TOYBOX'S ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT IN PRACTICE

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At Toybox, we understand 'Adaptive Management' as a broad innovative and learning approach that involves the whole organisation, our partners and funders. 'Adaptive Programming' of projects is part of this approach which is greatly enhanced by the Adaptive Management of all actors, including communities and children in the projects.

Over the last few years Toybox have been piloting Adaptive Programming with our partners across Latin America, Africa and Asia to support children in street situations. This project has been developed within the wider context of an organisation which is focused on innovation and learning, therefore enabling Adaptive Management to become mainstream within the organisation.

This paper captures the experiences and learnings of Toybox to our newly implemented Adaptive Programming approach, through the lens of a small-sized UK-based organisation working with local organisations internationally. This paper explains our learnings, inclusive of why we believe Adaptive Management is important to Toybox and how the organisation has embraced this new approach.

Responding quickly and effectively

Toybox works in extremely challenging contexts where children and young people in street situations[i] face extreme hardships including physical, emotional and sexual abuse – and all this coupled with the lack of access to basic needs, such as food, shelter and clothing.

We work in complex cities which experience constant movement of people and change. Life is constantly shifting, especially for children and young people living in slum settlements or on the streets as they live with the uncertainty of where they will sleep or what they will eat each day. Every day is different and every child has a set of diverse needs. Each individual child will have varying strengths and degrees of vulnerability with a different past, social, health and family status, which influences how they are able to cope with their situation.
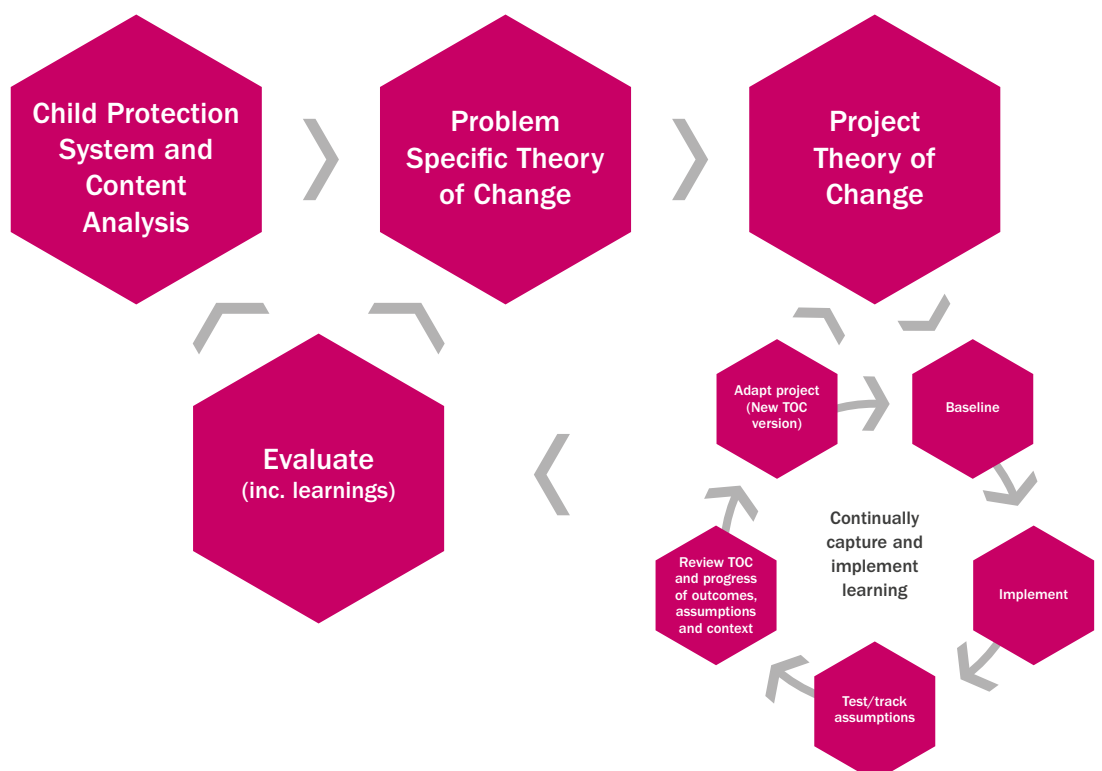
There are numerous ways that Toybox is responding effectively to these children and young people which are:

1. Each context is different and needs to be understood

At Toybox, we believe that local organisations are best placed to find the most appropriate solutions to improve the lives of children and young people connected to the streets. Our partnerships encourage **locally–led development** which increases the effectiveness, legitimacy and cost effectiveness of our engagement with street-connected children as we work with those who have expertise and long-term knowledge of the context.

We respond to the needs of vulnerable children through local actors identifying local problems and their solutions, and do not impose a pre-determined 'Toybox' solution on the unique needs of children and young people in differing contexts and cultures. To do this, we follow the first three stages of our Project Cycle Management (PCM), seen below.

Toybox's Theory of Change for Adaptive Programming (TOCAP)
Project Cycle Management (PCM)

Child Protection System and Content Analysis

Problem Specific Theory of Change

Project Theory of Change

Adapt project (New TOC version)

Baseline

Evaluate (inc. learnings)

Continually capture and implement learning

Review TOC and progress of outcomes, assumptions and context

Implement

Test/track assumptions

We take a **systemic approach**. To fully analyse the context for street-connected children and young people in a city, a Context Analysis is conducted which looks into the local Child Protection System and provides a snapshot into the lives of children and young people in street situations of a specific city. Using this information, a Theory of Change (TOC) workshop is held in the city with the partner and other local stakeholders. The objective of the TOC workshop is to ensure the projects start with a clear participatory analysis of the local context, and a space for local key actors to collaborate and build the best solution to an identified problem, through developing a Problem Specific TOC together. The partner then focuses on what contribution they can make through a project to tackle this specific problem (i.e. a Project TOC). When designing a new project in the same context, Toybox will subsequently update the Context Analysis and Problem Specific Theory of Change.

Context focused Theory of Change workshop – Nairobi, Kenya

In February 2017 a workshop was held with 29 actors from local NGOs and the government, in which the local Child Protection System was analysed, the Context Analysis verified and a Problem Specific Theory of Change developed with the goal of achieving 'A well-coordinated Child Protection System that protects all street-connected children in Nairobi County'. The Toybox-funded project, Safe from the Streets, with our partner Pendekezo Letu (PKL) contributes to this aim with support to the informal child protection structures in the community, promoting the best interest of the child in the Nairobi Juvenile Justice System and acting as a lead organisation in the newly developed Nairobi Street Children and Youth Consortium (NSCYC) which was established following this multi-stakeholder workshop.

The TOC is based upon evidence (statistics, reports, etc) but also individual beliefs and **assumptions**, with the project solution therefore being based on these assumptions being true. Due to the significance of this, Toybox's Theory of Change for Adaptive Programming (TOCAP) approach moves beyond just acknowledging assumptions in a column of the logframe, to encouraging the testing and tracking of the assumptions which could have a big impact on the project. TOCAP goes that stage further by actively applying double-loop learning[ii], with research activities to turn these project assumption-based solutions into evidence-based decisions. 'Killer' assumptions are tested at the beginning of the project to reduce the chance of the project failing. This approach strengthens the local solution, with evidence providing a greater understanding of the context and a stronger base for project success.

2. Change is expected

The situation for street-connected children is complex and dynamic. Toybox appreciates the uncertainty and unpredictability of the contexts we work in, the complexity of social issues we address and how elements and people may change during implementation. Our programmes are expected to reflect this reality and continue to adapt the more we learn from project implementation, feedback from children and communities and changes to the environment.

A TOC is exactly what it says it is – our theory of how change will happen. The TOC and work plan developed with the partner before the project begins is expected to be updated as we learn along the way; we do not think we have all the answers at the beginning[iii]. The road map is set at the beginning, but learning from implementation, feedback, and context changes produces a more detailed map that may show a better road to reach the destination. In some cases, another destination (impact) can appear that was not acknowledged as an aim at the beginning.

Deeper learning from testing assumptions – Delhi, India

When developing the Project TOC for an education project in Delhi, our partner at CHETNA made the assumption that 'children who do not work at all have a better chance of passing the school year than children who work before and/ or after school'. All of the children were working at the beginning of the project. Project staff then monitored the children's work status and attendance at school. By tracking this assumption, they found their assumption was partially true as those that were still working generally passed the school year (yet did not do as well in their grades as those that had stopped). They also found out that nearly all of the children had actually stopped working. Therefore this education project not only ensured a high-retention rate of 93.3% of 511 children in school, it also contributed to reducing child labour. If it was not for this assumption tracking, this would not have been monitored and we would have missed a major unexpected learning about the impact of this project.

The TOC process is outcome focused, looking at the overall change we want to see achieved. All staff are involved in developing the TOC the project rests on, which promotes a mind-set change for staff from running daily activities (the 'what/how/when') to understanding the reasons – the outcomes and objectives – behind the project (the 'why'); one frontline worker after the TOC design workshop in Delhi said *"…now I realise why we are doing the activities"*. Outcome-orientated quarterly reviews with the project teams also promote a non-static project management approach, with a focus on whether we are striving towards the bigger picture, and if not, what do we need to change to make the best impact on the lives of the children and communities.

With this process, we believe that each adaptation of the project has a greater likelihood of our project contributing to the change we are seeking. Adaptations to the project are tested on a smaller scale at first. As seen in the example below from Kenya, new assumptions on how to improve the project also arise throughout implementation and are tested to provide data evidence to justify a change to the project.

Assumptions tested to bring about evidence-based change – Nairobi, Kenya

The Toybox Programme Manager ran a review with the partner using an activity to reflect on new ways of achieving economic empowerment for vulnerable mothers and young people. Based on feedback from community members, the team came up with new ideas that they believed would improve the success of the project. These ideas were then taken and tested over a few months with the communities. With evidence of success, these new activities and approaches were implemented into the next phase of the project. Toybox's partner had been running this economic empowerment model in the same way for many years, so having this opportunity to reflect, test assumptions and find ways to improve the project was new at first, but ultimately had positive outcomes for the staff, the project and the communities.

3. Reflection and learning are mind-sets

Reflection and learning are for and by everyone, which Toybox believes is 'at the heart of adaptation'[iv]. A culture of embracing learning (from both successes and challenges), where everyone feels they can contribute with an idea or admit a mistake, is key. Enabled through the Toybox Leadership Team who encourage all staff to be courageous (our core value) and strive to try, fail, adapt and learn through open organisational reviews, Toybox already has this innovative and reflective mind-set which fits with the Adaptive Management approach. The internal enabling environment has a massive role to play in moving adaptive management from theory to practice[v].

"I NEVER LOSE. I EITHER WIN OR LEARN."

Nelson Mandela

How Toybox promotes an Adaptive Management approach within the organisation[vi]:

Toybox's Leadership Team are constantly looking for ways to learn and improve, even within an environment of restrictive legal compliance as well as maintaining the moral and value-based aspects of the Toybox culture – when this push for improvement comes from those spearheading the organisation, it becomes core to the organisation as a whole.

A key pillar of the organisation is innovation, encouraged through a commitment of 10% of staff's working time dedicated to the exploration of new ideas. Innovative tools are also used across organisational meetings, such as those presented in A Time to Think[vii].
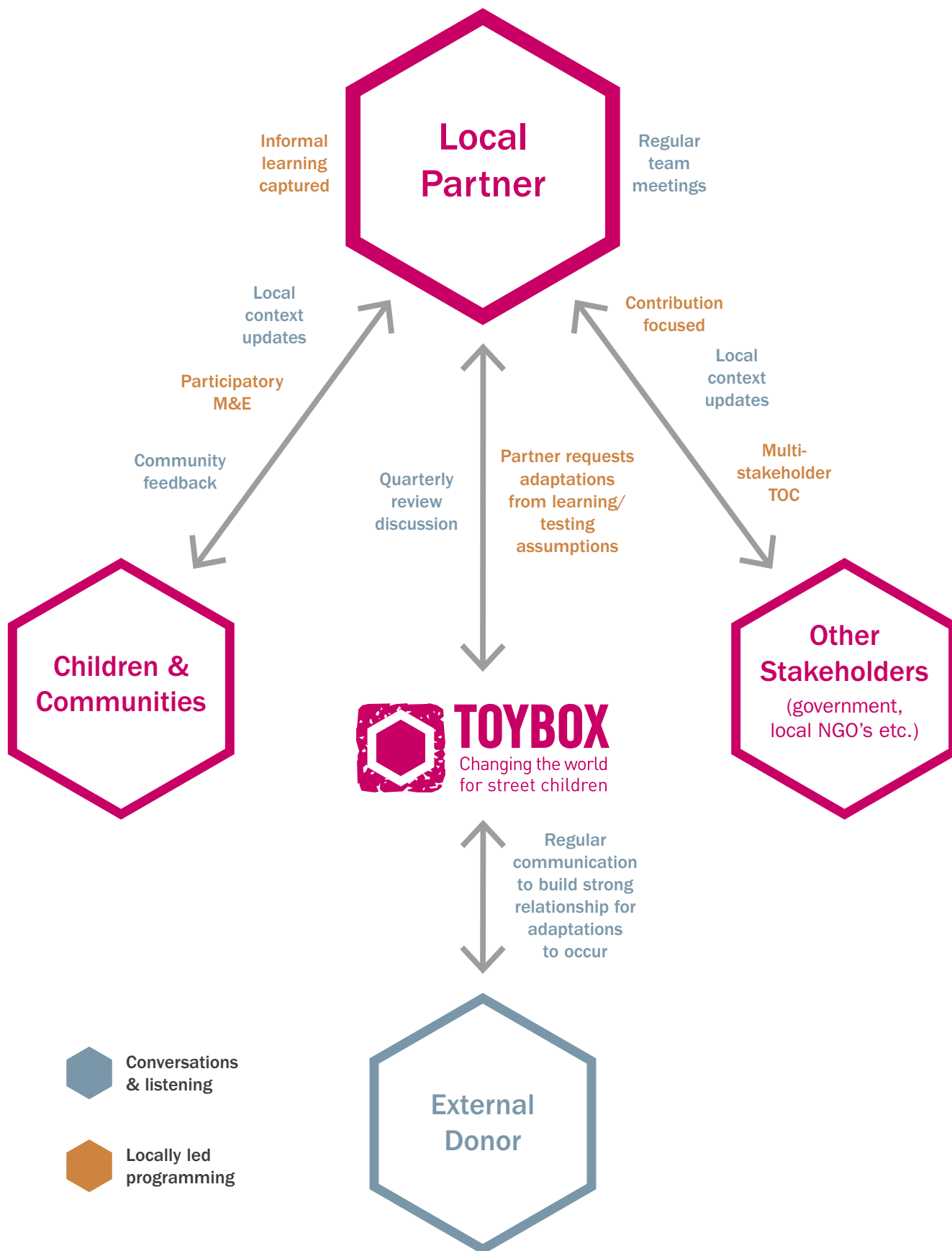
As a small-sized organisation, Toybox is able to be more responsive and not slowed down by bureaucracy. Effective requested adaptations to projects have been made even on the following day when required.

Toybox recognises the need to be open to change if a better way can be justified. Being adaptive does not mean constantly making changes just 'to be adaptive', which can affect efficiency, but constantly thinking 'What is best for the child?' and being open to changes to achieve that.

Reviews and adaptations have an impact on resources which can be challenging for a smaller organisation. Yet learning is only realised and captured when there is time to reflect and review. As seen in the diagram below, this culture is not only encouraged to thrive within Toybox, but within all stakeholders. Capacity building of partner staff on Adaptive Management takes time, as it can be a change to their internal culture, so is supported by Toybox in stages. One way we actively promote a focus on learning is through having a standard outcome or objective on learning, so adequate resources and time are placed on this process as much as other project activities and outcomes.

Reflecting and learning are a continuous process with everyone being empowered to know their contribution is important. Those who are in contact with the children and communities regularly – frontline staff (social workers/street outreach workers/street educators) – are the main people we focus on and whom we encourage to reflect.

Reflective learning by all actors to inform adaptation

Local Partner

Informal learning captured

Regular team meetings

Local context updates

Contribution focused

Participatory M&E

Local context updates

Community feedback

Quarterly review discussion

Partner requests adaptations from learning/ testing assumptions

Multi-stakeholder TOC

Children & Communities

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Other Stakeholders
(government, local NGO's etc.)

Regular communication to build strong relationship for adaptations to occur

Conversations & listening

Locally led programming

External Donor

4. Tools and systems need to be learning-centred and flexible to allow adaptation

A culture of reflection and learning is vital, and flexible learning systems and tools are key to allowing these learnings to be implemented as smoothly as possible[viii]. The whole organisation, partners, and external donors all play a key role as any stakeholder can negatively affect the outcomes of a project.

1) Adaptive Programming Tools and Approaches

As we recognise that change is desired to reflect reality, Toybox has developed tools and ways to support adaptations. These documents and tools aim to promote reflection, and are as simple as possible to ease adjustments made in the projects to be reflected in the reporting:

- The Theory of Change for Adaptive Programming (TOCAP)[ix] project management tool supports our partners to develop projects to address complex and changing local contexts with a focus on bringing about and monitoring positive change and providing a user-friendly toolkit to enhance strong Adaptive Project Management. TOCAP has been shown to integrate good project management practice (including feedback, context analysis, participation) to promote continual learnings, which result in adaptations to improve the project. This project management tool provides a space to document learning and changes made in real-time (during the project). For example, the results of testing assumptions need to be captured to show the data driven decisions on why certain project changes have happened.

Theory of Change for Adaptive Programming (TOCAP) Principles

1. Change does not occur in a vacuum, there will always be shocks and learning that require a planned project or programme to change course. Therefore, adaptation sits at the heart of the approach and is practically built into the model.

2. All intervention designs are based on a mix of evidence and assumptions and based upon our Theory of Change of how to reach that desired change.

3. The Critical Assumptions we make when developing our project or when making changes to the project must be tracked or tested.

4. Any impactful change in a complex world requires Systems Thinking. TOCAP is based upon a Child Protection Systems view for the interventions it designs.

5. There are many variables that lead to change in people's lives and an organisation contributes to this change.

6. The Accountability and participation of those people your programme is seeking to benefit is paramount. It is important the target group are involved in the design phase and that there is a consistent assessment of how their feedback is being incorporated into the implementation of the project.

TOCAP also standardises stronger Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) approaches across Toybox. It is a movement away from just focusing on the 'M' of measuring activity and output level (e.g. X many workshops with X many people were conducted in X many communities) and more towards the 'E' and broader process of change (outcomes and impact), 'A' in regards to accountability towards the children and communities and 'L' by looking at the continual learning and assumptions underpinning the work.

- A simple budget template to allow for movement between budget lines (with justification). Budgets can also be loosened by using broader terminology in budget lines to allow for flexibility if needed[x]. MEAL and assumption testing and tracking must have an adequate budget.

2) Funding

Due to our funding model, we are in a very fortunate position that has allowed Toybox to trial versions of the TOCAP model over the last few years to support project adaptations that fit the time and resources of our local partners.

This success of adaptive programming can be emphasised with funders as effective real-time project management. It is also an approach many institutional funders now look for, so with Toybox's experience, we can show how we can push this agenda and foster positive and expected Adaptive Programming to improve the success of the projects.

3) Bottom-up Accountability – Feedback mechanisms

Partner feedback mechanisms to adapt at an organisational level – we attain formal feedback from our partners through a simple questionnaire. Feedback is discussed by the Toybox Leadership Team and a summary response is sent to all partners. We look to implement the suggestions which are possible. Informal feedback is also gathered during visits to the partner.

Community feedback mechanisms to adapt at a project/partner level – Feedback from children and communities leads to effective adaptive programming, as it promotes adaptions from suggestions that meet actual needs and are built on their own solutions. Our partners have a good relationship with the communities they seek to serve and have effective informal feedback mechanisms. We are currently working on formalising some of these mechanisms.

Listening to those in the know and responding gives results – Lima, Peru

Toybox partner Agape was working to deliver a project outcome on better treatment for children in high-risk homes. However they were finding it difficult to engage parents (especially fathers) on ways to reduce domestic violence due to their other commitments or lack of interest. The partner learnt their approach was not reaching the numbers nor having the impact they had initially expected. From talking to the parents and finding out what they like doing, they redesigned their training sessions around these activities (football for fathers and sewing for mothers). More parents came and engaged in these fun sessions, where they discussed and practiced good parenting values and attitudes. Agape adapted how the activity was implemented which encouraged more parents to be part of the activity and greater behaviour change, with 74% of children recognising better attitudes by their parents by the end of the project.

Conclusion and recommendations

The literature on Adaptive Management and Programming has grown over recent years and most of the evidence shared is from large INGOs. What Toybox's experience shows is that Adaptive Management can be successful for smaller-sized organisations. Adaptations can happen faster as there are less people to consult, so the decision-making and response rates are often quicker. Many Adaptive Management and Programming discussions by NGOs have looked at ways to push this agenda within their organisations, but this was not necessary at Toybox. Adaptive Management fits Toybox's innovative culture and as the Leadership Team had already created the environment for staff to look for better, cheaper and more radical solutions, there was already a conducive environment for Adaptive Management to be adopted. Toybox continues to learn from and build on its Adaptive Management approach internally, with external funders and with all our partners, encouraging further participation of project stakeholders and children.

Based on our learning over the last few years, these are our ten key recommendations for Adaptive Management and Programming:

1. Adaptive Programming should be promoted as the umbrella term for good project management practice that includes and is interdependent on other good practice, such as context focused and locally-led development, participation, feedback mechanisms, strong MEAL and adaptations based on learning. Sometimes Adaptive Programming can be seen as a new approach which appears separate to other key project management practices, but they should all be viewed as integral to each other; for example, strong feedback mechanisms allow learning and suggestions from communities to trigger project adaptations.

2. Building a culture of Adaptive Management with partners is a process that takes time, yet is worthwhile as it strengthens the partner's ownership of the project and the partnership itself. Strong trust and good communication is vital for the partner to feel confident to come forward with new ideas and evidence for change, which will ultimately strengthen the impact of the project.

3. A specific outcome or objective on learning ensures time and resources are focused on learning and Adaptive Programming. It also helps overcome the challenge for partners in regards to additional time needed to reflect and adapt, as this process is seen as part of the project lifecycle.

4. Test and track assumptions to attain evidence-based project solutions.

5. Include an adequate budget for assumption testing in the MEAL budget to support the partner to have the resources to make evidence-based adaptations.

6. Context Analysis is a continuous process, so quarterly reviews must look at the wider context and beyond the last and next three months of project implementation in isolation.

7. It needs to be recognised that changes cannot keep happening all the time due to resources and the need for consistency. Periodic reviews give structured time together for the teams to monitor progress and reflect if there is any need for an adaptation.

8. The TOC approach enhances the visual focus for our partners on outcomes and therefore on how to attain positive change. The bigger picture is a valuable focus for all partner staff to understand, monitor and strive for.

9. Tools and systems need to be simple, and made adaptable to fit the capacity of the partner. Extra tools can be added once the capacity and culture at the partner organisation builds.

10. Project documents are important to support flexibility and adaptations, but the main focus should be on the culture of reflection and learning with the team and stakeholders.

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i   This document uses the terms 'street-connected children and youth' and 'children in street situations' to mean the same group of children as defined in the UN General Comment n.21 (OHCHR, CRC/C/GC/21, 21 June 2017).

ii   Double-loop learning, as seen in Valters C. et al (2016), pg.8, moves beyond single-loop learning of problem-solving, to questioning the underlying assumptions behind the decisions and what we do.

iii   TOCAP merges two approaches of the Cynefin Framework (Snowden, 2007): Complicated Problem approach (context analysis and hypothesis testing through implementation) and elements of the Complex Problem approach (learning from doing).

iv   O'Donnell M. (2016) Adaptive Management: What it means for CSOs (London: BOND), p.13

v   Proud, E (11 Sep 2017) How can Organizations Encourage Adaptive Management? Three Insights from Mercy Corps' Evolution Toward Agility

vi   This section was developed from a reflective session with each Toybox department reviewing their learning processes and level of flexibility.

vii   Kline, N. (2011) Transforming Meetings (Time to Think), pg.23-24

viii   BOND (2016), pg.4

ix   The TOCAP project management tool has been piloted with two of our partners (CHETNA in Delhi and Pendekezo Letu in Nairobi) since July 2016, and further refined with their feedback.

x   Also identified as a useful method by ADAPT (June 2016) Adapting AID, p.8

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