through reporting mechanisms. A collaborative relationship with the donor, established during the co-generation phase and maintained throughout implementation, enables the programme to steer toward its key objectives amid high degrees of uncertainty. Major programme adaptations, designed and agreed at the adaptive programming level, are approved by the donor.

Source: Authors' own, based on Apgar *et al.* (2022).

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14   The table complements the content of Table 2 and Figure 4.

Each of the adaptive layers is especially sensitive to certain types of issues and tends to inform different forms of programmatic improvement. They also operate at varying speeds and rates of change (Allana and Sparkman 2014); whereas changes at the adaptive delivery level may occur within weeks, those at the adaptive governance level typically align with reporting cycles. Given the discussed impact that relational issues can have, it is crucial for individuals at each scale to proactively capture signals from colleagues and teams from lower scales – including participants and stakeholders involved in the programme's activities – as distress calls may not always be transmitted through the formal channels. A good way to achieve this, as shown by the experience of CLARISSA, may be for people to cross the boundaries and engage and be present at the more operational levels. For example, the fact that the Country Coordinator spent significant time with the facilitators, engaging at different moments with most of their activities, significantly raised the self-confidence of the teams, promoting trust and strengthening communication flows.

4.2.4 Main factors contributing to failed awareness

A failure to recognise when things are going awry (whether due to inefficiency, poor implementation of actions, or misplaced efforts) can lead to persisting on a misguided path for too long, preventing timely course corrections, and potentially pushing the programme toward the 'game over' endpoint. Consequently, the awareness stage is one of the riskiest phases in the entire adaptation journey, as depicted in Figure 13, where there is no direct 'orange' route for recovery.

Our evaluation of CLARISSA surfaced three primary factors contributing to the oversight of issues, risks, and opportunities for the programme:

- **Capacity bottlenecks arise when teams – overwhelmed by competing priorities and heavy workloads – are stretched to their limits, impairing their ability to reflect and to identify and communicate issues promptly. CLARISSA's experience underscores the importance of finding a realistic balance between the programme's capacities and its ambitions. Focusing resources**

on activities and processes that yield the highest value, and gradually discarding less impactful elements, is crucial.

- **Communication issues, such as those derived from the reduction of face-to-face interactions due to Covid-19, have already been mentioned as undermining the capacity of the programme to quickly transfer awareness about incipient problems to some of the places where they needed to be considered and dealt with.**

- **Blind spots and biases can lead programmes to miss important signals or completely disregard them. These biases are often associated with excessive self-confidence, afflicting especially experienced members in leadership positions. In other cases, blind spots may be associated with some of the aspirational principles that inspire the programme. Our evaluation underscores the need to acknowledge the detrimental effects of biases and power dynamics to enable the programme to fully utilise the insights and knowledge of all staff and partners (Barnes and Lonsdale 2023: 34). Executive decisions made at higher levels, which were not informed by previous operational demands, risk misjudging their impact on the lower levels. As a result, these decisions may cause issues that are difficult to expose and address later, especially if those most affected by them are hesitant to voice their concerns about executive choices. This challenge can be mitigated if the programme's leadership proactively questions their own decisions and fosters an environment that encourages staff to openly discuss the difficulties they encounter, as CLARISSA did. In fact, given the programme's participatory and adaptive nature, executive decisions were very rare, and taken with the intent to protect the space for participation, and then only after significant consultation. Nevertheless, the decision to adopt Microsoft Teams as the programme's primary knowledge sharing platform, which was outlined in section 3.1, may have been affected by such biases, where the leadership failed to fully recognise the difficulties and missed opportunities resulting from the decision, and especially the way it was taken and implemented.**

4.3 STAGE 2: REFLECTION AND LEARNING

Following the successful identification of a challenge or an opportunity for the programme, a new phase starts where a series of reflective activities allow the programme to deepen its understanding of the issue, determine its potential impacts, and establish the best approaches available to handle it.

This reflection and learning stage leverages existing evidence, combines it with perspectives and insights available throughout the programme teams, and may result in a recognition of the need to approach and do some things differently. In some cases, beyond what is done or how it is done, what really matters is why it is done, because a change in the motivations and the commitments that trigger actions may, in itself, transform what is achievable. Deep adaptations may not just involve changing activities, or the practices and principles that guide them, but even the beliefs and perceptions of team members with regard to what is possible and desirable. This is something that happens in many collective and individual efforts, where progress lags not because of the team or the person reaching the top of what they could possibly achieve, but because of reaching the limits of the method, of the questioning frame they are using. So there is a need to go back to the drawing board, ask deeper questions and embrace a new approach. In order to speed up and be more effective, one may actually need to slow down for a while. Ultimately, effectiveness is less about how hard one

works than how well one learns (Grant 2023). Learning and adaptation, moreover, frequently need to happen simultaneously at multiple levels (from individual to organisational, to systemic) and involve different actors connected through a series of interwoven relationships, to inspire deeper transformational learning processes that can also question the current way things are done (Ørnemark 2016).

4.3.1 Depth of change and types of learning

Table 5 schematises these important reflections, connecting the depth of change and the depth of learning, which is characterised through the notion of multiple-loop types of learning first introduced by Argyris in the 1970s (Argyris and Schon 1978). The table suggests a relationship between the types of learning and the nature of the changes they motivate, from rather shallow and operational changes to deepest strategic rearrangements. The theory of change that we established for this evaluation, which was illustrated in Figure 5, similarly pointed to linkages between the adaptive layers at which participatory action learning happens and their associated programmatic improvements at the adaptive governance, adaptive programming, and adaptive delivery layers. It would be tempting to conclude, as frequently hinted by the adaptive management literature, that the deeper forms of learning correspond to the leadership ranks within development programmes, while local delivery teams should focus on the operational, single-loop learning, optimising how to do things rather than

Table 5: Depth of change and learning type

Depth of change	Type of learning	
Activities	Single-loop learning	How we do? Are we doing things right?
Tools		
Practices		
Principles	Double-loop learning	What we do? Are we doing the right things?
Structures		
Mindsets	Triple-loop learning	Why we do? Are we doing things for the right reasons? Who do we need to be?
Perceptions		

Source: Authors' own, based on Prieto Martín *et al.* (2017), Ramalingam and Mitchell (2022), and Argyris and Schon (1978).

questioning which things are done, or why (Barnes and Lonsdale 2023).

However, the evaluation of CLARISSA's experience suggests that all types of learning may need to happen at each of the layers for PAM to be truly effective. It is certainly the case that triple-loop learning means something different when performed at the delivery layer by the community mobilisers from what it means when undertaken by the programme leadership in their strategic conversations with the donor; but deep learning demands that everyone involved in the programme keeps questioning the hows, whats, and whys of what they do. In fact, each layer's learning seems to depend on the others: triple-loop learning at the delivery layer (for example), with delivery teams examining why they do what they do, may be the trigger for double-loop learning at the programming layer, and then enable the reframing of future approaches. It is difficult to imagine that the deepest triple-loop learning could happen at the governance layer unless it is already happening at the delivery and programming layers, as by default those at the top tend to lack awareness, humility, and time required for effective self-questioning. This was, for example, to some extent observable in CLARISSA's capacity-development strategies, which seemed to assume that partners holding leadership and programming responsibilities at the consortium level did not need any capacity-development support or sensitisation about PAM (Prieto Martín 2022; Widmer *et al*. 2022).

A final important aspect of learning that CLARISSA illustrated is the profound **need for unlearning** to enable the kind of deep transformational learning involved in changes in the perceptions and beliefs of individuals involved in the programme. This happened with regard to the teams' mindsets on the capacity of children as change agents. CLARISSA was led by recognised experts in children's rights and child protection, and from the very beginning the programme was framed as child-centred, with all partners entirely committed to the approach. However, some team members had doubts, and some prejudices, regarding what children could actually do. But the programme dared to try, and the journey of interaction with the children came to challenge their 'worldview': during the life story collection and analysis process, it was decided that children themselves would collect a share of the stories, be heavily involved in their analysis and interpretation, and later decide which issues each of the action research groups would work on. This worked much better than anticipated. The experience shook the perceptions of the team, shifting their own assumptions about what is possible, and allowing them

to have real faith in children's abilities, thereby reinforcing the children's leading role in other programme activities (Sayem *et al*. 2023; Karki *et al*. 2022; Sayem *et al*. 2022). Children were seen less as passive subjects in need of protection, and considered more as capable individuals with important experiential knowledge and agency to change their life circumstances.

Another key unlearning capacity that the evaluation highlighted is the ability to forget, or at least relegate, those parts of the evidence collected that are less relevant at a given moment – that is, a capacity to focus the limited resources and reflective attention where it matters more. As a result, one of the things that needs to be continuously adapted as a programme develops is the kind of evidence it collects and analyses, focusing on those pieces of data that contribute the most to meaningful learning.

4.3.2 Operationalisation of CLARISSA's reflection and learning approach

In their examination of effective MEL systems within complex international development contexts, Serpe *et al*. (2022) identify three systematic and intentional elements that facilitate reflection and learning. First, the establishment of mechanisms for intentional, ongoing collection of data on the project performance and the evolution of its contexts. Second, the implementation of clear, inclusive processes for regular reflection on this data, linking it directly to decision-making. This often includes participatory or partner-led methods to gather comprehensive feedback from staff, partners, and other stakeholders involved in the day-to-day aspects of the programme. Third, the creation of enabling structures that promote adaptive mindsets and attitudes within programme teams, ensuring a culture that supports continuous improvement and responsiveness. These were all elements integrated in CLARISSA's MEL system, whose operationalisation we briefly discuss in the next sections.

Extensive and constant gathering of data about the programme's actions

CLARISSA's data-gathering efforts aimed to produce useful, timely, and practical insights that could be used to inform programme activities, guide programme management, and respond to research and evaluation questions included in the programme's learning agenda. CLARISSA, as a research and innovation programme, distinguished itself through an intensive documentation approach.

Examples of activities that were documented in exceptional detail include the life story collection and analysis process, action research groups with children and other stakeholders, children's journeys mapping, interviews and shadowing of business owners, children advocacy groups, GIS mapping of the neighbourhoods, outcome harvesting processes, participants' feedback mechanism, and many other kinds of team meetings, among others. Documentation of the action research groups, for example, included the detailed minutes from each meeting, supported with photographic evidence, reflections from the facilitators, and a regular assessment of the progression of the group with regard to aspects like ownership, trust, creativity, or innovation. Interestingly, at the beginning of the programme, the programme staff involved in children's activities felt a bit sceptical about the need for such extensive documentation, wondering if it would be used effectively. However, they soon observed how the documentation provided the basis for evaluation, analysis, and decision-making in the programme. The documents and the information recorded in the meeting notes were frequently referred to during workshops and in interactions with stakeholders, where consideration could be given to specific things said by somebody in a particular meeting. Facilitators, documenters, and community mobilisers also realised how the data collected helped them and the children and community groups to advance with their own learning processes, to know what to do next. As a result, they ended up wholeheartedly embracing the documentation practices.

Another significant example of evidence use was how the SP+ component decisions were guided by research and data analysis, rather than based on pre-existing assumptions from the programme leadership. The social protection component performed a comprehensive community-level needs assessment, with focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, household census, and participatory neighbourhood mapping (among other tools) to uncover the needs of people in the communities. These needs were used to form groups at the community level, on topics such as early marriage and drug addiction.

Intensive planning and active validation of strategies and actions

CLARISSA's highly experimental planning approach enhanced learning by promoting self-questioning during the preliminary design of activities, which was followed by trialling and subsequent re-planning. Actionable learning reports from AARs and mini-AARs, for example, frequently included suggestions for new approaches and actions, while also emphasising the need for their detailed

and thoughtful planning. This underscores the teams' **commitment to validating ideas through experimental tests, piloting, and general analysis and research**, and their desire for learning to be systematic and to happen as early as possible, rather than being the result of raw experimentation or improvisation. Even when the planning fails to be accurate – as with the detailed calculations done of the capacity required to run action research groups, which subsequent ground-truthing demonstrated to be quite optimistic – it provides the basis for subsequent validation and allows a preliminary allocation of resources.

Another factor contributing to active learning included the **regular reflection on past performance, combined with future orientation and forward-looking visioning exercises**, which involves a conscious effort to leverage the expertise from the team and all evidence collected, while being mission-driven and constantly thinking about the future. One example of this is the decision to reduce to six months the period when households would receive cash transfers as part of the SP+ intervention. Different options and scenarios were evaluated, mostly based on the experience and learnings acquired by the community mobilisers through their daily interaction with the communities, considering (for example) how the communities would react to each scenario. Once all options had been analysed, the whole team was asked to vote on their preferred option. Another example of the level of internalisation of this reflective attitude comes in the form of a 'joke' shared by the whole Nepali team, who would greet each other (and especially those involved in MEL activities) with a 'what went well!?' – a joyous adaptation of the central question used from their AARs and mini-AARs.

A **risk-aware prioritisation of options, balanced with high degrees of ambition and an action bias**, constitutes an important element of the approach, as the capacity to anticipate the most critical risks for the programme and explicit work to avoid them (for example, through early validation of its most critical assumptions) is central to adaptive management. A risk register sheet was used to keep track of key risks, and was complemented by a decisions log that detailed how the programme adaptations contributed to mitigating and avoiding the identified risks. For example, when the initial country-level AARs workshops surfaced challenges affecting a theory of change assumption regarding how programme activities would lead to the emergence of innovative interventions, additional dedicated research was conducted, and the set-up and facilitation approach

of the action research groups was adjusted to reinforce the mechanisms leading to innovation.

Finally, the action learning approach paid significant **attention to relationship-building and stakeholder engagement in all the programme's activities**. However, a relationship monitoring tool that tracked the interactions with partners, stakeholders, and other organisations the programme works with or wants to influence was only introduced late in the programme's lifetime. This is consistent with the usual delay that the advocacy function has when compared with other programme components, but it seems an earlier introduction would have been beneficial.

Intentional capacity development and support to encourage reflective practices

These were included in CLARISSA to enhance both technical skills and behavioural competencies required for reflexivity and adaptability (Apgar and Burns 2021). The teams' capacity-development plans were based on a self-assessment of their needs, and combined diverse learning modalities such as 'learning for action', 'learning in action', and 'learning from action' across individual, team, country team, and cross-country levels (Widmer *et al*. 2022). Capacity development was operationalised through a series of processes that included training, self-directed learning, reflexive practice, technical backstopping, coaching, mentoring, and participation in collective reflection and learning spaces such as AARs and design workshops.

This all required the allocation of sufficient time to teams and team members to engage in collaborative reflection, in the form of individual journalling, debriefings, mini-retrospectives, and AAR workshops, which facilitated the emergence, sharing, and application of new insights. Those reflection moments also help to make the whole process participatory, generating a better shared understanding, and promoting a collective ownership of the programme's decisions. It is interesting to note how the reports from the first round of AAR workshops already included mentions of some of the critical adaptations introduced later by the programme, including the need for capacity building around adaptive management, the adaptation of partnerships rubrics to the country contexts, the review of assumptions within the theory of change, the restructuring of the programme's governance away from workstreams, and emergent relational issues. AARs seem to have worked well to surface the awareness (already emerging in the delivery teams) about key aspects that needed to change.

4.3.3 Factors contributing to failed reflection and learning

In the previous section we mentioned **capacity bottlenecks**, **communication issues**, and **blind spots and biases** as key issues that may block progression from the 'Awareness' stage into later phases of the adaptation process. These challenges fully apply to the 'Reflection and learning' stage as well, as they can all prevent an incipient awareness of a problem being transformed into a deeper understanding of its implications and the options available to respond to it. A blockage of reflection and learning can also result from **competing principles**, such as the cases where the need to properly safeguard children stood in the way of promoting their autonomy and leadership, at least for a while, until a creative compromise or reframing could be found. The learning blockage could also arise out of a **sense of powerlessness**, maybe because of previous programmes' decisions or commitments, which limit the range of actions available, or because it feels already too late to introduce the kind of structural changes required.

The cases we observed in CLARISSA were, in fact, a result of the combination of several of the factors mentioned. The consortium structure, for example (which was presented in Figure 2), was quite complex, including the programme lead, several international partners, their national partner organisations in the countries, and community grass-roots partners supporting them – all connected through an intricate network of contractual relationships. The risks associated with high degrees of internal complexity – in the form of overlapping communication layers, increased coordination effort, matrix management, conflicting organisational cultures, bureaucratic burden, etc. – were voiced at the early stages of the programme. However, at the time, such concerns were disregarded because other considerations, such as the desire to promote equity within the consortium and benefit from its diversity, were considered more important.

These kinds of contractual decisions cannot be reversed or easily adjusted later, and should always be taken with extreme caution. They were further compounded by another early failure to listen and reflect, this time related to the programme's principle to 'work as an integrated team'. Such desire to work as one team, transcending organisational boundaries, was strongly advocated by the programme leadership despite receiving significant pushback from some of the organisations involved. But in a context of very restricted face-to-face interactions

due to Covid-19, which multiplied the burden associated with communication issues, significant relational issues emerged that were not easy to acknowledge for a long time, and were very difficult to handle afterwards. In fact, the issues could only start to be dealt with once the integrated team approach had been (pragmatically) relaxed, and teams were allowed to work separately, leading to a significant and somewhat paradoxical improvement of collaboration afterwards.

4.4 STAGE 3: DECISION-MAKING

The decision-making stage is when the insights and options arising from rounds of collective reflection and learning are turned into an agreement to act in a certain way. In some cases, the decision-making is intentionally separated from the reflection and learning (as, for example, when AAR workshops are used to deepen the understanding of a problem and to identify possible responses), but the final step of deciding which one to take is left for a different moment and space. In other cases, decision-making and reflection and learning can be tangled, and gradually happen through several iterations of the stages 1–3 pathway, where awareness and insights get propagated to the places where the appropriate decision-making can be done.

4.4.1 Active vs passive decision-making

So far, in our discussion of the PAM adaptation stages, we have looked at instances leading to what could be named **active decision-making**, like when an AAR results in the introduction of a new activity or an agreement to do more of something and less of something else. These are part of the active introduction of adaptation displayed by Figure 13. However, in CLARISSA, we also observed the pervasiveness and critical importance of a form of **passive decision-making** process, more subtle and probably less conscious or intentional, where decisions are not explicitly made or agreed, but nonetheless change happens. It corresponds to a form of adaptation by stealth, or by exhaustion, which normally involves some form of not-doing, like reducing the intensity of an activity, not prioritising the development of some tools or approaches from the plan, or even involving gradual and tacit non-compliance with some of the agreed tasks.

The main reason for activities to be abandoned is limited capacity and time, which forces team members to focus their energy on those elements of their work that add
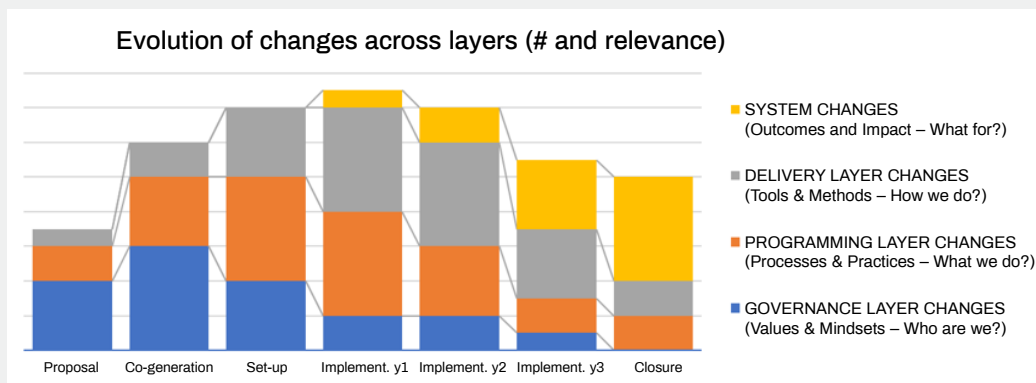
the most value. When there is an imbalance between the existing capacity and the level of demand, some form of passive discrimination will necessarily happen. This should not be seen as wholly negative, because it can help distinguish the most valuable tasks at a given moment. However, such inactions could also be a form of passive resistance by some individuals, teams or organisations, in cases where decisions were taken without their full allegiance. Ideally, cases of passive adaptation should be monitored and assessed as part of the programme's reflection processes, because they provide powerful signals both of challenges and potential capacity issues. Examples of such poor compliance include the use of the decision log, which initially was updated systematically by the whole team, but gradually was less used. Another example would be the participant feedback mechanism, which was envisioned in the original design as a keystone for the programme's downward accountability (Apgar *et al*. 2020), which would help close any monitoring gaps by allowing participants and stakeholders to independently provide inputs through a variety of channels. However, it was never fully implemented, because once the programme started it was not felt as valuable or needed as initially thought, as the programme activities provided participants with plenty of opportunities for deep engagement. A participant feedback mechanism was created for the social protection component (Jannat 2023), but it was meant to be used to quickly detect and address problems related to the cash transfers.

4.4.2 Programme phases and types of decision-making

With regards to programme decision-making, it is important to note how the different phases that typically structure international development programmes (such as proposal, inception, early implementation, late implementation, and closure) require and motivate different types of adaptation decisions. The 'windows of opportunity' that get opened in each of the phases, and the ways in which they can be capitalised, are different (Kleinfeld 2015). As a result, some of the adaptations need to happen at a given stage or are no longer viable, conditioning future adaptive opportunities for the programme, its effectiveness, and even success chances. In general, the more a programme advances in its development, the more its adaptation potential will be affected by its previous trajectory and decisions.

Figure 14 provides a conceptual visualisation of how the number, intensity, and character of the changes available

Figure 14: Evolution of different types of change across programme phases

Evolution of changes across layers (# and relevance)

SYSTEM CHANGES
(Outcomes and Impact – What for?)

DELIVERY LAYER CHANGES
(Tools & Methods – How we do?)

PROGRAMMING LAYER CHANGES
(Processes & Practices – What we do?)

GOVERNANCE LAYER CHANGES
(Values & Mindsets – Who are we?)

Proposal | Co-generation | Set-up | Implement. y1 | Implement. y2 | Implement. y3 | Closure

Source: Authors' own.

to a programme evolve along its lifetime. Whereas at the early stages of a programme, strategic opportunities dominate, once implementation starts, the focus tends to go into programmatic and operational adaptations. As the closure period nears, most of the attention turns into adaptations that aim to intensify impacts and promote their sustainability, as it may feel 'too late' for other types of adaptations. The gradual evolution in the character of the key adaptations considered by the programme could, for example, be observed when studying the reports from CLARISSA's AARs along the lifetime of the programme.

Taking into account how these phase transitions condition the adaptive capacity of programmes, it would be advisable to plan or anticipate the different types of emergence a programme will face in each of them (Lowe *et al.* 2022) to be better prepared to leverage the opportunities as they arise. For example, the profound restructuration of CLARISSA's governance model (described in section 3.1), transitioning from a workstream-led to a country-led management approach, could happen, partly, because of several favourable contingent factors coming together, which opened a particularly fortunate 'window of opportunity' that the programme seized. But if it had been less lucky, the programme could have stuck with a not really fit-for-purpose structure for much longer. Retrospectively, therefore, it seemed that the programme could have anticipated as part of its planning this probable need to transform or adjust its management structures when transitioning from the co-generation stage into the implementation phases of the programme, and could have planned to do so as part of the set-up period.

4.4.3 Participatory decision-making and empowerment

PAM's participatory and empowering features are key in relation to the decision-making stage. They refer to the extent to which, and the **ways in which, programme participants, stakeholders, and implementing staff can influence the programme's decisions and course**. The adaptive management literature tends to recognise the need to empower delivery teams (Learning Lab 2020), an aim that is further reinforced by the recent 'locally led development' agenda (Ingram 2022; Baguios *et al.* 2021; Office of Local Sustainability 2020). However, there are nuances regarding what character this empowerment should have; if it could be strategic in nature and affect the programme's aims and approaches, or remain restricted to operational aspects and mostly contribute to improving the efficacy of delivery (Barnes and Lonsdale 2023).

CLARISSA's experience recognises that, ultimately, the programme leadership needs to steer the programme, and has the last word with regards to most relevant decisions. However, effective PAM demands that there is a **high degree of alignment and harmony among the teams operating at each of the layers**. In the same way that deep questioning and learning needs to occur everywhere, each of the layers also needs to participate in the decision-making. Only when there is a tight and deliberative interconnection among layers, with the layers closer to the ground providing most of the evidence that informs decision-making, and also validating the choices established at other layers, will agreements promote sufficient endorsement and shared ownership

for the new practices to be fully embraced and sustained (Power 2016).

What was observed in CLARISSA is that the levels closer to the ground were empowered precisely through some degree of **self-constraint in the use of arbitrary power by the upper levels**, which promoted a form of 'grounded accountability' toward partners, implementers, and participants (Prieto Martín *et al*. 2017). This enabled a deeply participatory decision-making process, supported through transparent and horizontal communication systems that allowed everybody to talk to everybody when decisions were made. This process was sustained not only through the AAR workshop architecture, but also plenty of bilateral meetings – including management meetings, strategy board meetings, meetings of the Process Design and the Thematic Research teams, one-on-one calls with the programme leadership, and meetings of the Country Operations teams – which permitted everybody to contribute to the discussion of the issues and to the collective decisions.

Such a system may not always work efficiently, and there were cases of deadlocks and delays (such as when deciding how to compensate action research group participants), but it tended to deliver good compromises, reinforcing trust and alignment from the programme direction to the individuals working with children. If, as suggested by Kania, Kramer and Senge (2018: 16), 'there is no systems change without organisational change, and no organisational change without individual change', it is essential to build fluid relationships across the organisations and individuals involved in the programme, enabling each of them to enhance their learning capacity. Even if the strategies, approaches, and tools used at each level differ, they should remain as aligned as possible to form a coherent whole (Lowe *et al*. 2022; Prieto Martín 2017).

Empowering participants and stakeholders
One of our evaluation questions referred to the extent to which the participatory engagement of children and other stakeholders in the learning and adaptation processes allowed them to significantly influence the programme. Based on our interviews, the empowerment of participants could be considered from two main perspectives. The first refers to **empowerment in relation to their contexts of life and work**, how their abilities, self-confidence, relationships, agency, etc. grew and allowed them to try and achieve what matters to them, innovating and influencing their environment. The second perspective refers to **empowerment and agency within the programme, and children's capacity to influence the programme's agenda and decisions**. CLARISSA's adaptive management approach, and particularly the participatory action research (PAR) modality used to work with the children, has been quite successful in supporting both.

Children did not just share their life stories – which provided the evidence basis for the whole programme's research and action agendas – but indeed collected the stories themselves, and then led their analysis through the creation of system maps that explored the relationships between the different causal factors leading children into WFCL. Children chose the topics that each action research group would work on and headed the elaboration of the groups' theories of change and action, which guided their efforts to address the issues. Based on their own investigations, children designed, tested, and carried out a myriad of innovative initiatives, engaging with local stakeholders such as schools, business owners, and local authorities to (for example) set up an Education Fund for Child Workers, organise rallies, open a training centre that promoted the use of occupational safety equipment, create a scheme allowing admission of working children in schools, improve recruitment practices at AES businesses to better protect children, and many others.

The PAM approach also gave participants, stakeholders, and staff significant leverage to influence programme decisions. Much of the influence of the action research groups was channelled through the process of continuous documentation of the activities which, as discussed previously, provided an evidence base that was extensively referred to as part of the AAR reflection moments, and supported decision-making. But they also had significant opportunities to exercise their agency directly – for example, in the action research groups, children were not just consulted but were asked to lead, to decide by themselves what they wanted to do, and what kind of support they needed.

There was certainly a plan and a methodology framing how the interactions and work were conducted in the PAR groups. But this still allowed for much autonomy to make decisions locally, and to lobby for the things the children and the staff working with them saw as important. Children would normally discuss and propose what to do, and through the facilitators' team their requests would reach the country management, which would normally encourage them to go ahead. There were, for example, cases where, according to the plan, an action

research group was meant to be closed. However, the children did not agree because they wanted to continue working and carrying out more actions, and decided to do so. So, CLARISSA then extended the support given to these groups for at least another six months. Interestingly, in some cases, it was no longer facilitators who convened the children to participate in meetings, but children who organised their meetings, and would request the facilitator's participation on a 'by demand' basis, whenever they felt they could benefit from their advice. Through the participatory processes within the action research groups, children learnt a lot, realising why the iterative and explorative process they were following was important for them, and how it allowed them to achieve their own goals.

In all they did, the facilitators always tried to accommodate, as much as possible, the children's needs – for example, by constantly adapting methodologies, schedules, and training modalities, by adjusting their working hours to better match the children's availability, or by choosing venues convenient to them. More than that, facilitators developed children's capacities and agency by treating them with respect, as decision makers, whose opinions were always listened to and seriously considered. Facilitators consciously attempted to allow things to happen; being aware of their own capacity to influence but allowing most things to be decided by children.

It is very interesting to note the parallel between how facilitators described their work with the children – which to a large extent consisted in holding and structuring the action research groups' collaborative space in ways that allowed children's participation to be fruitful and encouraging children through the establishment of relationships based on trust and respect – and the way they described how CLARISSA management and the programme processes encouraged them to do their work. There seems to be a high degree of fractality being manifested across the levels at which the programme operates.

Although CLARISSA's original proposal considered the creation of a children's panel directly advising on the strategic direction of the programme, and thus complementing the insights provided by the Strategy Board (see Figure 9 and Box 1), this option was not implemented because it was later deemed that it could result in tokenism rather than offering a meaningful participation channel to the children.

4.4.4 Factors contributing to failed decision-making

The main reason why the learning arising from collective reflection is not turned into action is a **perceived lack of capacity**. There may still not be enough clarity regarding what to do, or the actions that seem to be required may not be achievable by the programme because of the multiple constraints it faces, in terms of its duration, resources available, its internal structure, relational issues, or any other constraint.

A failure to establish a course of action normally leaves things as they are, until a moment arrives where action becomes possible, or it is already too late to do anything. In some cases, the learning obtained is set aside and to some extent forgotten, until the re-emergence of related challenges forces its re-discovery. Generally, when the decision-making gets blocked, the 'orange arrows' pathway would be followed to revisit the 'Awareness' stage, deepening the understanding of the issue through new reflection and learning processes which, hopefully, will allow the problem to be framed differently, in ways that motivate decision-making.

An example of CLARISSA failing to take action to address a problem identified by the country teams refers to the need they had for local advocacy materials written in local language and condensing the most critical learning obtained by the programme at any given moment. These materials would have supported early engagement and influencing of relevant local audiences and stakeholders. However, for different reasons, such materials were not produced until quite late. There might have been a strategic misunderstanding within CLARISSA of the level of advocacy support required by the country operations, and its timeliness. This might, however, underline a general problem that adaptive programmes face: it is very difficult to plan for its more 'emergent' elements such as (in the case of CLARISSA) the particular areas of focus where evidence and insights emerged, and the best approaches to support advocacy around them.

4.5 STAGE 4: EXECUTION

The 'Execution' stage corresponds to the moment when the agreed decisions are implemented. This is where the adaptations are finally introduced and where adaptive management materialises in actual changes. In the previous sections we discussed how different aspects of the programme may limit its capacity to progress through the preliminary stages of the adaptation process. The

most relevant of them concerning the 'Execution' stage is what we termed 'passive decision-making', where limitations of capacity from the teams or relational issues could hinder the execution of the adaptation plans. It is worth reflecting, from CLARISSA's experience, on the core adaptive capabilities that enable programmes to be adaptive, and the implications of 'relational complexity' for the adaptive capacity of international development programmes.

4.5.1 Core practices for effective adaptive management

CLARISSA's MEL system was designed to support adaptive management by tightly integrating MEL tasks with the needs and activities from implementing staff, and by prioritising actionable learning over the collection of performance indicators used for reporting (Sharp, Riemenschneider and Selvester 2022; Valters and Wild 2019). CLARISSA explicitly considered, as part of its approach, a series of core practices that are deemed essential to promote adaptive capacity, and are described in Box 4 (Apgar and Burns 2021). These basically include the need to have **empowered people and teams**, which are tightly embedded in the programme's operational context, to be able to sense how it evolves and react to it; and a **continuous improvement culture**, manifested

through experimental action and learning, and a bias toward early and iterative provision of value.

These core practices informed the programme's capacity development efforts (Widmer *et al*. 2022), and also supported the initial development of CLARISSA's partnership rubric (Apgar *et al*. 2020), a self-evaluation tool created by representatives of all consortium partners at the end of the inception phase, which allows the teams and individuals to assess themselves and the programme against a series of principles for good adaptive programming. Those principles include: good communication; team identity; openness, honesty, and mutual trust; impact orientation; inclusivity and equitability; adaptability and flexibility; and entrepreneurial culture.

The use of the partnership rubric was integrated into the AAR workshops to provide systematic monitoring of the quality and evolution of the partnership, and was used in different ways and in different contexts during the lifetime of the programme (Snijder *et al*. 2023a), promoting self-awareness about relational issues. CLARISSA's experience of continuous self-inspection generally confirms the importance of all these principles to promote effective adaptive management. The results from the last self-assessment conducted using the partnership rubric tool characterised CLARISSA as having a healthy adaptive capacity, particularly strong with regards to team

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Box 4: Core practices for effective adaptive management

Empowered people

- **Energised staff and teams:** Teams should be ambitious, creative, trusted, multifunctional, and sustained, with open and honest communication within and across levels of action, and be largely self-directed.
- **Contextual embeddedness:** Plans and activities build in continued engagement with partners, intermediaries, communities, and problem-owners, monitoring both the external context in which the programme operates and the internal organisational context that enables the programme to function.

Continuous improvement

- **Promote experimental and action learning:** Acknowledging the need for cyclic and data-driven reflective deliberation among the different partners and stakeholders, to improve actions, tools, processes, and outcomes.
- **Focus on value-generation:** Aiming for early, frequent, and incremental provision of value to recipients and relevant stakeholders, using a risk-aware and risk-avoidant iterative delivery.

Source: Authors' own, based on Apgar and Burns (2021).

identity, communication, frequent use of adaptations, and people being listened to, and empowered to act on their ideas. The weakest elements corresponded to the general risk-taking capacity and some latent issues around team relationships.

4.5.2 Congruence between PAM and PAR

There is one special characteristic of CLARISSA that differentiates it from other adaptive management programmes and significantly deepened its PAM capacities: the fact that it uses **participatory action research (PAR) as its main delivery modality**, which generates innovative and agile, locally owned action. Rather than as an adaptive programme, CLARISSA was originally envisioned as an attempt to conduct systemic PAR with marginalised communities, while working at scale, and in a deeply participatory manner (Burns *et al*. 2021). The whole programme is therefore operationalised through the creation and facilitation of a constellation of action research groups led by children involved in WFCL. As was shown above, PAR is, in itself, a form of adaptive management operating at the action research group level. The extension of the PAR approach to the management of the whole programme provided the basis for CLARISSA to be framed as a participatory adaptive programme.

The alignment between PAR and PAM – where PAR can be seen as a way to perform adaptive management and, correspondingly, PAM can be seen as a way to apply an action research approach to the management of a programme (Apgar and Burns 2021) – promotes congruence across all aspects of the programme, facilitating the operationalisation and management of the adaptive approach. In CLARISSA, the same adaptive mindset applies to the management of the programme and to the activities it conducts – something that rarely happens in other adaptive programmes. For example, the theory of change established by the programme to theorise how PAR leads to ownership and collaborative action by the children, states:

> *... When there is a relational space in which people feel safe and there is good facilitation with a focus on sharing power, synergy can emerge, meaning that the knowledge and perspectives are weaved together in new and creative ways which will result in innovative actions being planned and implemented.* (Snijder and Apgar 2021: 25)

This is something that to a great extent could apply to how CLARISSA works as an adaptive programme.

4.5.3 Relational complexity relevance

The importance of the 'partnership context' as one of the key domains where issues and challenges emerge was raised in section 4.2, which discussed the 'Awareness' stage. The partnership context includes all arrangements and dynamics within and between the organisations involved in the programme's consortium or supporting the delivery of the programme's actions. In section 4.3, which discussed the 'Reflection and learning' stage, we also discussed how CLARISSA's rather complex consortium structure and its principle to work as an 'integrated team' created significant challenges for the programme. Relational issues become, however, especially relevant during the 'Execution' stage, as this is when they might influence adaptation plans becoming fruitless.

Given that the contractual arrangements and partnership structure are difficult to change once a programme has begun to be implemented, a failure to address such problems early on increases enormously the internal coordination effort, dragging the programme's effectiveness. **Alignment and agreement among consortium members and among key individuals** is a critical and strategic attribute of adaptive programmes. Special attention needs to be paid to these aspects, keeping track of the different characteristics of each partner and the evolutions they experience during the lifetime of the programme – for example, regarding changes in their leadership.

Each of the institutions involved in a programme normally has its own way of doing things, which is influenced by its internal structure, organisational culture, operating practices, legal limitations, budgetary requirements, and even the vested interests they may have. Moreover, the multiple countries where a programme operates may be characterised by distinctive attitudes toward hierarchy, collaboration, competition, need for visibility, etc., potentially complicating relationships among involved organisations. Finally, adaptations decided by the programme may need to go through the approval process of each of the partners, which may have different levels of flexibility depending on the topic.

CLARISSA provides a good example of how challenging this dimension is, and the need to find a good balance between the desire to benefit from a diversity of partners and the need to keep a consortium structure as simple as possible. CLARISSA was sensitive and strategic with regard to the importance of relationships, and from the programme's inception moment, the programme devoted significant efforts to get its consortium architecture right and to encourage cohesion among the partners. Nonetheless, it faced relational challenges, partly as a result of the communication limitations resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic.

For example, the programme established a series of **defining principles** (see Box 5) to guide its actions and to promote alignment across the consortium (Burns *et al*. 2021). Our evaluation showed how these principles were indeed recognised as part of their own identity by all people involved in the programme, though the 'integrated team' principle (as we discussed earlier) proved problematic and had itself to be reframed before it really became endorsed by all partners.

4.5.4 Relational management

In fact, several interviewees considered that the very open attitude that characterised CLARISSA's leadership approach should be considered as an additional defining principle for the programme. Their approach could be named **relational management**, and refer to an attempt to manage the programme through the careful tending of the 'relationships' between the different partners.

Such an approach was deemed essential for conducting effective PAM, precisely because partner relationships are responsible for a big share of the complexity that adaptive programmes handle. The premise is that managers deal with people, which then deal with the context and its many challenges; so people should come first, and relationships of trust should be built though the promotion of respectful engagements between all partners. This requires a certain **style of leadership that is supportive, culturally aware, and sensitive to the limitations but also the strengths of the different partners** – a leadership style that is very open to feedback and input from everybody, encouraging all team members to speak up, knowing that their inputs are welcome and will get a fair hearing, even if they may not be taken on board (Edmondson and Harvey 2017). Ideally, such leadership style needs to be spread through the managers working at the different levels of the programme.

Relational management, however, cannot be achieved just through positive one-on-one interactions. It requires **appropriate organisational structures and processes, and support from a communication and knowledge-sharing infrastructure**, which altogether guarantee transparency and allow the different partners to stay updated on all relevant developments and decisions, and to get involved in all the important conversations. This is why the reorganisation of CLARISSA's governance model (described in section 3.1) was instrumental to favour a functional relational management approach.

Finally, **staff dedication and stability** play an important role. As part of the relational management approach, CLARISSA promoted that most of the staff working on the

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Box 5: Defining characteristics of the CLARISSA programme

- **Participatory:** Children and other stakeholders generate questions that are important to them, gather evidence and analyse it themselves, and then generate solutions to the problems they identify.
- **Child-centred:** Perspectives and voices of children are at the heart of our programme design, including children who are often ignored, such as children with disabilities, girls and young women, and those in the very poorest households.
- **Adaptive:** Effective learning processes are built into our programme design so that we can make changes that are needed.
- **Integrated:** All of the skills and attributes of partners are integrated into each country programme, rather than creating silos delivered by individual partners.

Source: Authors' own, based on Apgar *et al*. (2022).

delivery had a full-time dedication to the programme and aimed to retain them for the duration of the programme. The different partners recruited staff with high adaptive potential, with a good mix of adaptive mindsets and qualifications, and behaviours (Salib 2019).

4.6 STAGES 5 AND 6: SUCCESS, WHICH IS SUSTAINED

This section considers the final two stages of the adaptation process, which question in the first place whether the actions taken resulted in the intended effect, meaning that the adaptation was successful, and if so, whether the intended effect and the very adaptive actions were sustainable, and therefore led to a sustained success.

Given the experimental character of adaptive management, whenever an adaptation is introduced, accompanying **proxy indicators, criteria, or signals should be defined** that allow an assessment of whether it worked as desired. It is very important not just to execute the agreed adaptation decisions, but also to validate how well they achieved their aims. It could be that a new approach was not as effective as originally thought, or maybe the implementation of the action was challenging and failed to be conducted satisfactorily. Whatever the reason for failure, the issue that triggered the adaptation process will still be unabated, and there will be a need to reflect and learn from the attempt and determine what can be done better or differently.

It could be a matter of trying again the same actions with just minimal adjustments. Or alternatively, as the flows from Figure 13 illustrate, the orange pathways could need to be followed to revisit the 'Decision-making' stage and establish an alternative course of action. Or maybe it is necessary to return to the 'Awareness' stage to better understand potential additional factors limiting success, which need to be considered. Or, finally, it might be necessary to acknowledge that the programme lacks the capacity to address the issue and return to the 'Planning' stage to adjust its general planning.

Thinking about the sustainability of the change is important because often, **what manages to work in the short term may not be doable, sustainably, in the longer term**. It may be easy to find the capacity required to pilot a new approach or introduce a new tool but, afterwards, the momentum usually fades amid competing priorities that redirect capacity to where it is most needed. This, in some way, causes a 'natural

selection' of the most valuable adaptations, which is not necessarily a bad thing, as it helps to recognise issues affecting the adaptations introduced, and may also help to further adjust them to evolving circumstances and needs. For example, as part of its capacity-development effort, CLARISSA introduced a mentoring scheme that allowed facilitators to meet regularly with senior management to discuss and problem-solve methodological issues. It was a successful initiative that everybody enjoyed, and it helped them to develop skills and self-confidence in a very targeted way. However, after some time, the demand for the sessions started to fade, and the frequency of the sessions had to be adjusted – a change that was welcomed as a signal that the original need had been mostly satisfied.

4.6.1 Creating the space for adaptation

There is an aspect of CLARISSA which deserves to be discussed in the context of the ('Sustained') 'Success' stages. It refers to how the programme created the **enabling environment and the authoritative space** that later allowed CLARISSA to decidedly pursue its profound adaptive management approach, and thus empowered the programme to achieve sustained success.

To some extent, such enabling space is the result of a continued strategic and relational effort that started with the submission of the proposal, but traversed several stages, in which the relationship with the donor was gradually deepened and the space for adaptability progressively enlarged.

The way in which CLARISSA's original proposal was structured – combining an innovative and challenging topic with the intention to use PAR as its main delivery modality – created the opportunity to later start a conversation with the donor about the programme's need for adaptiveness. It is important to note that CLARISSA's proposal was submitted using the standard FCDO template, which strictly limits word count and prescribes a series of sections that are not at all supportive of adaptive approaches. The proposal was evaluated, moreover, using assessment criteria that value predictability, and a clear and convincing pathway to success, and thus tend to dismiss anything that appears risky, unprecise, or too detached from the standard practice. The proposal thus contained just the 'seeds' of what could later become CLARISSA, to some extent disguised as 'Trojan mice' (Mahendra 2016) to avoid triggering any negative response from the system.

Once the first hurdle was passed and direct interaction with the donor started, relational management was used to orient the relationship toward trust and flexibility, which during the co-inception period was turned into a shared commitment (from the donor, the consortium leadership, and the extended partnership management) toward collaborative participation and a relational management approach, where most decisions are co-produced and co-owned. This allowed, for example, for agreement very early that no logframe would be used for CLARISSA, and the programme would be accountable not just in terms of results and outcomes but in terms of learning.

The design and planning of the programme included most of the elements that appear in more traditional programmes. For example, the budget was very thorough, with more than 400 different budget lines, and the logistical planning and the process planning were very detailed, with a detailed accounting of the expected outputs. What was different in CLARISSA is that these elements were kept very open in terms of content and structure, allowing for some elements to be defined later, at the right moment, once the programme had learnt enough. For example, neither the places nor the sectors where the programme would work were defined at the start. And the budgeting was oriented toward 'processes' rather than specific 'activities', allowing for flexibility, and also including significant resources reserved to attend to emergent aspects of the programme (like, for example, supporting the innovative actions undertaken by the action research groups). Flexibility is, in the first place, to be able to rearrange resources in the best way possible, and such budgeting arrangements were fundamental to allow the programme to operate flexibly afterwards, learning and being guided by its context. CLARISSA has always been in the situation where the real needs of the teams could be prioritised, budget-wise.

This shows how the **initial framing of the proposal and the preliminary negotiation and relationship-building stages with the donor are crucial for adaptive programmes** (Teskey and Tyrrel 2021), as they set the foundation for later discussions and create an enabling space that empowers both implementers and donors. Just as traditional, linear contractual arrangements restrict implementers from making necessary adaptations, they can also constrain donors' capacity to tolerate such changes. With appropriate arrangements and relationships in place, donors can just trust the judgement of the programme implementers, as they were able to do with CLARISSA.

The implementers of adaptive programmes must **navigate, leverage, and even tweak existing donor frameworks** (USAID 2023; FCDO 2021) to maximise flexibility while meeting their requirements for programme design, accountability, budgeting, and reporting. This approach not only facilitates the success of the programmes but also encourages the gradual evolution of donor policies. Convincing donors to adapt their systems is achieved more effectively by recognising the systems' potential strengths and flexibility, and by demonstrating how practical improvements can be achieved, rather than just by highlighting their flaws (Honig 2020).

To finalise the examination of the key stages and critical dimensions of PAM through the insights collected through our evaluation of the CLARISSA programme, Table 6 provides a summary of the characteristics of each stage, alongside the key concepts and tensions discussed, offering readers a comprehensive snapshot of the adaptive management journey and its complexities.

Table 6: Summary of learning about participatory adaptive management

	Characterisation of the stage	Key concepts and tensions
Stage 0. Planning	Detailed planning efforts provide the foundation of the adaptation cycle, establishing goals, tentative actions, resources, and timelines, as well as measurement approaches to track progress. To be effective, adaptations need to happen on top of a pre-existing plan.	• **Importance of foundational planning** that leaves room for emergence and adaptability. • **Challenge of balancing detailed planning with the need for flexibility and responsiveness to changes**: Planning not just as a prescriptive tool, but as a process fostering adaptability in response to accumulating knowledge and learning. • **Meta-planning**: Outlining higher-level plans in terms of processes rather than as rigid activities and outputs, enables gradual refinement. • **Spectrum of programming modalities** that progress from rigid to flexible to adaptive. All of them are normally present within a programme, as the need for adaptiveness varies across its components and phases, favouring a dynamic amalgamation of traditional and adaptive aspects.
Stage 1. Awareness	Awareness involves the recognition that a deviation from or refinement of the original plan is needed to respond to challenges or opportunities faced by the programme.	• **Different contexts where events or shifts lead to the emergence of awareness**: External operating context of the programme, the partnership context that amalgamates the relationships between all entities engaged in the programme, and the intervention context encompassing actors and activities delivering the programme. • **Mechanisms for raising awareness**: Evaluative, evidential, experiential, visioning, and principled mechanisms all play a role in identifying adaptation needs. • **Operational level** at which awareness of an issue first emerges, such as the adaptive delivery, programming, or governance layers, influences the adaptation trajectory required to address the challenge. • **Importance of relational issues and dynamics**, within and between partner organisations, as they significantly constrain the programme's effectiveness, but are difficult to identify. • **Factors contributing to failed awareness**: Capacity bottlenecks, communication issues, and blind spots and biases hinder the prompt identification of necessary changes.

	Characterisation of the stage	Key concepts and tensions
Stage 2. Reflection and learning	Involves deep collaborative reflection and learning to understand the issues fully, their impacts, and the best approaches to address them. Effective reflection and learning require slowing down to re-evaluate and embrace new approaches, often necessitating simultaneous multi-level learning and the involvement of different actors.	• **Depth of change and types of learning**: Reflection and learning that activates single-, double-, and triple-loop learning modalities allows to move beyond immediate reactivity to promote changes that may be required at the level of activities, tools, practices, principles, structures, mindsets, and even the core beliefs and perceptions of team members. • **Importance of unlearning**: Preconceived notions and biases need to be addressed to enable deep transformational learning. • **Operationalisation of reflection and learning**: Implementing systematic and intentional MEL systems, extensive data-gathering, active validation of strategies and actions, and fostering environments that encourage reflective practices and capacity development. • **Factors contributing to failed reflection and learning**: Capacity bottlenecks, communication issues, blind spots and biases, plus competing principles, and a sense of powerlessness can impede effective reflection and learning.
Stage 3. Decision-making	Turning the insights and options arising from collective reflection and learning into actionable agreements. Decision-making may intentionally take place separately from reflection and learning, or be intertwined with them.	• **Active vs passive decision-making**: Active decision-making involves intentional choices leading to adaptations, while passive decision-making results from subtle and less intentional shifts in activity focus due to capacity limitations, de-prioritisation of actions or tacit non-compliance. • **Programme phases and decision-making types**: Different programme phases (proposal, inception, early and late implementation, and closure) demand and enable different types of decision-making across the delivery, programming, and governance continuum. Missed adaptation opportunities condition the scope and nature of possible ulterior adaptations. • **Participatory decision-making and empowerment**: Importance of inclusive decision-making processes that allow all programme stakeholders to influence the programme's decisions and course. This is supported by high alignment among teams operating at different adaptive layers, and by self-constraint in the use of power by the programme leadership. • **Key factors contributing to failed decision-making**: Perceived lack of capacity, strategic misunderstandings, and the challenges of planning for emergent elements of adaptive programmes.

	Characterisation of the stage	Key concepts and tensions
Stage 4. Execution	Implementation of agreed decisions, turning adaptation plans into actual changes.	• **Core practices for effective adaptive management**: Emphasising the need for trusted and contextually embedded teams and staff, which focus on early value generation and are willing to experiment to learn, contributes to enhanced adaptability of programmes. • **Congruence between PAM and PAR**: In CLARISSA, the use of participatory action research as the programme's main delivery modality enhanced its PAM capacity, integrating adaptive mindsets and approaches throughout all programme activities. • **Relational complexity**: Execution challenges pertained to the programme's relational dynamics, emphasising the need for alignment and agreement among consortium members, despite their many differences, across the programme's key defining principles, and mutual respect. • **Relational management**: Carefully tending the 'relationships' between the different partners, providing a supportive leadership style that is sensitive to the limitations but also the strengths of the different partners. • **Organisational structures and communication and knowledge sharing infrastructure** are key to supporting relational management, ensuring transparency, dedication, stability, and involvement of all partners across the programme. • **Key factors contributing to failed execution**: Passive decision-making and capacity limitations.
Stage 5. Success	Assessing whether adaptations achieved their intended effects.	• **Evaluation of adaptation effectiveness**: Use of proxy indicators and success criteria to assess whether adaptations achieved the desired outcomes. • **Need to iterate adaptations**: If success is not achieved, need to adjust actions or revisit previous stages based on outcome assessments.
Stage 6. Sustained change	Ensuring that changes remain effective and beneficial in the long term.	• **Creating enabling environments and authoritative spaces** allows that adaptive approaches can be decisively pursued and sustained. • **Importance of initial proposal framing and negotiations with donors**: Setting the foundation for adaptability through strategic proposal development and a relational management that promotes the donor's trust. • **Leveraging the manoeuvring space offered by donor's programming frameworks** to allow for budgeting flexibility, resource reallocation, and meaningful accountability and reporting approaches.

Source: Authors' own.

Section 5:

FINAL REFLECTIONS ON CLARISSA'S PAM EXPERIENCE

5 FINAL REFLECTIONS ON CLARISSA'S PAM EXPERIENCE

This paper has detailed key insights from evaluating CLARISSA's participatory adaptive management (PAM) approach. By examining various adaptation instances throughout the programme's lifetime and by reflecting on the key stages and critical dimensions of PAM, we have provided responses for the evaluation's main questions, allowing readers to understand the operationalisation of the PAM approach, its contribution to evidence-generation and learning, its impact on programme decision-making and effectiveness, and how it empowered children and other stakeholders to shape programme decisions and outcomes.

The previous sections combine conceptual considerations with storytelling and examples to keep our reflections grounded in CLARISSA's experiences, and to better transmit how messy and dynamic adaptive management efforts tend to be. It is too easy, when reflecting theoretically about adaptive management, to make it sound like you can streamline it into a sequence of questions, phases, steps and scales, which somehow allow to 'domesticate' and easily handle it (Gokhale and Walton 2023; DT Global 2022; Byom *et al*. 2020). But if the evaluation of CLARISSA shows anything, it is how difficult and contradictory, how messy, PAM is in reality.

CLARISSA is considered a successful and innovative development programme, whose PAM approach broadly represents the 'best practices' usually recommended for adaptive programming (Valters and Wild 2019; Cooke 2017). Its learning and adaptation focus has indeed helped the programme to avoid potential traps and has helped it to succeed on many levels. However, as the previous pages showed, the experience is far from perfect. This is not entirely surprising, as ultimately everybody in the programme had to learn how to adapt 'on the job'. As a result, for example, some of the adaptation decisions taken proved to be problematic; some even had to be reversed; some discussion processes took much more time than desirable; and the need to change or improve was not always recognised quickly enough.

The evaluation has also shown how being adaptive is not a silver bullet that guarantees success, allowing programmes to transcend or dispel all troubles. In fact, many of the problems that affect development programmes operating under more traditional programming modalities are fully present in adaptive programmes: from top-down decision-making to badly functioning management structures, institutional inertias, biases, and relational dynamics, among others. Maybe PAM processes can contribute to attenuating problems somewhat, and enable programmes to navigate these issues earlier, or faster, or better; but certainly the problems do not disappear. The impact of adaptive programmes continues to be as much a matter of luck, a favourable starting position, and windows of opportunity opening up, as it is attributable to the programme's design and implementation (Kleinfeld 2015).

It seems, however, that even limited and imperfect adaptability tends to have important positive effects on development programmes (Bridges and Woolcock 2019). This is something that the evaluation attested: every person interviewed considered that the impact of the PAM approach was very positive, as the selection of quotes included in Box 6 shows.

Box 6: Quotes on the effects of PAM in CLARISSA

'PAM allows us to be flexible and respond to the needs of the communities and the teams. It allows us to make decisions along the way. I do not see any other way to do the management of such a programme. It is very much liberating and empowering. It gives us the flexibility to make decisions along the way, which for many donors is not applicable.'

'For this kind of research programme, AM [adaptive management] is very crucial… PAR has given us a lot of flexibility, allowing us to look always for ways that allow to contextualise better. It is very much appreciated. Each place we are working in is different. Consultations with children and local stakeholders are different in each context. And we are adapting and formulating interventions based on the local contexts.'

'Other programmes are to be implemented according to a logframe and a set of instructions you have to follow. But the context does not always allow it. And this creates difficult times. We have to improvise, but without changing the basic assumptions of the project. That becomes difficult for implementing partners or staff like us. Whereas in CLARISSA, the IDS team is listening to us, they have been directly in communication with us or with the ground-level staff. They listen to us, to what changes are necessary to be made, and the changes happen.'

'Donors and international development actors should embrace participatory adaptive management. I don't see any other way of doing it. Because it really allows you to be innovative, to be creative, and to respond to the needs, and being brave.'

Source: Evaluation interviews.

The transformative potential that CLARISSA interviewees attribute to PAM in development, and the demands they make to donors to support it more decisively, reminds us of the seismic shift observed with the agile movement in the software development industry at the turn of the century (Prieto Martín *et al*. 2017: 13). In the same way that the agile methodologies revolutionised software projects by prioritising team adaptability and iterative learning over rigid, linear planning, PAM embodies a similar ethos for tackling the complexities of international development, acknowledging that in the face of intricate challenges, empowering teams and enhancing their capacity to learn and adapt, rather than adherence to predefined plans, can significantly enhance outcomes and innovation. This paradigm shift suggests a path forward for development programmes to become more responsive, innovative, and effective by adopting some form of 'agilism': attempting to mainstream PAM principles in the sector by extending agile framings from the purely technological to the socio-political intervention domains that international development engages with. Agile methodologies achieved success by radically simplifying the ideas, processes, and tools used by the teams, making them more accessible and actionable, and

enabling non-experienced staff to immediately contribute value. Something similar is now required for PAM, and CLARISSA hopefully represents a step in that direction.

Adaptive management is rooted in common sense and, as discussed earlier when first introducing the concept, it basically embodies a 'thoughtful and curious rationality' that champions the integration of learning into action. If the multiple reflections and insights proposed in this paper seem to the reader to be rather obvious or intuitive, this is probably a good sign, as it likely validates such an understanding of PAM. CLARISSA's journey underscores the necessity of incorporating this mindful rationality in development work, while highlighting the value of traditional planning's preliminary designs.

The challenge is thus not to forsake traditional planning but to temper its rigid excesses, fostering an environment where adaptability and responsiveness are not just permitted but encouraged. The goal is to balance 'the good stuff' of thoughtful planning with the flexibility of adaptive responses, mitigating the 'poisonous' rigidity that stifles innovation and effectiveness. In essence, planning and adaptive learning should be perceived not

as opposing forces but as complementary elements of a cohesive framework, each enhancing the efficacy and impact of the other in a continuous cycle of improvement.

Ultimately, what PAM demands from programmes is something quite common-sensical: **'Think and plan well, do your best, learn'**. That is what FCDO wanted CLARISSA to achieve when it decided to fund the programme. That is also what CLARISSA demanded from its leaders and managers, and what they then tried to encourage all programme staff to do – and finally, what the facilitators of the PAR groups inspired children to do.

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CLARISSA works by co-developing with stakeholders practical options for children to avoid engagement in the worst forms of child labour in Bangladesh and Nepal.

The participatory processes which underpin the programme are designed to generate innovation from the ground which can sustainably improve the lives of children and their families.

The programme's outputs are similarly co-designed and collaboratively produced to enhance local ownership of the knowledge, and to ensure that our research uptake and engagement strategy is rooted in the direct experience of the people most affected on the ground.