

MULTI-PROJECT PROGRAMMES

FUNCTIONS, FORMS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EVALUATION AND LEARNING

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KEY MESSAGES

- Multi-project programmes can serve different purposes. For instance, they may coordinate multiple implementing entities; standardise management and technical support; compare intervention approaches across different contexts; enhance leverage through joint action; or foster sustainability by building relationships among organisations.
- At the same time, multi-project programmes are costly, potentially duplicate other mechanisms that fulfil similar functions, and can dilute focus and create confusion.
- To guide decisions on what coordination, evaluation and learning mechanisms are needed, it is helpful to articulate the intended purpose of using a programme model. Identifying the purpose(s) can help staff determine what types of knowledge sharing strategies may be most useful to the programme, and how project and programme theories of change can be sequenced.

The Methods Lab is an action-learning collaboration between the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), BetterEvaluation (BE) and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The Methods Lab seeks to develop, test, and institutionalise flexible approaches to impact evaluations. It focuses on interventions which are harder to evaluate because of their diversity and complexity or where traditional impact evaluation approaches may not be feasible or appropriate, with the broader aim of identifying lessons with wider application potential.

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Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Programmes are one of many types of organisation	5
3. Potential benefits of programme models	6
4. Potential drawbacks of programme models	8
5. Alternatives to the programme model	9
6. Implications for programme-wide coordination, learning and evaluation systems	10
7. Integrating programmes into existing systems	13
8. Greater than the sum of its parts? Assessing the programme model	14
9. Conclusions	15
References	16
Acknowledgements	17

1. Introduction

Large programmes,¹ in which multiple projects are grouped together under a wider umbrella, have become an increasingly popular model of development delivery among donors. In recent years, the UK Government Department for International Development's (DFID) growing spend relative to staff² (House of Commons International Development Committee 2015) has, for example, contributed to an increase in the use of independent contractors to manage portfolios of funds (Independent Commission for Aid Impact 2013), while other bilateral donor agencies and private foundations are also experimenting with multi-project programme models.

These types of programmes are typically funded through a single mechanism and address a common, broad theme, such as community resilience or women's empowerment. They are implemented across different locations by different organisations, and may target different population groups and employ different interventions, but are grouped together under a common set of high-level objectives, often under a single results framework. Importantly, there is an expectation of some level of interaction between the projects. These multi-project 'umbrella' programmes often represent third-order aggregations – that is, individual implementing organisations self-assembled into consortia at the project proposal stage, which are then brought together with other consortia by the donor into the umbrella programme (Figure 1).

Multi-project programmes represent an effort to move away from many separate projects, which have been critiqued for their collective burden on recipient countries and siloed nature, missing opportunities for wider learning and integration.³ A programme approach has the potential to streamline management, facilitate coordination and information sharing, and expand reach, influence and diversity. Multi-project programmes do, however, impose additional costs, risk duplicating other mechanisms that aim to fulfil similar functions, and may dilute focus and create confusion. Considering these trade-offs raises the following important questions about the nature of the programme arrangement:

- How can programmes maximise benefits and minimise costs for implementing organisations and funding agencies?

- What type and intensity of interaction is most productive and appropriate for constituent projects?
- At what stage in the programme cycle are programme-wide coordination, and evaluation and learning systems necessary?
- What is the added value of this type of mechanism? At what level does aggregation become artificial? And when is the whole greater than the sum of its parts?

Programme models inherently embed a number of assumptions about enhancing impact, channelling transactions and facilitating greater learning by creating an organisational structure that requires interaction and cooperation. However, these assumptions are not always explicitly articulated and are rarely tested. Indeed, a review of research consortia found the relationships between organisations and networks to be the least understood and assessed compared to other consortia activities (Hovland et al 2008).

This paper aims to help address this gap in understanding, by characterising forms and functions of a programme-wide approach and discussing implications of this model for project and programme-wide coordination, learning and evaluation. It then analyses the comparative advantage of multi-project programmes relative to existing coordination and learning approaches, and identifies when and how programme-level elements could be developed to capitalise on their potential benefits. The paper aims to help guide funding agencies and development practitioners in clarifying:

- Why they have chosen this approach, explicitly articulating the purpose and rationale compared to other mechanisms that may fulfil similar functions
- What types of coordination mechanisms and interactions are necessary to fulfil specific functions
- When in the programme period should programme-wide activities take place.

The paper concludes by identifying a series of questions to test the multi-project programme model and assess the conditions under which it may be more – or less – useful.

1 These arrangements are also sometimes referred to as 'consortia' or 'schemes'. For simplicity, we use the term programme throughout to denote this type of structure. This use is consistent with the UK Government's *Managing Successful Programmes* approach, in which a programme is a 'a temporary flexible organisation structure created to coordinate, direct and oversee the implementation of a set of related projects and activities in order to deliver outcomes and benefits related to the organisation's strategic objectives' (MSP Refresh 2007). By 'project', we mean a piece of work that has a specific purpose and scope, a collection of related tasks or deliverables..

2 Spending per staff member in DFID increased from £2.5 million per full-time equivalent (FTE) in 2009-10 to £3.3 million per FTE in 2013-14 (House of Commons International Development Committee 2015).

3 At the a more macro level, sector-wide approaches SWAs (sector-wide approaches) and budget support –, whereby international funds are channelled through national ministries of health or finance –, represent earlier attempts to shift from a project approach. Multi-project programmes are more mezzo (between micro and macro) and external in orientation, working through contracted implementing entities rather than national governments.

2. Programmes are one of many types of organisation

Multi-project programmes share certain characteristics with other types of institutional arrangements involving multiple entities – such as coalitions, networks and facilities – but are distinct in several key ways.

Coalitions are formed of a group of people or organisations that have chosen to join together for a common purpose. Multi-project programmes differ from coalitions in that their membership is limited and contingent; participation is selective and determined by a third party – the funding agency. In multi-project programmes, membership and continued financial support is dependent on specific deliverables, including collaboration with other programme members. Entrance to and exit of such programmes are therefore associated with higher costs when compared with coalitions where membership is voluntary and more fluid.

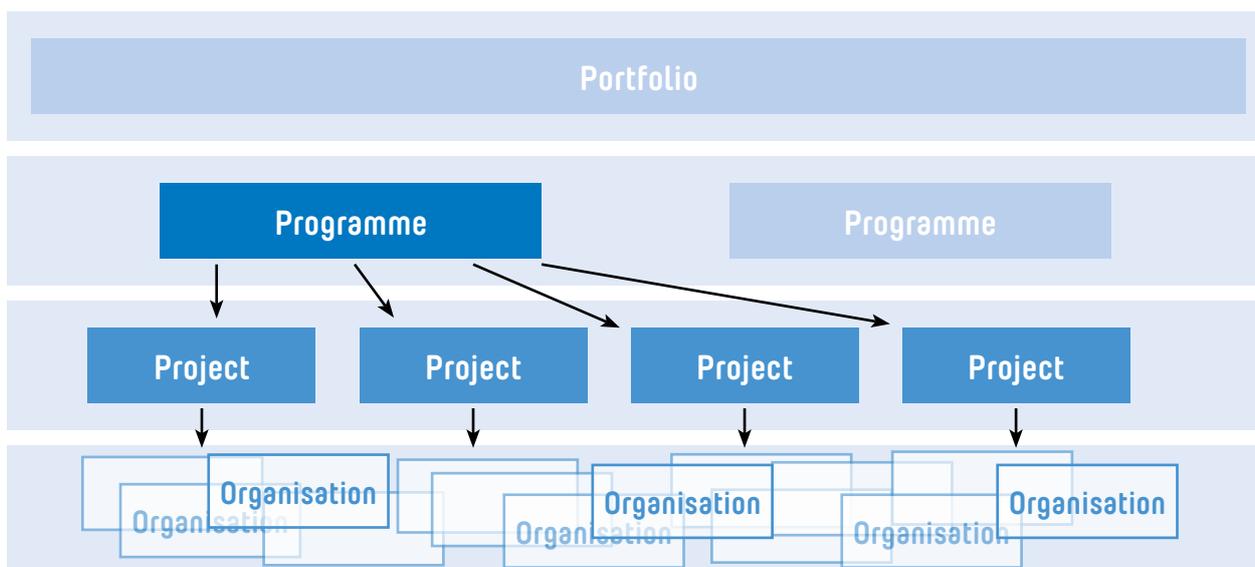
Networks are a collection of actors that are connected to each other through some kind of relationship. Some networks may be managed in a similar way to a programme, with funding from a donor to members of the network for specific deliverables. But one major difference is that networks are more likely to be funded by multiple funders, including the members themselves in many cases. Members may receive services or benefits as part of their

involvement. Networks also emphasise the development of interrelationships, collaborative activities and coordination as key outputs (Hearn and Mendizabal 2011).

Facilities allocate a large pool of funds to achieve a high-level objective. They have substantial flexibility in choosing which projects to fund – a decision that is usually guided by demand from the government in the country where the facility is operating (Dawson 2009). In comparison to facilities, the relationship between projects in a programme is more intentional and closely linked to the overall programme logic.

Multi-project programmes are also distinct from **third-party administrative coordination**, in which contracting and financial oversight of a portfolio of projects is centrally managed through an external organisation. It is not uncommon for donors to pool project funding together into large ‘funds’, sometimes up to several hundred million dollars. These funds are primarily created to reduce administrative costs and offer consistent services across the fund.⁴ Programmes go beyond administration, with explicit links among individual projects (to varying degrees) pursuing activities around a joint theme and mandating periodic interaction among members.

Figure 1: Organisational structure of multi-project programmes



⁴ Some fund management approaches also include a learning element, through the use of external consultants to conduct research and evaluation or by facilitating learning among the projects themselves. The categories of organisational types discussed here are not wholly distinct, and rather may fall along a continuum from purely administrative coordination to joint strategy and learning.

3. Potential benefits of programme models

Pursuing a joined-up programme approach offers multiple potential benefits. We can cluster these possible benefits into three broad categories: channelling transactions, increasing knowledge and learning, and increasing influence and impact.

These benefits may be realised by fulfilling different functions:

Channelling transactions

Multi-project programmes may aim to channel transactions by:

1. *Coordinating implementing entities*, shifting from numerous binary relationships among funders, implementing organisations and external stakeholders such as host communities and governments to grouped interactions.
2. *Standardising management and specialised technical support* to streamline processes, structure external communications around a coherent narrative and maintain minimum standards, such as common risk assessments or monitoring and reporting frameworks.

As programmes coordinate actors funded by the same source, they can streamline interactions for the funding agencies instead of having separate lines of communication and reporting between many different projects and their individual donor officers. Programme-wide coordination could also reduce separate, similar requests to external actors like government officials.

Increasing knowledge and learning

Multi-project programmes may aim to increase knowledge and learning by:

3. *Sharing information* among and beyond participating organisations informally through inter-organisational observation and communicating perceived lessons and good practice.
4. *Comparing intervention approaches across different contexts* empirically through structured comparisons to better understand how interventions aimed at addressing similar issues for different participants in different contexts across the same time period; or, in the case of multi-project research programmes, how research findings vary across groups and contexts.

If projects undertake similar activities, they may be able to share specific lessons in real time and replicate these strategies across the programme – such as what type of outreach, training and retention strategies may be most effective with a particular population subgroup.

If variation among projects is structured in such a way as to be able to systematically compare what works for whom, and under what circumstances, programmes may be able to address this question with a greater level of specificity regarding a particular set of interventions, contexts and/or participants than broader systematic reviews are able to do. Undertaking such comparisons may provide better control for history effects – that is, events that occur in time in the external context (i.e. national elections) – which may affect outcomes, as all projects are operating at the same time.

Increasing influence and impact

Multi-project programmes may aim to increase influence and impact by:

5. *Extending the reach* of interventions to multiple geographic areas.
6. *Enhancing leverage* through joint action with government or market institutions.
7. *Broadening the diversity* of perspectives and strategies, bringing together actors from multiple disciplines, sectors and locations with different capacities, who may take different approaches to a common problem, together providing a more holistic response.
8. *Fostering sustainability* by building relationships among organisations through repeat interaction.

Programmes that bring together a larger number of organisations can increase leverage and influence by taking advantage of the unique capacities and connections of their members and by acting together as a collective. The programme model provides both the financing and organisational structure, and indeed an obligation, for project interaction, which overcomes many of the collective action dilemmas experienced by voluntary coalitions where all members rely on others to organise the group and generate resources for their activities. Because programmes mandate periodic interaction, participation will be consistent over a period of time.

Box 1: Donor rationales for a multi-project programme model

‘The goal of consortium-led projects is to *enhance impact* and assist them to reach their potential. Consortia, when properly governed, have the potential to produce a sum of overall outputs that is *greater than individual organisations* working with *little coordination*. Consortia offer the opportunity for numerous organisations to *increase collaboration, exchange expertise, unify advocacy efforts, and increase overall service delivery* and accountability to project participants.’

‘Partnerships *enhance the reach of aid*, and enable the donor government and NGOs to *share lessons and experiences*, jointly identifying the most effective ways to help people overcome poverty and make progress towards the Millennium Development Goals. Experience suggests that a partnership approach *improves the efficiency and effectiveness* of development outcomes.’

‘Collaboration will be essential to the success of the strategy, especially in the execution of the project’s goals. We see greatest potential when individual partners, each of whom may have *different types of expertise*, have committed to a common vision and a willingness to *share best practices and lessons learned* on an ongoing basis.’

‘Each of the consortia brings together a number of institutions with a range of regional, scientific and socio-economic development *expertise* to explore the physical, social, economic and political dimensions. This approach enables *greater South-South sharing of knowledge and experience* across disciplines, sectors, countries and continents, and *encourages innovation*. The consortia also tackle the issue *over different timeframes and across different scales* – from impacts on households and villages up to regional and global policies. This approach brings *fresh and more practical perspectives* to the problems.’

‘It will help to *build and share knowledge and evidence*. It will help *deliver a sustained and transformational impact* on people’s resilience, *beyond the communities directly supported by funded projects*. It will do this by *learning lessons and building evidence on what works in different contexts*.’

If a donor thinks particular perspectives are critical, first-hand experience in a local community, knowledge of physical sciences or advocacy expertise, for example, the inclusion of these organisation’s profiles can be required. In terms of scale, if each organisation has established relationships in a particular community, it may be faster and more cost-effective to scale-up by building on these relationships rather than funding a single organisation to expand their project to new sites.

These eight functions are not mutually exclusive; rather, they may be complementary. A multi-project programme model may be selected to fulfil several purposes, and the perceived importance of different functions may vary among stakeholders. At the same time, there may be trade-offs: sharing information may increase rather than reduce transaction costs; learning based on what is and is not working may improve effectiveness but will also uncover circumstances where impacts have not been observed.

Box 1 presents the rationale cited by different development donors in publically available documents to explain their choice of a multi-project programme model. Their terminology differs slightly – referring to consortia, partnerships and collaboration – but the organisational structure is the same. They each refer to knowledge exchange, sharing lessons based on unique expertise and experiences. Their statements are ambitious, aiming to enhance effectiveness, impact and innovation. Of the categories already identified, these statements reference enhancing leverage and comparing approaches across contexts the least.

4. Potential drawbacks of programme models

Along with the potential benefits of a multi-project programme model come possible disadvantages. Having fewer large units is often regarded as being more efficient. However, channelling transactions may simply shift the coordination burden from one entity to another, reducing transaction costs for some stakeholders while increasing them for others. If multiple organisations are grouped into consortia, it may decrease the number of individual interactions a donor officer has with each organisation, but the organisation coordinating the consortium must then absorb these costs.

Adding structural layers also increases the number of individual interactions. For instance, one donor funding 15 recipient organisations produces 15 relationship pairs. One donor funding three consortia projects, with five organisations in each, produces 48 relationship pairs. With external actors, programmes may exacerbate coordination with government officials if a specific programme-wide group is added on top of existing government-NGO-donor mechanisms.

Multi-project programmes essentially create new organisations for a fixed period of time, typically between three and five years, repeating the process when a new programme cycle begins. This entails establishing management procedures, which may differ from those of each member (discussed in further depth in the ‘Integrating programmes into existing systems’ section of this paper). Working across multiple languages, sectors, and administrative, legal and currency systems may increase also transaction costs.

For smaller organisations with few central human resources (financial, legal, communications), or those not covered by the project budget, working in larger more bureaucratic structures may be prohibitively expensive. Creating new, temporary organisations – particularly those involving people from different countries and sectors – also requires careful management of interpersonal interactions and time to build relationships and trust.

Grouping multiple projects together can create confusion among implementing staff and dilute the focus of each individual project. Conducting explicit comparisons among approaches may be quite sensitive and institutionally risky if projects result in different outcomes.

5. Alternatives to the programme model

Given the potential drawbacks, it is important to consider whether there are more suitable alternatives to the programme model for achieving the intended aims and fulfilling the functions listed herein. By examining each set of functions in turn, we can see that each can be achieved through various means, including, but not limited to, programme models.

Channelling transactions

Government-NGO-donor coordination groups exist in many countries, particularly in dense development arenas. Professional and sector associations aim to coordinate actors within a particular thematic area (i.e. agriculture, education) or sector (Chamber of Commerce, national NGO associations). They often establish standards that can be used to establish consistency across individual projects. Donors themselves typically have standardised assessment and reporting forms so a programme model may not be necessary to streamline processes if they are already uniform across the agency.

Increasing knowledge and learning

Coordination groups and associations may also serve information-sharing functions. They may be supplemented by more informal communities of practice, which emerge to fill a particular need. Meta-analyses, comparative case studies and systematic reviews compare intervention approaches across contexts and can help to generate broader lessons about what works for whom, and under what circumstances.

Increasing influence and impact

Increasing reach can take place through a single project that extends to more people and/or operates in more locations. Organisations may self-select to join coalitions to enhance their influence and leverage by working collectively with others. They may independently establish relationships with individuals and organisations with different capacities to fill perceived gaps and broaden their repertoire and skill base. Coordination groups and associations build and maintain relationships, often for greater lengths of time since they are not bound by a fixed programme cycle, and so may be more sustainable.

6. Implications for programme-wide coordination, learning and evaluation systems

Weighing up the potential benefits and drawbacks of a multi-project programme in relation to alternative options can help to determine when this model is an appropriate structure for delivery. Once a multi-project approach is chosen, the programme must then determine when and how cross-project interaction will take place. Again, articulating the primary purpose or function of the programme can help to guide these decisions.

Table 1 identifies the mechanisms required to fulfil each programme function, when in the programme life cycle it is needed and the intensity and frequency of interaction among projects and with programme-wide bodies, such as

the funding agency or a knowledge management partner. Arguably, planning programme-wide elements as early as possible would help embed them from the outset. The ‘phase’ column highlights that, for half of the functions, programme-wide elements need to take place before the request for proposal is issued, prior to programme selection and initiation.

Of the eight functions set out in the ‘Potential benefits’ section of this paper, increasing leverage is the most intentional and requires the more intense and frequent interaction. Projects would self-select or be invited to participate in a larger programme based on the

Table 1: Requirements, timing and interaction for different programme purposes

Purpose of programme model	Requirements	Phase when programme-wide element begins	Extent of interaction
Coordinating implementing entities	Coordinator	Programme start	Variable: may be light to intense
Standardising management and specialised support	Guidelines, templates and standards for assessment and reporting Technical advisor(s)	Prior to reporting. If assessments and monitoring frameworks are submitted with the proposal, guidelines need to be available prior to proposal processes	Periodic interaction between programme management and implementing organisations, initially intense and decreasing over time
Sharing information	Exchange mechanism (person, platform), staff time	Programme start	Periodic: may be light to intense Likely to increase over time
Comparing approaches across different contexts	Structured variation and consistency in project elements, common measurement approaches, entity to conduct comparisons	Prior to proposal process; project selection dependent on variation Measured at the outset, during and/or at the end of the cycle	Intense: interaction between implementing organisations and the evaluators at specific times
Expanding reach	Organisations with established sites and relationships	Prior to proposal process; project selection dependent on locations	No interaction needed
Enhancing leverage	Joint strategy, discussion and decision-making forum	Prior to proposal process; project selection dependent on influencing target	Intense, frequent
Broadening diversity	Variation in discipline, location Interaction mechanism	Prior to proposal process; project selection dependent on organisational profile	Variable
Fostering sustainability by building relationships	Interaction mechanism that can be maintained without programme funds	Programme implementation	Moderate to intense

organisation or actors they intend to influence. Projects would need to develop and continually refine a joint strategy, and maintain an established forum for discussion and decision-making. By definition, their success depends on the programme acting collectively.

Coordination, information sharing, diversity and fostering long-term relationships may be relatively less intensive, but each requires some sort of mechanism for interaction, a person or platform through which these exchanges take place. These mechanisms can be put in place at the programme start and do not necessarily require a substantial investment of resources. They do, however, require time from each person participating in the exchange, beyond their time allocated towards project delivery. Coordination and sharing can be as light-touch or as often as desired; if project staff find exchanges with others to be useful to their work, interactions will happen fluidly and frequently.

There is an extensive literature on knowledge-sharing strategies and tools that we will not repeat in great depth here. One example is Ramalingam's (2005) typology of knowledge and learning tools based on the type of knowledge (tacit, explicit, implicit), and the purpose: to create, store or share knowledge (Figure 2). Multi-project programmes could facilitate tacit knowledge-sharing across projects by holding training and skill share sessions led by members with different sets of expertise. They could exchange explicit knowledge through a programme-wide online discussion forum, and hold periodic face-to-face meetings to build initial relationships and foster remote interaction throughout the year.

In contrast to coordination and sharing, comparing approaches and expanding reach do not require interaction among implementing organisations. These two programme functions, along with leverage and diversity, do, however, involve upfront planning prior to proposal processes; as their fulfilment involves variation, it must be specified at the programme's outset. Programmes that aim to expand reach would purposefully select projects based on the location of established sites and relationships with specific groups that would facilitate rapid rollout and scale-up. Similarly, if a multi-project programme is chosen to broaden the diversity of perspectives, the profiles of the involved organisations must reflect this range; if, for instance, the funded projects are all comprised of international NGOs and management consulting firms based in Europe or North America, with staff trained in social sciences, this reduces the diversity of perspectives available.

With multiple actors operating across multiple sites, programmes are particularly well suited to answer 'what works for who under what conditions' (Rogers 2011). While pursuing the same broad objective, individual projects may vary according to the specific objectives and intended intermediate outcomes, sector, context, and intervention mode, duration and frequency. For example, a programme could examine how the same intervention operates in different contexts (stability of the economy or government, topography) or among different types of participants (gender, age, ethnicity). It could test different approaches (training and credit to individuals versus community groups) within the same context and type of participants.

In this case, the evaluation question will guide which projects are selected based on the variation in intervention, context and participants. If there are no common dimensions across the projects, other than their funding sources and broad overarching goal (which is operationalised into different specific objectives for each project), this systematic comparison will not be possible. Conversely, if there is no variation then there are no comparisons to make. Once projects are selected, they will need to gather information in the same way on a core set of indicators in order to conduct comparative analyses. Box 2 discusses the relationship and sequencing between project and programme-wide theories of changes and measurement indicators.

If the programme is intended to be experimental and projects used to trial and eliminate or adopt different approaches, then interaction among implementing entities would be necessary once results are available. At this point, periodic exchanges to communicate lessons may be helpful as one project adopts elements of the other, when the programme purpose shifts from comparison to sharing.

Figure 2: Knowledge and learning tools

		KNOWLEDGE		
		TACIT	EXPLICIT	IMPLICIT
PURPOSE	CREATE	RESEARCH WORKSHOPS CHALLENGE SESSIONS	BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE E.G. FUNDING ANALYSIS	STATISTICAL MODELLING REASONING TOOLS
	STORE	CAPACITY ASSESSMENTS EXIT IVs HANDOVERS	SHARED DRIVES INFO CENTRE TAXONOMIES DATABASES	SPACE MANAGEMENT WORKFLOW M&E PROCES MAP
	SHARE	MENTORING COACHING COMMUNITIES TRAINING	INTRANET INTERNET EMAIL PUBLICATIONS CD ROMS	AARs RETROSPECTS EVALUATIONS

Ramalingam, 2005, adapted from Nutley et al, 2003

Box 2: Developing nested theories of change and programme-wide measurement indicators

Three of the functions – comparing approaches, enhancing leverage and broadening diversity – link projects together either explicitly or implicitly through an overarching theory of change. Theories of change illustrate how change is thought to take place and can serve as a foundation for evaluation and learning. They can guide the formulation of evaluation questions by helping to identify relationships and assumptions in the causal pathway that need testing as well as the appropriate measurement indicators to answer these questions, and provide a framework to integrate learning from this analysis.

Multi-project programmes often use nested theories of change, with an overarching theory of change at the programme level, which encompasses core elements of the projects and more specific theories of change for each individual project. However, they sometimes struggle to determine the relationship and sequencing of the two. Which theory of change should inform the development of the other? How many levels of aggregation are appropriate? When are common measurement indicators useful?

For comparison, leverage and diversity purposes, projects may relate to the programme in three ways. Each project may be intended to replicate a common theory of change with different population groups or in different contexts. For example, each project may deliver a similar intervention package of training and agricultural inputs to individuals or groups, women or men, different ages or different regions. Alternatively, to enhance leverage or broaden diversity, each project may represent one component or level in a longer pathway of change. One project may be working with local civil society organisations to increase awareness of their rights and advocacy skills, while another may target regional or national policymakers to change governance bodies to be more inclusive and transparent, together aiming to enact policies that address the needs of marginalised groups. One project may be conducting research that another project then takes up to advocate for specific policy change.

In both cases, the programme theory would determine which projects are selected in order to ensure variation in groups and contexts or to cover the spectrum of the change pathway. Therefore, the development of the programme-wide theory of change would drive the development of project-specific theories of change. As projects progress through implementation, they can help to refine the overall programme theory of change, identifying which groups or locations the intervention is best suited to and what elements may need to be adapted under different circumstances.

In contrast, rather than pursuing similar or linked interventions, each project may be experimenting with different interventions to reach a similar goal, such as improving community resilience or women's empowerment. For these types of multi-project programmes, project theories of change would be developed first. A programme theory of change may be created to illustrate multiple potential pathways of change, but trying to simplify different project theories of change into a meta-theory may risk over-aggregation.

Common measurement indicators are most appropriate in the first and third examples, where the programme is making explicit comparisons among population groups, contexts or approaches. In the second example, projects would have unique inputs and outputs and together gather information on a joint outcome.

Common outcome indicators and definitions that will be required by the programme should be specified from the outset, rather than having each project identify their own indicators as part of the proposal process and then later negotiate which to choose. That said, it is important to note that the ways in which similar outcomes are measured may differ by context; for instance, using rapid HIV tests to detect serostatus will be done in the same way, regardless of where the tests are used. In contrast, the way in which women's empowerment or policy influence is assessed is contextually dependent. Appropriate measures for assets will vary by setting, but could be standardised across projects.

In these cases, common measurement indicators help to fulfil the programme purpose. If the primary function is to streamline management processes rather than to conduct comparisons, then identical indicators may not be appropriate. Programmes could standardise reporting processes but what, how and how frequently information is gathered should be specific to each project.

7. Integrating programmes into existing systems

The timing, structure, intensity and frequency of programme-wide coordination, evaluation and learning systems will be guided by the primary purpose or functions of the programme. Nevertheless, the shape of these programme-wide systems is also dependent on organisations' existing processes, knowledge and learning cultures, relationships between the organisations involved, and the extent of flexibility possible.

The current nature of grant-making processes mean that project objectives, theories of change and sample measurement indicators are specified at the proposal stage, prior to implementation and often before organisations are grouped into a programme. 'New' projects often build on existing approaches and relationships. This continuity can facilitate implementation by not requiring the development of new materials, community contacts and recruiting and training of new staff every few years. Measuring outcomes over more than one project period may be a more realistic timeframe to observe change. However, reframing existing projects to fit new grant proposals may mean that the intervention approach and corresponding indicators are less well suited to the programme goal.

Regardless of project continuity across funding cycles, organisations have existing internal communication, learning and evaluation systems in place. For institutional coherence, organisations may have a core set of indicators that all projects must report against at fixed intervals. Programme-wide evaluation and learning structures are therefore overlaid upon established systems within each organisation.

The second programme function – standardising management – may appear relatively straightforward. In practice, it may involve substantial interaction between the programme management unit and implementing organisations, and time for organisations to adapt their procedures to those required by the programme. Streamlined consistency and tailored adaptation will always sit in tension with one another. Rather than assuming that a project will fortuitously align well with the local context, implementing organisation, overall programme and funding agency, it is more realistic to expect some mismatch and plan for a degree of flexibility at both the project and programme level.

As well as factors specific to each organisation, relationships between organisations can also affect the feasibility of different multi-project programme functions. Sharing information may be complicated by predictable factors like language barriers or stability of internet connections. It can also be influenced by other, more relational issues.

There may be tensions between project and programme-level expectations about the extent of information and interaction required. In particular, when pressures to deliver are high and interaction time not accounted in the budget, project staff may perceive the time spent 'feeding the centre' (i.e. responding to information requests from the lead organisation or headquarters) to be burdensome and of little value. Information requests at the programme level may be higher the larger the overall budget and more visible the profile of the programme is within the funding agency.

Implementing organisations operate in a context in which they are competing for resources, which may limit the extent to which they want to share information, be compared to other projects or pursue a joint strategy or relationships with external actors. If organisations have worked together and/or with the funder in the past, they may be more likely to share experiences when things worked less well compared to other groups, and more likely to work together in a collaborative rather than competitive way (unless previous experiences were conflictual). If organisations and staff have worked together in the past, the programme may be able to rely on less formal coordination and sharing mechanisms.

Based on seven case studies of consortia, Gonsalves (2014) highlights the importance of developing a clear vision among funders, implementing organisations and beneficiaries/end users at a preparatory or inception workshop to articulate the 'why factor' for their collaboration together. She underscores the importance of attending to processes of knowledge co-production, not simply group outputs and outcomes, and the need to negotiate among different epistemic cultures. For example, the ways in which research scientists and community advocates interpret evidence and offer policy solutions can vary substantially in terms of depth and degree of certainty; youth and adults, or programme staff from different cultures may communicate in quite different ways. As such, brokering understanding across projects is a vital role for programmes.

Finally, the extent of flexibility allowed by the funder – and feasible within implementing organisations – can facilitate or constrain what options are available. If change is likely to be costly, time-consuming or unwelcome, adaptation based on learning and comparisons may be limited. Even if there is no overt resistance, changes requiring different skill sets or intervention approaches may not be possible to adopt or, if adopted, will take time to integrate.

8. Greater than the sum of its parts? Assessing the programme model

Although increasingly used, multi-project programme models are in some ways still a hypothesis that needs testing. The notion that the grouping together of, and repeated interaction between, different organisations working on a common theme will create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts is still uncertain. To what extent is this structure a more effective, efficient or sustainable mechanism than other approaches? When does it offer good value for money? Under what conditions are different *management* (donor, fund manager, consortia-lead implementing organisation) and *implementation* (individual organisations, consortia) arrangements most appropriate?

The multi-project programme model may be more appropriate in some circumstances, addressing certain issues and involving particular actors. To identify some of these scope conditions, testing of the programme model in practice could consider questions such as the following:

- What staff and institutional profiles and external contexts are more or less conducive to a programme model?
- Are there thresholds below or above which the transactions overwhelm their utility?
- How are the benefits and costs distributed among organisations and positions within the programme? How do they affect small organisations and those based in the Global South?

- How do programmes orient their multiple lines of accountability upward to principals, inward toward the programme and outward toward intended beneficiaries?
- How does programme size affect the relative emphasis of different functions?

It is unlikely that direct comparisons could be made of multiple approaches involving the same actors at the same time – that is, comparing a multi-project programme approach with a direct project funding approach. However, individual donors could map different delivery approaches across their portfolios over time. Donors could jointly pursue this line of inquiry to identify patterns and the extent of agreement or divergence in the perceived value and applicability under different circumstances.

The first step in testing the programme model hypothesis is to identify the often tacit assumptions inherent in each of the programme functions already outlined. Table 2 suggests potential expectations and possible ways to measure them. At a minimum, programmes could collect information on the time and resources involved in cross-programme interactions and the benefits, costs and overall value of the programme as perceived by implementing organisations, donor officers and external stakeholders.

Table 2: Assumptions associated with programme model benefits and sample measures to test them

Programme benefit and functions	Assumptions	Sample measures
Channelling transactions by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinating implementing entities • Standardising management and specialised support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less time spent on management and reporting processes makes it easier to detect deviations from minimum standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time spent on interactions (email, calls, meetings) and among who • Time spent on reporting and synthesis, advising
Increasing knowledge and learning by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing information • Comparing approaches across different contexts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unless mandated and funded, organisations do not interact • Information will lead to changes in knowledge and in practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rate of information flows and among who • Change in staff knowledge • Change in organisational practices • Content and quality of individual and joint knowledge products • Actor attribution of the source of increased knowledge
Increasing influence and impact by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expanding reach • Enhancing leverage • Broadening diversity • Fostering sustainability by building relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programmes produce higher quality or quantity of work than individual projects alone, organisations are less persuasive acting alone than with others • Joint strategies can be negotiated, differences of opinion can be resolved • The programme timeframe and extent of interaction is sufficient for relationships to develop, strong relationships enhance implementation and effectiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation cost per unit • Execution of joint strategies, proportion of organisations involved in each • Quality and quantity of outputs • Change in outcomes • New activities initiated among organisations, continued collaboration following the programme period • Actor attribution of the source of increased influence, role of the programme relative to alternative explanations for change

9. Conclusions

This paper explores an under-examined model of development delivery: multi-project programmes. In order to take advantage of the potential benefits of this type of multi-organisational structure and justify the costs associated with it, funding agencies can start by explicitly articulating the intended purpose of and reasons why they have chosen this model instead of other structures that could fulfil similar functions. The purpose will then guide what coordination, evaluation and learning mechanisms are necessary, when and how often. The purpose can guide the development of knowledge sharing strategies and sequencing of nested project and programme theories of change.

The durability of a multi-project programme approach remains to be seen. The scale of the funding and number of organisations involved in multi-project programmes warrants further exploration. By tracking investments of time and resources, perceived and observed benefits, and examining patterns across contexts, these decisions about whether, when and how to use a programme model can be more deliberate and strategic.

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