UNHCR South Sudan Learning Brief: Adaptive Management

> *Purpose of this learning brief:*
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> *All UNHCR operations can learn lessons to strengthen their effectiveness and relevance, assessing how well they are performing in relation to UN guidelines, and drawing on best practice approaches. This learning brief is based on the findings of the Country Strategy Evaluation (CSE) in South Sudan, completed in May 2023. It focuses on the issue of **adaptive management**, highlighting how and where UNHCR South Sudan is doing well, and also how it could strengthen adaptive management going forward.*

What is adaptive management and why is it relevant?

'Adaptive management' is an approach to managing under conditions of uncertainty, making adaptations in response to changes in context or understanding that go beyond everyday good management.[1] It requires a shift from a classic, linear approach of 'analyse to predict', to a more systemic 'learn to adapt' mindset.[2] Adaptive ability to modify and change ongoing programming is particularly important for contexts where there is a high degree of uncertainty about what will be most effective. It is thus widely recognised as highly relevant to humanitarian (and development) responses. Box 1 captures the characteristics of adaptive management.

> *Box 1: Key features of adaptive management:*
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> - *Adaptive decisions and practices are evidence-based, informed by monitoring, evaluation and learning mechanisms that support reflection, rigorous evaluative thinking and collective decision-making.*
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> - *Adaptive management requires an iterative rather than linear approach to planning, implementation and evaluation, with multiple decision points, better suited to complex and uncertain contexts and challenges.*
>
> - *Organisational culture, staffing and mindsets are key to effective adaptive management.[3]*

The relevance and importance of adaptive management to UNHCR in South Sudan is obvious: the context is volatile and dynamic, whether due to political and conflict dynamics within the country or in neighbouring countries, flooding, or a pandemic like Covid-19, in turn impacting displacement and humanitarian need as well as the operating environment. Adaptive management is also key to the flexibility required for nexus ways of working, to move between, and connect humanitarian, development and peace-oriented programming, to remain relevant and responsive to the local context.[4]

What is UNHCR's record on adaptive management in South Sudan?

Feedback from UNHCR staff and partners

The CSE findings show that UNHCR staff and its partners think that UNHCR has demonstrated a reasonable to high level of adaptability to the fast-changing context in South Sudan, particularly to fresh waves of conflict-related displacement, and to the Covid-19 pandemic. This was apparent in the results of an online survey of UNHCR staff, and confirmed in meetings and key informant interviews (KIIs) with implementing partners.

1   Rogers, P. (2021) 'Adaptive management'. [Webpage]. Better Evaluation. East Melbourne: BetterEvaluation. https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/themes/monitoring-evaluation-support-adaptive-management

2   UNFPA (2022) 'The A-Compass: The UNFPA adaptive management model', April. https://www.unfpa.org/publications/compass-unfpa-adaptive-management-model

3   Adapted from Buchanan-Smith and Morrison-Metois (2021) 'From Real-Time Evaluation to Real-Time Learning. Exploring new approaches from the Covid-19 response'. M&E during Covid-19 Series. ALNAP (based on a number of sources). https://www.alnap.org/help-library/from-real-time-evaluation-to-real-time-learning

4   Alcayna, T. (2019) 'Ready to Change? Building flexibility into the triple nexus'. Spotlight Study. ALNAP. https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/programming%20flexibility.pdf
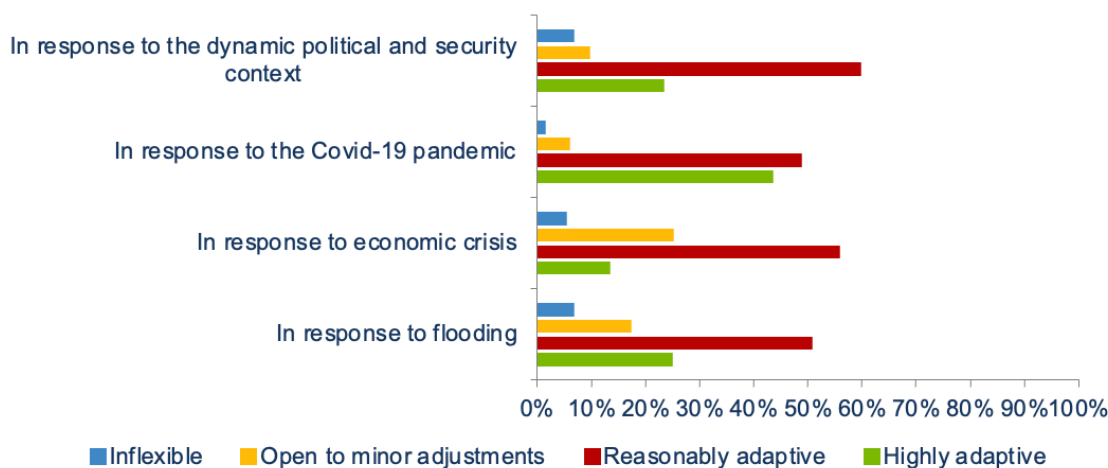
Figure 1: UNHCR staff assessment of adaptability and flexibility in UNHCR's programming and portfolio in South Sudan[5]

Four examples of adaptive management

Timely response to surge of conflict and displacement in Greater Upper Nile in August 2022: UNHCR's rapid step-up of IDP protection, declaring this an L1 emergency which unlocked additional funding, support from the Headquarters-based Emergency Response Team (ERT), and with additional support from the national-level protection cluster, is a positive example of adaptive management in response to the change in context.

Responding to new patterns of conflict and flooding in Abyei: UNHCR's rapid deployment of a focal point and support team in Abyei in 2022, which has worked closely with UNMISS to address both flood and conflict-related displacement, is another positive example of adaptive management in response to the change in context.

Adaptation in ways of working with refugees during the Covid-19 pandemic: In Maban, UNHCR adapted its protection monitoring and reporting to its limited access to the camps. This was handled by community-based structures in refugee camps, with remote reporting to UNHCR and its implementing partners. Initially this responsibility was given to adult community leaders, then extended to youth leaders to promote inclusion of different population groups.

Adaptations within the HDP nexus: Some FOs have demonstrated adaptive management in how they have shifted emphasis from more developmental solutions-oriented programming to humanitarian response in response to the changing context, for example in Western Bahr El Ghazal in 2022, in response to intercommunal violence that triggered significant displacement within Warrap state.

Examples of less successful adaptive management

UNHCR staff gave the organisation's adaptability to flooding a slightly lower rating – see Figure 1. This was keenly felt by staff in Maban SO: 'we accept the situation, but we are not adapting to the situation'. To those staff, effective adaptive management would mean better preparedness and mitigation measures; it has been severely constrained by inadequate funding.

As described below, lack of monitoring constrains adaptive management in relation to refugee returns.

Contributing and constraining factors to effective adaptive management in UNHCR South Sudan, with examples

The results of the online survey, plus KIIs with UNHCR staff and group meetings with its partners, revealed some of the contributing and constraining factors to UNHCR's adaptive management. These are organized according to the key characteristics of adaptive management from Box 1:

(i) Decisions and practices adapted according to the evidence

- Information and evidence emerged as a contributing as well as a constraining factor to adaptive

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management. On the positive side, UNHCR's regular and ad hoc needs assessments and situational assessments facilitate adaptive programming, for example assessments of need when there has been a fresh wave of conflict and displacement in Greater Upper Nile.

- As a constraining factor, the CSE found UNHCR's monitoring of results and learning mechanisms to be weak, for example of refugee returns. Not only does this inhibit adaptive management and learning, it also leaves many questions unanswered, for example about which refugees are returning, whether individuals or whole households, for how long, and therefore how UNHCR's programming should be adapted to their needs. There is also scope for much greater learning across FOs, between those that have performed well on IDP protection (for example the Malakal FO) and those that have struggled (for example the Bentiu FO). There has also been very little substantive evaluation of UNHCR's projects and programmes in South Sudan, to know what is working well and why, and to identify and improve what is not working. Where UNHCR's contextual understanding is weak, this constrains its adaptive management as well as conflict sensitive programming which, by definition, requires adaptability. (This is the subject of a separate learning brief).

Lessons learned:

- ***UNHCR has a strong track record of doing rapid updates of needs****, for example to fresh waves of conflict and displacement, and adapting/ upscaling its response accordingly.*

- ***UNHCR has a weaker record of looking back to reflect and learn****, or of learning across its programming.*

(ii) Iterative rather than linear approach, with multiple decision points

- Where UNHCR has been adaptable across the nexus, as in Western Bahr El Ghazal, this is indicative of an iterative approach, adapting constantly to the changing context. Implementing partners have appreciated UNHCR's willingness to allow them to adapt their PPAs and therefore their interventions, for example in response to flooding, rather than having to stick to the original agreement which has become outdated by the change in context and needs. There are also examples of UNHCR's adaptability to reduced funding, sometimes on a relatively small scale, for example from one shift to three shifts in primary schools in Jamjang to ensure they can still provide education to large numbers of refugees and host community members, albeit for shorter time periods. In the words of one UNHCR staff member: 'As an organisation we are adaptable. We move with events, we don't stick to our original plans'. However, this way of working requires flexibility from UNHCR's donors. Overly prescriptive or delayed funding was identified by UNHCR staff as a constraint.

Lesson learned:

- ***Facilitating an iterative approach requires flexible partnership and contracting arrangements****, between UNHCR and its implementing partners, and between UNHCR and its funders. As funding flows reduce, UNHCR may have to increasingly make the case for this more iterative and less linear way of working to its donors.*

(iii) Organisational culture, staffing and mindsets

- At national level, a dynamic senior leadership team within UNHCR's Country Office is seen by staff as an enabling factor. The evaluation team observed how this contributed to an open and less hierarchical culture, and to 'thinking outside the box', for example in the partnership that UNHCR's senior leadership has forged with UNMISS, evident in Abyei and other states.

- In terms of staffing, the ability to provide surge capacity has been key to some of the positive examples of adaptive management, for example mobilization of the ERT in the L1 emergencies in Greater Upper Nile and in Jonglei in 2022. In contrast, understaffing was identified by staff as a constraint to their adaptability,

especially in some FOs dealing with a growing humanitarian caseload, such as Wau and Bentiu.

- The mindset required was described particularly well in a mini-workshop with UNHCR staff in the Bor FO. They described the psychological resilience required, and that they have developed, at a personal as well as organizational level, to be adaptive to a volatile and challenging context, and to avoid being demoralized by setbacks. In FOs that demonstrated a high level of adaptability, a 'can do' attitude amongst staff was evident, with many small-scale examples.

Lesson learned:

- *The importance of leadership for effective adaptive management is critical, at all levels, to encourage creative thinking, responsible risk-taking, and to support and encourage staff resilience.*

In the survey, staff cited a number of logistical issues constraining their adaptability, e.g. obstructed roads, flooding. This, in turn, begs the question about whether there is evidence of UNHCR adaptive management in dealing with these logistical challenges. There is one example of UNHCR 'thinking outside the box' in exploring alternative supply routes from Sudan to overcome logistical constraints, but these proved not to be feasible.

Key takeaways for UNHCR South Sudan

1. **Overall, UNHCR South Sudan demonstrates good adaptive management capacity**, and this offers valuable learning opportunities for other UNHCR COs.

2. **Adaptive management at scale in South Sudan has been most effective where there has been a sudden and significant change in context**, for example triggering large displacement and an L1 emergency declaration that has enabled mobilization of resources from all levels of the organisation.

3. **There are many positive examples of adaptive management on a smaller scale** as a pragmatic response by UNHCR staff at FO level to maintain service delivery in the face of declining funding.

4. **Adaptive management within South Sudan could be greatly strengthened with a more robust evidence base**, in turn dependent on improved monitoring and evaluation, and by fostering an environment of reflection and learning. This would support adaptive management from programme design through to more subtle and nuanced adaptations in implementation. Within the humanitarian sector there are many examples of 'light' learning approaches that would be appropriate to the pressured working environment for UNCHR staff in South Sudan, from 'Real-Time Learning' exercises to After-Action Reviews and Adaptive Management Reviews.[6]

5. With limited resources as well as the volatility of the context and impact of climate change, **the need for adaptive management is likely to become even more important in South Sudan**.

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6   For many examples, see Buchanan-Smith and Morrison-Metois (2021)