

IT'S COMPLICATED: ITERATION, ADAPTATION AND SYSTEMS THINKING IN COMPLEX PEACEBUILDING PROCESSES

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OVERVIEW

Peace processes and peacebuilding are non-linear and the complex and fragile environments in which they occur require adaptive and flexible programming and problem-solving. The peacebuilding community is developing new tools for systems analysis and others that will improve the culture of monitoring to make it more conducive to adaptive learning. Nonetheless, peacebuilding still lags behind fields such as public health and education.

Drawing on the expertise of leading thinkers on context-specific adaptive programming, systems thinking and complexity science, this session identified good practices from diverse contexts on how to build learning, adaptation and feedback mechanisms as well as flexibility into programme design. The session began with an overview of systems thinking and complexity science, which focused on how the two relate to adaptive management. The subsequent plenary discussion and group work focused on overcoming barriers to working in more flexible and adaptive ways.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) and other similar approaches help peacebuilders to better understand how to tackle the complex challenges that surround conflict and fragility.¹ To enable adaptive learning approaches, peacebuilders must begin with a hypothesis rather than a solution. Furthermore, adaptive learning entails an iterative, step-by-step model that allows for failure and adjustment along the way. Adaptation and the development of locally defined solutions is only possible by learning through 'feedback loops'. Unfortunately, the trend for adopting best practices and exchanging lessons learned often means that peacebuilders transplant solutions from one country context to the next without first interrogating whether they are fit for purpose.

Barriers to applying PDIA in peacebuilding

Donors tend to be risk-averse, seeking linear approaches to peacebuilding that have been tried in other conflict contexts. Their reluctance to invest in approaches that promote exploration and risk failure impedes learning by prioritizing the safety of what is known over the possibilities of what has yet to be tested. Based on their understanding of donor preferences, peacebuilders and peacebuilding organizations package their programmes to deliver a specific set of known outcomes in a linear process.

PDIA approaches are time-consuming because they require implementing organizations and donors to evaluate the effectiveness of their peacebuilding approaches on a continuing basis. The time and effort inherent in this process and the practice of questioning long-standing methods can be unsettling for experienced practitioners and difficult to achieve while at the same time trying to deliver results. Furthermore, the switch from an expert model, in which individuals are believed to possess the organization's expertise in their respective issue areas,

¹ For more on PDIA see Andrews, M. and Pritchett, L., 'Escaping capability traps through Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA)', *World Development*, vol. 51 (2013), p. 242.



to a more fluid model, in which the process of learning and the context on the ground are valued above thematic expertise, can be traumatic.

Finally, with some exceptions, the peacebuilding community has been more preoccupied with developing a broad definition of peace than identifying everyday peace indicators. This big picture focus hinders efforts that would approach peacebuilding challenges at the local level, testing one piece of the puzzle at a time.

Overcoming barriers to PDIA

At the programme level, peacebuilders should seek to build a healthy system by focusing on processes instead of outcomes. Systems are neither broken nor fixed: they are dynamic. Participants discussed testing a dynamic map of the theory to avoid confining their approach to the short term or a particular linear process. The experts leading the discussion recommended using a 10-year plan as a guide for structuring programme-level learning.

At the organizational level, peacebuilders should work on building shared, collective and aligned intelligence across all levels of the organization. Equally important is the need to communicate learning objectives to donors and partners to increase their risk tolerance and patience. Within the organization, leaders need to change the organizational culture in such a way that learning itself becomes an outcome in service of the desired impacts. One way to bring about this type of cultural change is by establishing regular check-ins to discuss what staff members are learning and how they have adapted in response to each lesson. Decentralizing decision making can also encourage a culture of learning by removing the bureaucratic obstacles to adaptation.

At the system level, mapping helps to visualize data sets and system dynamics to discover opportunities for integrating feedback loops. Systems maps also help to illustrate the ‘core story’ and ‘supporting stories’, or the narratives of the primary and secondary hypotheses being tested and the results of that exploration processes.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Introducing adaptive peacebuilding approaches is tough in large organizations. Start by getting buy-in from key stakeholders at various levels and then test pilot projects. It is important to identify early signs of impact and how to measure these types of outcomes.
- Fail smart in ways that limit damage and maximize learning. To do so, peacebuilders must first identify ‘easy wins’ and areas of least resistance on which to build.
- Build collective intelligence in your organization and break up the decision-making process into three parts: (a) explaining the context; (b) defining perceived opportunities; and (c) identifying the means (method, resources) of seizing them.
- Maximize learning in the early stages of a programme and only as the programme evolves become more linear in approach and focused on outcomes.
- To every linear programme, build in the space to try something innovative.
- Use a narrative to engage stakeholders in the learning process. Stories are easier to remember than lists of ideas or statistics.

