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# Pathways of change for achieving sustainability results: A tool to facilitate adaptive programming

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## ABSTRACT

Traditional approaches to development programming with fixed targets and outcomes do not fit complex problems where the pathway to achieve results differs in each context and evolves constantly. Adaptive programming improves responses to complex problems by identifying which solutions bring change. This paper reviews the theory behind adaptive programming approaches and introduces the 'Pathways of Change' tool for achieving sustainability results, developed for the multi-country Women's Integrated Sexual Health programme. Qualitative data, using semi-structured interviews and group discussions from teams in over 17 countries in Africa and South Asia, are presented which examine the application of the Pathways of Change (PoC) tool focusing on successes and challenges across different intervention areas. The PoC responds to the need for a more practical adaptive programming tool that can be tailored to support flexibility in global health programme implementation while meeting donor requirements. Findings suggest that the PoC tool provides a flexible yet robust alternative to traditional monitoring frameworks and is able to facilitate adaptive, contextualised planning and monitoring for multi-country programmes. The PoC tool offers a solution to realise the ambitions of implementing adaptive programming within global health programmes and potentially beyond.

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## Introduction

Conventional approaches to international development, which favour predefined targets, fixed outcomes and adherence to initial programme designs with little room for iteration, dominate the field, despite often not achieving the desired impact (Derbyshire & Donovan, 2016; Ramalingam, 2013). Even when programmes deliver successfully against expected outputs or outcomes, they can do so without achieving meaningful and lasting change (DFID, 2016). Programmes that have predetermined outcomes and define in advance how they can be achieved, do not fit complex problems where the pathway to achieve results and solve problems differs in each context and evolves constantly (Cooke, 2017; Desai et al., 2018; Ladner, 2015; Valters et al., 2016). Initiatives that are

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successful in progressing development goals ensure flexibility in their approach, using learnings to inform their responses (Andrews, 2013).

Adaptive programming is a fitting response to complex international development challenges where solutions are not fully understood or there is uncertainty on how best to address the problem (Bond, 2016; ODI, 2016; Ramalingam, 2013). The need for adaptive programming emerged from experiences of international development programmes in a variety of countries which did not learn from failure and lacked understanding of the different potential routes to achieve change, which, in turn, adversely affected development outcomes (Brinkerhoff & Ingle, 1989; Derbyshire & Donovan, 2016; Eyben, 2009). The inability of some international development initiatives to successfully tackle problems is often linked to the inability to produce feasible and sustainable solutions to problems in complex environments where change is uncertain (Eyben, 2009; Hulme, 1989). Adaptive programming is at the heart of a change agenda in international development pushed forward by funders and practitioners who recognise the need to swiftly adapt to opportunities and challenges as they emerge rather than being held to prescribed programme implementation plans (Wild et al., 2015).

This paper reviews the theory behind adaptive programming approaches and application in the field. It then introduces the Pathways of Change (PoC) tool for achieving sustainability goals, developed for the Women's Integrated Sexual Health (WISH) programme funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), formerly known as DFID, to respond to the need for a practical tool that can support adaptive work while meeting donor requirements and providing accountability. The paper shares findings from country teams in applying the pathways of change tool in their settings, focusing on successes and challenges.

### ***Principles of adaptive programming***

Adaptive programming acknowledges the ambiguity in reaching outcomes as there are multiple interactions and complex systems that may influence achieving programme results (Cooke, 2017; DFID, 2016; Paina & Peters, 2012; Ripley & Jaccard, 2016). In the context of uncertainty and political changes, adaptive programming facilitates a systems thinking approach by understanding and improving responses to complex problems and identifying which ones bring about needed change (Adam & De Savigny, 2012; Ripley & Jaccard, 2016).

Adaptive programming generates learning and evidence of what works or does not (Andrews et al., 2016; Brinkerhoff et al., 2018; Ladner, 2015). It involves experimenting, monitoring and adjusting programme design and implementation where needed, taking into account the political context in which programmes operate (Andrews et al., 2015; Bond, 2016; Cooke, 2017; Derbyshire & Donovan, 2016; Valters et al., 2016). Learning from programme implementation in real time informs decisions on redirecting, scaling up or dropping activities, recognising it is not always easy to find the right combination of interventions that are effective in a specific context (Cooke, 2017; Desai et al., 2018; Pritchett et al., 2012; Ripley & Jaccard, 2016; Wild et al., 2015).

Adaptive programming relies on local understanding, and should be politically informed with a strong emphasis on decision-making at local level and led by those in a position to better understand the realities on the ground with critical insight of emerging information (Cooke, 2017; Desai et al., 2018; Devarajan et al., 2014; Paina & Peters, 2012; Wild et al., 2015).

### ***Adaptive programming approaches***

Donors, implementers and academics have initiated dialogue on adaptive programming through communities of practice such as Doing Development Differently and Thinking and Working Politically (Brinkerhoff et al., 2018; Desai et al., 2018; ODI, 2016; Ripley & Jaccard, 2016). Over 60 countries have signed up to the principles of Doing Development Differently which focuses on merging design and implementation through learning from success and

failure as well as pursuing actions with potential promise and stopping others that are not demonstrating results.

Donors and development organisations, including the FCDO and USAID, have used different tools to facilitate wider uptake of adaptive programming in their investments to ensure aid effectiveness and encourage a continual culture of learning and adaptation (Derbyshire & Donovan, 2016; Desai et al., 2018; Wild et al., 2015, 2017). FCDO encourages suppliers to focus on context-specific programming to enable a process of reflection and learning. Principles of iteration, political and context-specific initiatives and sustainability continue to guide FCDO's investment in the health sector and beyond (Desai et al., 2018; Wild et al., 2017). USAID uses the Collaborating, Learning and Adapting model which through regular 'pause and reflect' exercises, aims for programmes to engage in proactive learning loops to inform programme implementation (Dexis Consulting Group, 2017; USAID, 2014, 2016).

Other adaptive methodologies developed include Harvard's Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation tool, which seeks to examine problems, continually asking the question 'why' to delve deeper into root causes and possible solutions while encouraging experimentation and rapid learning (Bond, 2016; Pritchett et al., 2012). The Search Frame, developed by Harvard University, provides a structured way to get from a problem to an appropriate solution, examining what the problem looks like solved (Andrews et al., 2016). The Asia Foundation has developed a Strategy Testing Tool to monitor complex and political issues where solutions are not always evident at programme design stage (Ladner, 2015).

There are a host of other methodologies that incorporate an adaptive programming lens. Despite the availability of these tools and approaches, the movement towards mainstreaming adaptive programming remains more of an aspiration, as implementers struggle with the realities of how to design, implement and monitor adaptive programmes (Derbyshire & Donovan, 2016; Ripley & Jaccard, 2016) within the boundaries of contractual and procurement requirements.

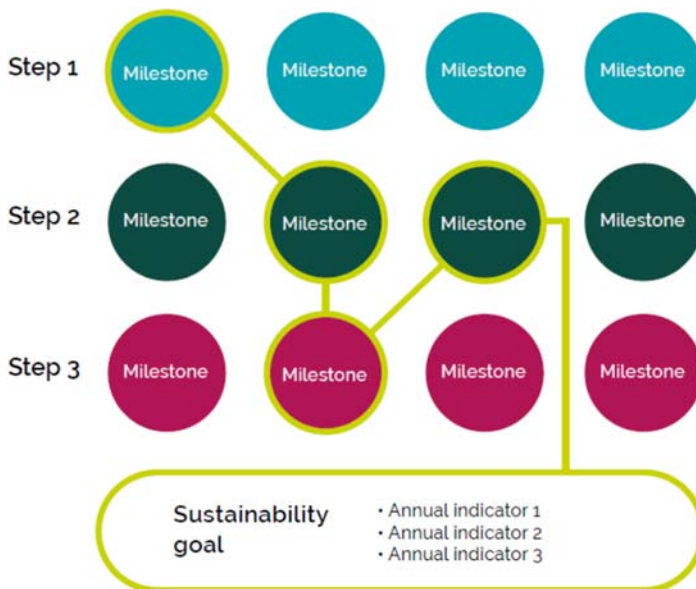
## **The pathways of change tool for achieving sustainable results**

The WISH Programme, funded by the FCDO in 2018, provides comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services, aiming to improve universal access to quality family planning and safe abortion services (where local laws allow this) in 27 countries in Africa and Asia. WISH focuses on generating demand and ensuring choice for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) as well as driving sustainability through national stewardship which enables governments to spearhead efforts towards universal access to SRHR. Measuring and reporting progress on SRHR with interventions focused on governance, accountability, transformation and reform that are known to require an adaptive programming approach (Derbyshire & Donovan, 2016) led programme implementers to investigate tools that may be suitable and tailored for WISH. Despite the wealth of information available on adaptive programming, it became clear that while a number of approaches exist, more practical adaptive programming tools are needed that implementers can tailor to their programmes (Bond, 2016; Ripley & Jaccard, 2016). In response to this gap, Options Consultancy Services, which leads the national stewardship component under WISH, developed an innovative and practical adaptive tool known as the Pathways of Change to ensure flexibility in implementation across multiple countries and under a payment by results contract. The tool was developed during the inception phase before programme implementation began. Nine different PoC have been developed and are being used under the WISH programme across three intervention areas: (1) demand, (2) supply and (3) enabling environment. The nine PoC provide both content and a broadly logical order of getting to each pathway's sustainability goal, but they do not dictate the sequence in which milestones must be achieved, how or when. FCDO approved the nine different pathways, which were then used by country teams to identify the most promising route to achieve a sustainability goal in their contexts.

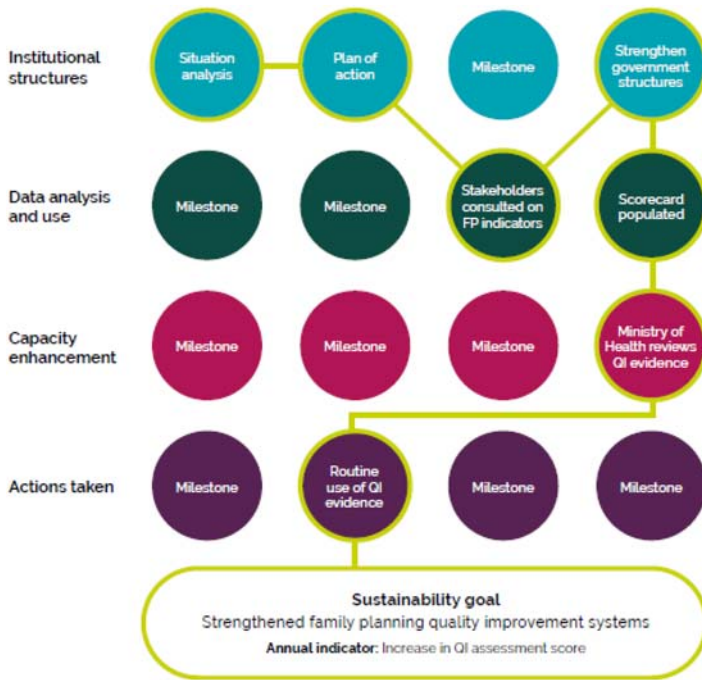
The PoC tool provides an evidence-based technical framework that is generic enough to enable staff across multiple countries to contextualise their strategies to maximise flexibility while being aligned to the overall programme goal. A stylised illustration of a Pathway of Change is presented in [Figure 1](#) which outlines the adaptive framework. The development of a Pathway of Change starts with determining the higher-level **sustainability goal** in response to the problem identified, then selecting **annual indicators** to measure achievement of that goal. The next stage is to identify key steps (i.e. categorised interventions) drawn from the literature and experience that will drive progress towards the goal. Each **step** is composed of a menu of quarterly **milestones**, which can be selected or adapted based on a situation and problem analysis, local priorities and knowledge, emerging political opportunities, challenges and commitments. These milestones can be revised quarterly or annually, informed by a political economy analysis and programme learning, allowing the PoC to be contextualised to each country context. WISH staff members received a detailed induction on the PoC, particularly in the use of the tool to guide workplanning and adapting milestones and annual indicators to each context. Each year and quarter, the country teams determine which milestones they will work towards to achieve their sustainability goals using the pathways of change as a framework.

The PoC takes into consideration the content of the intervention area, drawing from evidence of what works to achieve change, which is just as important as the different paths identified to solve a problem (Janovsky et al., 2006). The WISH programme does not have to indicate in advance which milestones will be submitted to the FCDO each quarter. Since the donor approved the pathways of change in advance, as long as there is demonstration that a milestone from a particular pathway was achieved, payment for results will be triggered.

Different routes can be taken by choosing particular milestones within the different steps to reach the same goal. New routes can be plotted as opportunities and challenges arise, changing the way the programme arrives at the goal. This approach enables flexibility in which milestones are selected to report against for monitoring or payment each quarter with the final quarter of each year reporting against the annual indicator. The Pathway of Change charts a navigation course towards a clear sustainability goal which is agile to the context.



**Figure 1.** Pathway of change tool.



**Figure 2.** Quality Improvement (QI) for family planning pathway of change: illustrative example.

Figure 2 provides an illustrative example of a Quality Improvement (QI) Pathway of Change, where a particular route has been chosen to reach the sustainability goal of ‘strengthened family planning quality improvement systems’. Countries will contextualise reaching this goal in different ways. In Zambia for example, this involves establishing a QI Task Force drawing together relevant Directorates and stakeholders who actively contribute to a harmonised Sexual and Reproductive Health and Family Planning (SRH/FP) tracking mechanism led and maintained by the Ministry of Health. In Bangladesh, a similar QI forum will track SRH/FP quality which will include client’s perspectives, equity and disability indicators with these data fed into planning and decision-making processes to influence resource allocation and spend.

The PoC tool facilitates an adaptive programming approach by identifying the key problems to be solved and the most appropriate path to achieve change considering the political economic context. The tool also facilitates adaptation based on the principles of experimentation, monitoring, rapid evidence gathering, synthesis and sense-checking with country teams.

## Methods

The PoC tool has been used under the WISH programme since September 2018. The programme sought inputs from country teams on the extent to which the tool was flexible and the degree to which it helped mainstream adaptive programming. Semi-structured interview questionnaires were developed to solicit input from country teams on their experiences using the PoC including successes, challenges, application of the tool and interaction across different intervention areas. This research was undertaken as part of the wider learning component under the WISH programme. All interviewees work for the WISH programme. The programme has permission to work in each country setting and, therefore, additional ethics approval was not needed. Questionnaires were shared with 20 individuals in total which included 18 country leads/focal persons, and two individuals in programme leadership positions overseeing WISH implementation (referred to

as WISH Leadership Team in the results section), to ensure representation from different implementing partners, working across different PoC. Focal contact persons were asked to consolidate written feedback from all team members in the country. In West Africa, questionnaires were sent to leads/focal persons in Nigeria, Burkina Faso, DRC, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Sierra Leone. In East and Southern Africa, questionnaires were sent to leads/focal persons from Malawi, Tanzania, Madagascar, Uganda, Zambia, Ethiopia, Burundi and Mozambique. In South Asia, country representatives included Bangladesh and Pakistan. Data were collected from September to November 2019.

Of the 20 individuals who were sent the questionnaires, 19 provided written responses. Of these, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 individuals/teams to further clarify responses and highlight unique experiences (two requests for follow-up calls received no response and in one case the written response was deemed sufficient). All interviews were recorded, with participants' permission, and transcribed. After receiving feedback from country implementers and WISH leadership, a second stage of feedback was gathered through group discussions in November 2019 with inputs from donors, service delivery partners, demand side partners and programme staff working on the enabling environment pillar. The group discussions (10–15 participants each) were facilitated by one member of the group using a condensed version of the questionnaire, focusing on successes and challenges in using the tool for iteration and course correction. Programme staff working on WISH held follow-up discussions with leads/focal points which may have led to some biases skewed towards more positive reporting. This was overcome by ensuring questions probed on challenges, learnings and improvements.

Notes from the group discussion and written/verbal responses from the semi-structured interviews were uploaded to Deedose software for analysis. A deductive analysis was first carried out: Preliminary codes were first identified by the research team and drawn from the literature as well as the interview guide. An inductive analysis was then undertaken; Transcripts were reviewed and new codes added. In total 22 codes were used which were then categorised using a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research team reviewed the themes looking for consistency and patterns in responses.

## Results

### *Adaptability to country context*

Most teams reported the PoC tool was flexible enough to adapt to the country context based on activities and milestones that make most sense for their respective geographies. The tool facilitates an iterative approach by ensuring local insights and political contexts shape the most suitable route to achieving the sustainability goal in each country:

This tool is easier to use because it gives you a head start. It already shows all the possible ways, clear and simple. For me, personally, the projects before were not flexible, it was rigid, it had to be done, I couldn't change it ... With WISH, we had the opportunity to propose changes. This is very important, it is more suitable to the context. It's not 'top-down' but it really fits into the context of the country. – Madagascar

The beauty of the PoC being flexible is you can choose the activities or annual indicators you want to achieve. Unlike other work plans which tend to be cast in stone. You're being guided by your output and outcome rather than activities. – Nigeria

The PoC was discussed as being adaptable to a country context in two ways: first, by allowing for mapping of a country-specific route through the menu of milestones and secondly by having the ability to add milestones where things are missing. For example, the Malawi team conducted a data flow exercise which tracked data from facility to national level with a view to informing how to improve the quality of family planning data. Such a piece of work contributes to achieving the QI sustainability goal of strengthening national stewardship for SRHR QI; however, it was not originally included in the QI pathway but still worked towards to respond to the need in-country.

The idea of a trade-off arose between adapting the PoCs to a country context (and potentially writing country specific PoCs) and having a tool suitable to use for a large multi-country programme. Some countries would have liked to develop their own PoCs, but it was acknowledged that entirely country-specific PoCs (each with a different menu of milestones to select from) would increase the difficulty of monitoring across so many countries as well as take considerable time to develop. Most, therefore, thought the generic PoC model proposed was suitable for a multi-country programme as milestones were generic enough to be contextualised to a country context (i.e. SRH/FP evidence packaged into meaningful formats for external audiences). In addition, there was some indication that approaches may be standardised across countries.

Because the pathways include multiple milestones that contribute towards a sustainability goal, there are potentially hundreds of different routes that each country can take during the life of the programme to reach the annual indicator and the sustainability goal. However, interestingly, I think we are seeing some convergence around the milestones selected by countries. – WISH Leadership Team

### ***Changing course and course correction***

The ability to change course and adjust the direction of the programme throughout the year, a key aspect of the PoC approach, was acknowledged, requiring implementers to build in time to continuously review progress and refine how they will reach their goals.

Need to keep thinking, re-inventing, re-analysing what to do to achieve quarterly milestones. – Nigeria

The following two examples demonstrate how country teams have been able to flexibly use the PoCs to course correct when changes in the external environment meant that their initial plans would no longer be the best strategy. In Nigeria, for the Public Investment Pathway of Change, the team had planned to hold a dissemination workshop to showcase their investment case for family planning with the aim of using findings to advocate for a budget line and improved allocation. The window of opportunity to present an investment case is at the onset of budget planning. However, political uncertainties attributed to matters arising from 2019 elections meant that the preliminary budget planning was delayed. The team was able to delay the presentation of the FP investment case (a planned milestone) and instead focus on strengthening the Family Planning Technical Working Group and accountability mechanism to still position their advocacy for FP investments but delaying it to a time when the window of opportunity was open.

In Tanzania within the QI Pathway of Change, the team initially agreed with the Ministry of Health (MoH) to focus on revising FP guidelines; however, the government subsequently delayed this as it overlapped with another development partner's work. The team and MoH later agreed to work instead on revising the tools used in supportive supervision. The ability to change milestones during the course of the year allowed for this kind of adaptation in the face of changing government priorities.

### ***Stakeholder mapping and work planning***

Several country teams reported finding PoC a useful tool for guiding work planning prioritisation, facilitating the mapping of other stakeholders' work to avoid duplication and ensuring WISH resources were effectively used and maximised:

It [PoC] helps with the planning and it is very pragmatic. You can adapt the activities that you need in order to achieve milestones and contribute to the annual indicators ... you can see the 'lay-out' of how to achieve your final objective. – Burkina Faso

The Pathway of Change provided us with the methodology of work – it helped us understand what are the steps to change; starting from a contextual analysis and then building activities from there. – Mali

The process of using the PoC to develop workplans and implementation strategies was done in different ways. Work planning was often conducted as an iterative process, with back and forth



between the PoC and the context analysis, the political economy analysis and existing knowledge of the context. Some countries reported starting their work planning by looking at the ‘problem’ and their country context and what they thought was needed, then returning to the PoC to see where their approach could fit into it and which milestones enabled them to get to their goals. Other countries reported starting with the PoC to come up with a rough approach and then looked out to the context. Across both types of approaches, countries were using the pathways to identify different ways in which a sustainability goal could be achieved.

We analysed the country situation, then we looked at which milestones in the pathways get us there. We believe the Pathways of Change is a useful tool in light of country context. – Bangladesh

I started with the pathway, then looked at the context analysis. We went through the pathway linking country priority needs activities to milestones. That process worked well. – Zambia

### ***Understanding and maximising PoC interactions***

Maximising achievement in the PoC and strengthening sustainability of results requires understanding of and harnessing the links between the pathways. Some respondents highlighted that some level of interdependency between pathways is essential to ensure optimal progress. Flexibility is built in the PoC as each can operate independently or one pathway can support the achievement of results in another pathway allowing multiple actions to be implemented within and across pathways to reach the same sustainability goal.

There are necessarily connections and interdependencies between all the pathways. For example, sustained improvements in supply including capacity in the public sector cannot be achieved without for example increased budgetary allocations for commodities and staff. – WISH Leadership Team

I think there is an interaction. For instance the social behaviour change pathway is important to successfully deliver on milestones in the sustainable supply pathways such as increasing public and private sector sites that provide a mix of FP services. The interaction could be between pathways within the same pillar [in this case supply, demand, or enabling environment] or in different pillars. – Ethiopia

### ***Application to specific intervention areas over others***

A common trend in responses highlighted how the PoC tool was more useful for partners working on some intervention areas than others. Some partners, working in service delivery and demand side intervention areas with fixed quantitative targets, did not appear to require the flexibility and adaptability that the PoC offer compared to partners whose work is more influenced by the political context and which do not follow a linear process.

Generally speaking, the more macro the pathway, the less control we have over outcomes, and the less meaningfully we can attribute change to WISH alone. The enabling environment pathways fit in this category. Conversely, the public, private sector and disability inclusiveness pathways are more within our control and any change observed will be more attributable to our inputs. – WISH Leadership Team

There is a feeling the PoCs are more appropriate for the aspect of creating an enabling environment rather than other areas like demand creation. – Demand Side Group Discussion

### ***Comparison to conventional monitoring tools***

The majority of respondents felt the PoC provide a useful alternative to measurement frameworks such as log frames for monitoring programmes and tracking progress, and have the added value of increased flexibility and setting out the programme goal:

The PoC is a more flexible tool compared to other methods used by some donors. PoC focuses on ‘results monitoring’. – Sierra Leone

The PoC tool is good for quarterly reporting. It gives a snapshot of the WISH program across many countries and helps articulate the programme vision. – Donor Group Discussion

An added benefit highlighted of the PoC compared to other monitoring tools is that it is less top-down. The focus of PoC on outputs and outcomes rather than fixed activities, along with the ability to adapt to changing needs and what works results in more cost-effective programming:

The PoC helps a program to be more focused, and more cost-effective. It reduces focus on inputs and shifts attention to outputs, outcomes and impact. Other programmes had fixed activities that need to be implemented. Work plans handed over to them. A donor says, this is what I want to achieve, the programme leader says this is how we do it. But with this [the Pathways of Change], we can assess, review, re-programme and re-align based on outputs not inputs. So we have spent less funds compared to other programmes- if something is not value added, stop it and move on. – Nigeria

The PoC shifted how we work, because it provided us with a methodological and chronological guide for how to achieve change. Before we would also do a contextual analysis, but the steps after that were not systematically linked. In the PoC, we found it easy to identify the steps and to adjust what we needed to do next. Compared to other tools, this tool, helped methodologically, to guide individuals through the change and how they think about achieving the objective. – Mali

Some teams also felt that the PoC provide additional guidance and structure on the content of potential milestones to get to sustainability goals compared to traditional monitoring tools, but this requires a new way of thinking and perhaps further skills to fully integrate adaptive programming into implementation plans:

It is dynamic tool that we can revise based on our needs ... even if at the beginning I struggled to understand it because it was very different from classical program thinking. – Burkina Faso

Very flexible and adaptive, but requires that all team members (including frontline staff) are familiar with the PoC. – Service Delivery Group Discussion

Some respondents acknowledged that the focus on achieving milestones each quarter may distract from the overall goal of institutional strengthening and reform efforts. Implementation may be directed at achieving quarterly milestones rather than having the broader picture of how the cumulative achievement of milestones leads to a broader change.

Partners may focus too much on milestone deliverables instead of strengthening the system. – Donor Group Discussion

## Discussion

Findings from our assessment suggest the PoC tool provides a robust alternative to traditional monitoring frameworks and is able to facilitate adaptive, contextualised planning and monitoring for multi-country programmes. Building on adaptive programming literature, the PoC tool articulates the destination of the programme by identifying the sustainability goal, but does not define the exact route to get there which allows flexibility in programme implementation while also maintaining accountability to the donor (Desai et al., 2018; DFID, 2016). The PoC tool is used by WISH country teams to monitor progress towards the achievement of a sustainability goal, but differs from traditional monitoring frameworks which tend to focus on measuring where programmes are along a certain route rather than whether that is the best route to get to the destination (Ladner, 2015). The PoC can thus be used as a tool in isolation or to complement other monitoring tools to assess progress on key outcomes. The PoC tool complements a broader theory of change for the WISH programme, which outlines causal linkages and assumptions to achieve higher outcomes and impact, but does not provide details of the different routes to get to these changes which the PoC provides.

Balancing the tension between rigid reporting requirements and principles of adaptive programming requires a strategy for replacing fixed output indicators with broader defined categories

(Valters et al., 2016). The ability to select from a menu of milestones based on the evidence of the changes that might be achieved and having a range of broad annual indicators which countries can work towards enabled programmes to have a high level of flexibility using PoC compared to ridged monitoring frameworks (Bond, 2016; Derbyshire & Donovan, 2016; Manuel, 2016).

Our findings highlight that a strong understanding of the political and economic context is required to inform the most suitable route to achieving the sustainability goal in each country (Cole et al., 2016; Guertzovich et al., 2014). Armed with situational knowledge, implementers can use the PoC to better understand and respond to the problem(s) they are trying to solve. Defining the annual indicator and sustainability goal (which are specific enough to guide action yet expansive enough to enable flexibility and adaptation), while leaving lower level measures demonstrative (i.e. defining the what, not how) enables maximum flexibility (USAID, 2018). This contrasts with projects which have fixed activities with little room to manoeuvre and which often contrive technical solutions that are unsuitable to the problem (Ripley & Jaccard, 2016).

The PoC tool seems more suitable for measuring government stewardship compared to other intervention areas on the supply or demand side of health services where the process to achieve change is mostly linear and where causation is understood in a particular context. Partners working on the supply and demand side, which is generally less influenced by the political context, did not to the same extent, require the flexibility and adaptability that the PoC offer. The questions we asked were around the tool itself rather than the broader principles of adaptive programming, the latter aspect which supply and demand side partners still largely adhere to. Adaptive programming approaches are more useful when interventions are complex, unpredictable and do not follow a linear path which our findings corroborate (DFID, 2016; Wild et al., 2015).

While there is a growing movement towards adaptive programming in development, the focus should be on enabling it to happen (Derbyshire & Donovan, 2016). Adaptive programming features include innovative programme designs, flexible monitoring tools and financial reporting. Donors, however, require financial accountability for programme implementation and results, where strict adherence may not be conducive to adaptive programming (Derbyshire & Donovan, 2016; Desai et al., 2018). The tensions between contractual and donor accountability and the level of flexibility programmes need to change course requires more consideration (Brinkerhoff et al., 2018). One of the suggested strategies in response to this is providing funds against broad rather than detailed areas of work which is the premise of the PoC tool.

Our findings note the skills and capacities that are sometimes required of teams to fully absorb adaptive programming in practice. This corresponds to the broader structures that need to be in place from individual skills sets, donor reporting and organisational culture to ensure adaptive programming is incorporated into routine practice to enable more impactful development programmes (Viswanath et al., 2019). As the PoC tool was developed during inception, it took some time for implementers to fully understand how it works. Some respondents initially found it complicated and were at times unclear that the milestones were not fixed and therefore could be edited or new ones added. This is likely due to it being a new tool, requiring a shift in traditional thinking towards a more adaptive approach. Respondents also reported that cross-linkages and interactions between pathways of change were sometimes not initially obvious and it would have been helpful if these were highlighted up front so that linkages could be better maximised.

Some limitations of our findings include that the majority (60%) of country leads who responded worked on the enabling environment pathway (the remainder worked on supply or demand pathways). It is acknowledged that this pathway may benefit more from the flexibility and adaptability offered by the PoC tool. Additionally, while it did appear that interview responses reached saturation, we may have received more rounded feedback by interviewing multiple implementing partners from the same country rather than just one. Lastly, all country programmes were within the first year of implementation with some further on than others; therefore, some respondents had less exposure to the PoC than others. Further research will need to examine feedback loops across

pathways and the extent to which learning from adaptation has informed and improved programme implementation.

Truly understanding how health services can be scaled up at country level and incorporating flexible approaches and tools for adaptive programming in different contexts can facilitate progress towards sustainable health systems and global goals (Paina & Peters, 2012). Investing in efforts that encourage flexibility in implementation, using data and learning to help adapt and scale up, experimentation and engaging key local actors in the process of health systems strengthening (Andrews et al., 2016; Paina & Peters, 2012; Peters et al., 2009) are important factors for adaptive programming. Taking these factors into account, the PoC tool offers a solution to further realise the ambitions of implementing adaptive programming within global health programmes and potentially beyond.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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