

### About Link

Link Education is Scotland's leading international education charity, working to improve education for children and communities in some of the poorest rural areas of Ethiopia, Malawi and Uganda, and helping thousands of people escape the cycle of poverty. We focus on enhancing teaching and learning in schools, as well as building life-skills and promoting inclusion for the most marginalised. Our vision is one where all children have access to good quality education, giving them hope and a strong foundation for a brighter future. We take both a top-down and bottom-up approach to transform education, supporting broad system and school-wide improvements while recognising the need for more tailored, localised support to overcome specific challenges.

### Background

Adaptive management is increasingly recognised as a relevant response to the complex problems which the Sustainable Development Goals aim to address. Growing interest in adaptation originated in the areas of accountability, governance and institution strengthening, and is now applied by a range of NGOs working in areas such as peacebuilding, livelihoods, education, and emergency relief<sup>1</sup>.

Donors including FCDO and USAID have begun to support adaptive management as an alternative to results-based management, reflecting that complexity and systems thinking do not align with holding NGOs responsible for delivering pre-defined and short-term results attributed to a specific intervention.<sup>2</sup>

Within the Girls' Education Challenge, FCDO introduced six-monthly Review and Adaptation Meetings between the projects and the Fund Manager to critically reflect on progress, and adjust workplans and budgets in order to achieve the intended outcomes, with input from technical specialists as required.<sup>3</sup>

**“By adopting strategies that allow for more flexibility, organisations can significantly improve programme delivery, especially within complex and fragile environments.”<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> BOND (2015) [https://www.bond.org.uk/sites/default/files/resource-documents/adaptive\\_management\\_-\\_what\\_it\\_means\\_for\\_csos\\_0.pdf](https://www.bond.org.uk/sites/default/files/resource-documents/adaptive_management_-_what_it_means_for_csos_0.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> BOND (2015)

<sup>3</sup> Girls' Education Challenge / DFID / FCDO (2018) <https://girlseducationchallenge.org/media/kidfrc4h/lftf-learning-by-doing-adaptive-management-mar-2018.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Girls' Education Challenge / DFID (2018)

## Approach

When Link designs project interventions we undertake contextual analysis and consult with implementing partners and communities to develop a robust theory of change. However, we recognise that many of the challenges which we aim to address through our work are complex and often the solutions that we implement have not been tried before in a specific context. It may also be the case that further in-depth information ascertained at baseline or project start-up adds different dimensions or perspectives to the issue, or indeed the context may change during the project lifetime. As a result, we expect that the assumptions in our theory of change will be tested, and in some cases will require modification.

When this happens, we want to be able to adapt the way we work so that the project outcomes will be achieved and we provide the best service possible to the communities where we work.

In order to identify and respond to problems early, we collect data about project performance on a regular basis and make time to reflect on this as a team. This is especially important when a project is delivered in multiple areas or involves multiple partners.

Link's adaptive management approach is based on clear communication pathways which enable the exchange of ideas between project staff, project participants, government stakeholders and our donors. We embed a structure and timeline for review, adaption and feedback into our projects so there is a clear process for listening to the people we work with. We ensure that feedback mechanisms are accessible to all, taking account of age, gender, language and ability, and provide multiple channels and opportunities to participate, like focus group discussions and suggestion boxes.



This gives project management teams access to the most accurate information, enables communities to hold Link accountable for delivering on our commitments, and ensures Link's projects are responsive to our partners' needs.

In the long term, it supports community ownership, local problem-solving, and greater sustainability. Where the challenges and solutions we encounter are supported by evidence, this puts us in a strong position to negotiate changes to grant agreements with donors.

## Experience

### Malawi

The **TEAM Girl Malawi project** is delivered by a consortium of five organisations with teams operating in three districts in Malawi. The project has established 80 Learning Centres spread across these districts, separated by long distances, poor roads, and limited phone access. Project activities are carried out by 150 field staff who are supported by 1,600 community volunteers, and up to 4,800 young people are enrolled in the project at any one time.

The project's adaptive management cycle, which takes place several times a year, is designed to capture and share information and learning across the wide range of project stakeholders. Meetings at the Learning Centre, district and national levels review attendance and learning data, disaggregated by characteristics including gender, disability, orphanhood, and child marriage. Participants also consider child protection and safeguarding, and discuss plans for the next term.

Learning Centre meetings are attended by the field staff and volunteers, learner representatives, parents, and local community leaders. The Learning Centre stakeholders are encouraged to take responsibility for solving problems in their community, especially where these relate to poor attendance, child protection, or local management issues. The facilitator then writes a short report for the district team summarising the successes and challenges, explaining the proposed solutions, and sharing any recommendations for changes by the project.

District level meetings are attended by relevant district-based staff and local government representatives. Participants review attendance and learning data for patterns, alongside the reports from the Learning Centres. This helps them to identify common problems across the Learning Centres, as well as any examples of successful solutions which could be adopted. They also look at information which has been gathered from other sources, such as monitoring visits, classroom observations, or community suggestion boxes. Challenges which are unique to specific Learning Centres can often be resolved quickly by the district teams, sometimes by sharing successful solutions from other centres. Challenges which are more complex, affect several centres, or which might require changes to project implementation or budget are escalated to the national level meeting.

At national level the management team reviews the patterns of attendance, learning and safeguarding concerns across the whole project, and reflects on the explanations, challenges, and potential solutions which have been identified by the district teams. They also look at data from internal monitoring exercises such as annual focus groups, tracer studies, training sessions, external baseline and midline evaluation findings, and other sources such as the rapid assessment conducted in response to COVID-19. This meeting identifies challenges which appear to be affecting the project as a whole and decides on strategies to address these.

Once changes to the project have been costed and amendments agreed with the donor if required, these are shared with district teams to put into effect. Community feedback

meetings are held at the Learning Centres to keep stakeholders informed of how the project is responding to their concerns and to secure their participation in the solutions. Actions are tracked frequently at national level and the successes and challenges of their implementation and fed into the next term of adaptive management discussions to see what is working and what can be improved.

During their community-level adaptive management meetings, several Learning Centres identified gaps in Facilitators' abilities and confidence with teaching certain literacy and numeracy skills. They suggested the project should provide more training for Facilitators.

Observations of Facilitators' teaching carried out by the district teams had also highlighted areas for improvement, and the learning data analysed at national level showed that only 69% of girls in the first cohort of the project were performing well or very well after a year of learning<sup>5</sup>, compared to a target of 83% at the end of two years<sup>6</sup>.

The national adaptive management meeting reflected on the training that had been given to Facilitators so far, and concluded that on the job coaching would be the most effective way to boost skills in these areas. With the government's support, Link arranged for teachers from the local primary schools who had recently received training under the National Reading Programme to make regular visits to the Learning Centres and coach the Facilitators to improve their techniques.

The learning performance of the first cohort of girls improved to 87% and the second cohort were found to be performing 9% better than their cohort 1 counterparts were at the same point last year<sup>7</sup> which can in part be attributed to this adjustment in approach.

Using teachers trained by the government is a sustainable way of maximising the resources available in the education system, while providing effective support to community Facilitators. It was low cost for the project, and has the added advantages of exposing these teachers to a peer support model, and enabling learners to become familiar with some of the teachers who work in the schools they may transition into after graduating from the project. It also enabled the project to share the inclusive education approaches used by Facilitators, influencing the mainstream education system to become more welcoming to marginalised adolescent girls.



<sup>5</sup> National Adaptive Management Meeting data presented May 2021

<sup>6</sup> TEAM Girl Malawi Logframe

<sup>7</sup> TEAM Girl Malawi Year 3 Annual Report, August 2021