LESSONS FOR PEACE
Afghanistan

Adapting to fragility

Lessons from practitioners

Ed Laws, Samuel Sharp, Pablo Yanguas

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Acknowledgements

About the authors

Ed Laws is a Research Fellow in the Politics and Governance programme at ODI, and Research Lead of the Lessons for Peace project. He has a particular interest in politically smart approaches to aid delivery, flexible and adaptive programming, and the political economy of conflict and peacebuilding.

Samuel Sharp is a Senior Research Officer in ODI's Politics and Governance programme. He specialises in adaptive and politically-smart development programming, and how adaptive approaches interact with bureaucratic politics and processes.

Pablo Yanguas is an expert on adaptive, politically-smart, and learning-oriented approaches to governance support. As a consultant, Pablo has specialised in providing strategic advice to smart anti-corruption programmes in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and Europe, that work with government and civil society.

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Acronyms

DFID	UK Department for International Development
FCAS	Fragile and conflict-affected settings
FCDO	UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (successor to DFID)
LEEP	Lebanon Enterprise and Employment Programme
MEL	Monitoring, evaluation and learning
NGO	Non-government organisation
PEA	Political economy analysis
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
SFL	Stabilization Facility for Libya

Executive summary

This report explores practitioners' perspectives on how adaptive programming can be calibrated to different kinds of fragility, and operational factors for helping or hindering such efforts. There is a growing consensus on the importance of more adaptative ways of working for improving the effectiveness of aid in fragile settings. But there is less detail in the current literature on how adaptive principles and processes can be applied in response to different kind of fragility, and whether different fragile settings might present distinct challenges and opportunities.

When we began this research in 2020, we planned to address these gaps by documenting previous donor efforts to work adaptively in Afghanistan, and comparing these to adaptive programmes in other fragile contexts. By addressing the aforementioned evidence gaps, we also hoped to inform more adaptive approaches to the provision of future foreign assistance to the country, as donors prepared to pledge financial and political support for the peace process at the Afghanistan Conference in Geneva in October that year.

However, in the aftermath of the Taliban victory the following summer, security considerations meant it was no longer appropriate to discuss and analyse publicly what limited donor experience of working adaptively in Afghanistan we had been able to identify.

We adjusted our own project accordingly: preserving the case study approach but looking further afield for lessons. After an extensive search we selected a multi-donor stabilisation programme in Libya, the Stabilization Facility for Libya (SFL), and a bilateral, private-sector development programme in Lebanon: the Lebanon Enterprise and Employment Programme (LEEP). Although Libya and Lebanon differ from Afghanistan in many ways, we argue there is enough resemblance in terms of broad patterns of fragility to allow useful lessons to be drawn about processes of working adaptively, that may be important for aid delivery to Afghanistan in the future.

In Section 2 we outline the main causes and dynamics of fragility in our case study countries. We describe Libya as more *vulnerable*, by which we mean that the limited inclusion and/or commitment of key factions and groups to a political settlement contributes to a perpetual risk of conflict being sparked or exacerbated. We describe Lebanon as more *volatile*, in the sense that the country lacks robust institutions that are able to anticipate, mitigate, and respond to shocks (economic, social, or political).

Volatility and vulnerability are ideal types which we use as points of reference for examining the inherent complexity of fragile and conflict-afflicted settings.[1] As such, within a country's territory, some regions, cities or localities may be more vulnerable, and others more volatile, and some may be a hybrid. We suggest that Afghanistan is one such hybrid case, at the country level.

Section 3 looks at how LEEP and SFL adapted to their respective fragility dynamics. We define adaptive programming in terms of three components: flexibility, context-sensitivity, and systematic learning.

Flexibility was critical for both programmes, but it was deployed for somewhat different purposes. For LEEP, given the high degree of instability in its volatile setting, it was used to keep the programme relevant amidst near-permanent political and economic crises. For SFL, given the risks of provoking local-level conflict in its vulnerable setting, flexibility was important for achieving a balance between patient consultation processes with local communities, and rapid implementation of projects once priorities were agreed.

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1   We find these to be useful analytical constructs for discussing appropriate ways of adjusting adaptive practices to different contexts. However, we also acknowledge that fragility is a contested concept. See, for example, the critical discussion of the OECD 2020 States of Fragility report (OECD 2020) in the ODI blog series 'Fragility: Time for a rethink?'

Moving on to context-sensitivity, we found that both programmes invested in tools to help them understand their political and operational context, but again we found differences in emphasis. Ongoing economic, social, and political crises in Lebanon meant LEEP needed tools for anticipating and mitigating potential shocks. Typically, this meant developing plausible future political and economic scenarios, and using them to build a menu of options for programme adaptation. SFL, on the other hand, needed to understand complex local-level conflict dynamics, and found that inclusive community consultations were critical for this.

The third component of our adaptive framework is systematic learning. LEEP developed a bespoke 'dashboard' to help analyse and learn from its monitoring data. This paid dividends in the volatile context because it allowed for rapid feedback and iteration at the level of day-to-day programming. Quarterly reflection sessions were used to review progress and discuss more strategic project adaptation, while also building a learning culture across the team.

Systematic learning was a greater challenge for SFL. Programme staff said that, in a context like Libya that is highly susceptible to local-level conflict, programme interventions must explicitly monitor, evaluate and learn about the interaction between specific projects, and the deals among elites that are required to sustain peace. But the team lacked institutional support for the kind of monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) system this would require. Instead, the team principally drew on the individual knowledge of frontline staff and coordinators, and feedback from conflict analyses and mediation efforts. This helped ensure that local conflict dynamics did not undermine the Facility's infrastructure projects and other investments. However, it was insufficient for learning how SFL could be used to build sustainable peace, and what additional measures might be needed.

We conclude the report by summarising these lessons and their relevance for future assistance to Afghanistan, and other regions or countries experiencing fragility.

In terms of volatility, decades of conflict and foreign intervention have undermined Afghanistan's coping mechanisms and protective capacity, and as a result many Afghans are highly exposed to shocks (i.e. conflict, natural disasters, and livelihood challenges). In this volatile and unpredictable context, international assistance must be flexible to reach as many Afghans as possible in the time available, and to react to emerging crises or opportunities. Workplans, results targets, and disbursement goals must be adjustable, but within clear parameters. For longer-term development aid, the value of 'controlled flexibility' in more vulnerable settings is a lesson we draw from SFL: flexibility in supporting local communities to prioritise investments, but being clear from the outset about the scope of work and what the programme can provide, and managing expectations accordingly. This may become increasingly important if non-government organisations (NGOs) are able to now expand into areas of Afghanistan that were not accessible during the conflict.

The importance of sensitivity to the new context is unlikely to be controversial, particularly in light of the country's vulnerability to both inter-factional conflict and intra-Taliban fragmentation, as well as external shocks. SFL's experience of working with local coordinators to track, in real time, the interaction between aid and complex social and political dynamics at the local level, could be useful for adapting aid to more vulnerable regions or districts in the country. To help anticipate and plan for future shocks, partners could also consider LEEP's approach, mapping scenarios with corresponding strategic adaptations to assistance.

Finally, donors and their implementing partners will need strong learning mechanisms. All forms of engagement should be used to generate learning, about both the Taliban and also the needs and challenges of local communities. This could involve engaging selectively with different parts of the state and society to identify where there may be convergence of interests with international agencies. Drawing on SFL's experience, we suggest these efforts be connected to a broader theory of change about peace, stability, and resilience, that can be tested and adjusted in response to emerging results.

1   Introduction

Afghanistan faces a complex range of crises and a great deal of uncertainty. The country is in the throes of a humanitarian emergency – driven by displacement, drought, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a struggling economy – that has worsened sharply since the withdrawal of US and allied forces and the subsequent Taliban takeover in August 2021 (Diwakar, 2022; Shapour, 2022). Against this backdrop, the future of international assistance is unclear. As of January 2022, humanitarian agencies are working throughout the country and in some cases, Taliban control has reportedly improved access (Hakimi and Price, 2022). There is growing recognition that Afghanistan's acute humanitarian crises will give way to protracted development, governance, and peacebuilding challenges (Rose and Pisa, 2022). Among Western donors, however, questions about whether and how to engage with the Taliban, and what mechanisms are appropriate for coordinating aid delivery while the Taliban government remains unrecognised, have yet to be resolved (McKechnie et al., 2022). As a result, development aid has been placed on hold, contributing to economic collapse and mass unemployment.

In light of this complexity and uncertainty, one response arising from policy discussions is that flexibility and adaptation will be important principles in the design and delivery of future assistance to the country, in whatever form that takes (Brown, 2021; SIGAR, 2021). This reflects longer-standing trends in humanitarian, development, and stabilisation and peacebuilding programming, where the need to work more adaptively in fragile settings is well recognised (Christie and Green, 2019; de Coning, 2018; 2019).[1] Donors are increasingly announcing their commitment to move away from 'blueprint' plans that assume the solutions to complex problems are simple and predictable, towards more adaptive approaches that prioritise learning through implementation, with rapid adjustment of programmes in response to initial results (Booth, 2018a).

Despite this consensus on the need to meet fragility with adaptiveness, however, efforts to develop more tailored recommendations are still at an early stage. Although there is a growing number of case studies of individual adaptive programmes (see, for example, Booth 2018a; Booth 2018b; Booth and Chambers, 2014; Laws, 2018; Laws and Marquette, 2018; Lucia et al, 2017; Rocha Menocal and Aston, 2021; Yanguas and Castle, 2019), to the best of our knowledge, the literature does not compare and contrast the relevance of different adaptive approaches, tools, or practices for different kinds of fragile settings.[2] As a result, the practical implications of adapting to different types of fragility are underexplored. If this gap is not addressed, there is a risk that 'adaptation' becomes an abstract form of 'best practice': the very kind of blueprint approach from which the adaptive programming agenda has tried to break.[3]

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1   It also resonates with the findings of research into the shortcomings of the international intervention in Afghanistan, some of which highlight the lack of flexibility and adaptation in the past (SIGAR, 2018; 2021; 2022). We discuss these findings in Section 2.

2   An important exception is the series of studies by the Action for Empowerment and Accountability Research programme, examining whether and how adaptive approaches can strengthen aid projects that promote empowerment and accountability in fragile settings. The research encompassed standalone case studies of large DFID-funded governance programmes in Nigeria (Punton and Burge, 2019), Myanmar (Christie and Green, 2018), and Tanzania (Green and Guijt, 2019), and a final synthesis report drew out comparative analysis (Christie and Green, 2019). However, although these reports and the synthesis contain many useful insights, they focus mainly on country similarities and shared adaptive practices across the three programmes and countries, rather than exploring in detail the interplay between different fragile contexts and adaptive practices.

3   The World Bank's new fragility strategy is a good example (World Bank, 2020). The strategy strongly rejects 'one-size fits all' approaches and emphasises '[adapting] implementation and supervision approaches to the complex and rapidly changing dynamics of [conflict settings]'. Yet it lacks detail on what this approach would involve, the kinds of specific problems it might be able to address, and how it would work in fragile contexts. Among the range of unhelpful consequences, this leaves practitioners to 'reinvent the wheel' at programme design stage (Laws et al., 2021).

This paper helps address this need for evidence by documenting and sharing practical experience, with a view to informing practitioners, programme designers, and decision-makers in donor organisations. We examine two principal issues:

- How should the processes and tools of adaptive programming adjust to different types of fragility?
- What are the key enabling factors and operational challenges for working in these ways in different fragile settings?

1.1 Methods, approach, structure

When we began our research in late 2020, we hoped to document previous donor efforts to work adaptively in Afghanistan, and to compare these to adaptive programmes in other fragile contexts. Our aim was to contribute evidence to inform adaptive approaches to the provision of future foreign assistance, as donors prepared to pledge financial and political support for the peace process at the Afghanistan Conference in Geneva in October that year.

We encountered two challenges. First, the range of suitable projects we found in Afghanistan was extremely limited. Second, in the aftermath of the Taliban victory the following summer, security considerations meant it was no longer appropriate to discuss and analyse publicly what limited donor experience we had been able to identify, of working adaptively in the country. The Taliban takeover, and the subsequent freeze of development spending, also meant we were faced with a very different aid architecture than when we began.

We adjusted our own project accordingly: preserving the case study approach but looking further afield for lessons. To enable comparative analysis, we looked for programmes that had made a sustained effort to work adaptively, but were being implemented in different fragility contexts, were pursuing different objectives, and had different funding structures. After an extensive search we selected a multi-donor stabilisation programme in Libya, and a bilateral, private-sector development programme in Lebanon.

We recognise that Libya and Lebanon do not have the same fragility drivers as Afghanistan, which is in many respects unique. We are also mindful of other key differences between these three countries, which are relevant for understanding the relative prospects for adaptive programming. These include the international architecture for delivering aid, the maturity of different funding modalities, the level of local civil society and NGO capacity, as well as the feasibility of working with state counterparts and other local partners.

These differences mean that our case studies are unlikely to hold directly transferrable lessons for contemporary Afghanistan, in terms of specific adaptive programming activities and interventions. Moreover, trying to apply lessons at this level of specificity would run counter to adaptive principles of context-sensitivity and aversion to blueprint planning, and could replicate some of the shortcomings of previous international assistance to the country, on which we elaborate in the following section.

However, we argue there is enough resemblance, in terms of broad patterns of fragility, between Afghanistan and Libya, and Afghanistan and Lebanon, to allow potentially useful lessons to be drawn about the processes of being adaptive: how to seek out entry points, build in learning, flex interventions, and so on. We describe these fragility dynamics in terms of vulnerability and volatility, which we outline in Section 2 as part of our conceptual framing. In this section we also describe a conceptual model for understanding adaptation, comprising flexibility, context-sensitivity, and systematic learning.

In section 3, we look at the ways in which adaptive practices have been adjusted to different fragility dynamics in our programme case studies, working through the three components of our framework in turn. Under each, we also describe the key enabling factors and operational challenges that helped or hindered the respective teams. Our aim is not to provide an exhaustive account of relevant factors, but rather to reflect on those which practitioners and donor agencies, with whom we spoke, felt were most important, or were highlighted in programme documents.

In our concluding section, we summarise our core findings and reflect further on the relevance of adaptive principles for the design of future assistance to Afghanistan and other fragile settings.

2 Two conceptual frameworks

2.1 Understanding adaptation

Development programming has conventionally been planned in linear terms, with donors setting out sequential steps over a number of years that, if achieved, will lead to the intended goals. This assumes a stable institutional and development context that enables a fully planned approach to delivering results.

The international community has long acknowledged the need to work differently in fragile settings. Over the past two decades it has become central to the global development agenda, enshrined in such policy agreements as the 2007 'Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States & Situations' and the 2011 'New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States'. Subsequently, these high-level agendas focusing mainly on donor–recipient relations have been supplemented with a growing body of operational lessons and recommendations, stemming from the poor performance of conventional programming approaches. More specifically, the cumulative, disappointing outcomes of rigid, technical, and over-ambitious programming suggest that more experimental and incremental approaches may achieve better results (de Weijer, 2011; Sannerholm et al., 2016; Laws, 2018; Medinilla et al., 2019; SIGAR 2021).

As a consequence, the focus for many discussions on fragility has shifted from 'what' to do in fragile and conflict-afflicted contexts – conventional goals like peacebuilding, statebuilding, and economic reconstruction – to emphasising 'how' to do it. In this regard, three recommendations have become increasingly common in recent literature: flexibility, context-sensitivity, and systematic learning (ADB, 2012: 48). For the purposes of this paper, these three elements comprise the core components of what we refer to as adaptive programming, and we use them to structure our discussion of our case studies in the following section. Some combination of these three elements can probably be found to a greater or lesser

degree in most, if not all, development programmes. In practice, there is likely to be variation across them – for example, programmes or partnerships that are highly flexible, but less strong on learning or responding to their environment. For the purposes of this paper, when these three elements are found together, they are the hallmark of a genuinely adaptive programme.

In the rest of this sub-section, we describe these three components in more detail. We also draw attention to emerging research on the shortcomings of the international intervention in Afghanistan, some of which reinforces the relevance of these components for aid effectiveness more generally.

Flexibility, in our understanding, is simply the capacity to adjust things (resources, activities, counterpart or partner organisations, outputs, etc) as necessary. Almost all development programmes or partnerships need a degree of flexibility to deal with uncertainty, new information, and unexpected events. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated how all projects have had to adjust to an unanticipated change in the global context, for example.

The call for greater flexibility in fragile settings arises from the heightened uncertainty faced both by local actors and international donor agencies. In fragile settings, it can range from difficult to impossible to plan accurately over the lifetime of a conventional three- to five-year project. Hence teams need to have the capacity, and opportunities, to adjust and correct course at regular intervals (World Bank, 2020). Rapidly evolving contexts where 'significant adjustments during project implementation are likely to exist' call for flexibility 'to deal with the unseen' (Asian Development Bank, 2010). This was acknowledged in a 2012 'how to' note, published by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), on results in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS), which warned that impact would often be 'unpredictable, intangible and hard to attribute', and progress against objectives

'rarely linear, often reversible, but equally likely to accelerate after sudden breakthroughs' (Department for International Development, 2012). In addition, the time gap between programme design and implementation often also requires programmes to be flexible, as the initial assumptions may be outdated. There is a consensus that flexibility is an imperative both at the level of programme strategy and overarching results, but also in terms of 'everyday' programming processes, with fungible budgets and adjustable results measures often being points of emphasis in the literature (Booth, 2018a; Wild et al., 2017; Wild et al., 2015).

Although the need for flexibility in response to fragility may seem obvious, it has often proved challenging to put into practice. For example, according to evaluation reports produced by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR),[4] the US-led reconstruction and stabilisation effort was often characterised by inflexibility, stemming from rigid programme timeframes and project designs that could not be adjusted easily (SIGAR, 2018: 132–133). There is also evidence that a similar lack of flexibility characterised much of the approach to development spending. In 2017, for example, a report from the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) found that donor efforts to support rural livelihoods in Afghanistan often recommended 'technocratic practices, delivered through fast-track, short-term programmes' that 'failed to take account of friction when they hit the ground' (Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, 2017).

Content-sensitivity is about proactively 'reading' the external environment, tracking the politics around a particular issue, or taking in feedback from people participating in a programme. In broad terms, it means having defined systems and process to analyse and interpret how the local context may be changing, and how programmes may need to be adjusted accordingly. In more fragile settings, content-sensitivity is often advocated as a way to navigate uncertainty and ensure that external interventions can more effectively contribute to peace and sustainability: 'when clear objectives flow from a sound general analysis of the operational environment, it becomes possible to balance the key challenge of short-term uncertainties with longer-term goals' (OECD, 2020). Political economy analysis (PEA) and 'more astute' designs have been

identified as 'critical ingredients for efficiency and effectiveness' in fragile contexts (Asian Development Bank, 2010).

In Afghanistan, efforts to address the conflict were undermined by a lack of contextual understanding from the outset (Weigand and Jackson, 2019). Despite stated commitments to 'local ownership', the re-engagement of international donors after 2001 came with preconceived ideas about sources of legitimacy (e.g. through the modern service- delivery state) and the nature of governance, and ignored complex local patterns of authority grounded in historic, cultural, ethnic, regional, kinship, and religious structures (McKechnie et al., 2022). Moreover, after the 11 September 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks in the US, the Coalition conflated the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and terrorism, and generally overlooked evidence of differences both within the Taliban and between parts of the Taliban accommodating Al Qaeda and other jihadist groups (McKechnie et al., 2022). That being the case, it is perhaps unsurprising that a 'lessons learned' report by SIGAR, released in May 2018, found that US stabilisation strategy and the programs used to achieve it "were not properly tailored to the Afghan context", and that, as a result, "successes in stabilizing Afghan districts rarely lasted longer than the physical presence of coalition troops and civilians" (SIGAR, 2018: vi, vii).

Systematic learning means proactively testing solutions, gathering and analysing evidence, and correcting course as necessary. It involves regular and systematised reflection, ensuring that progress towards outcomes is checked regularly. This calls for a programme design that builds in deliberate processes of testing, learning, and experimentation, with strong Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) systems, together with effective governance for joint learning and decision making.

Booth (2018a) summarises the importance of systematic learning when he criticises what he calls the increasingly popular 'flexible blueprint approach' of some donors, which involves reacting to changes in external circumstances, but without a deliberate effort to test different options and learn from experience. In Booth's estimation, this is a flaw in the design of many of the conventional programmes funded by the World Bank, bilateral donors, and NGOs: 'They do not change course in a decisive way when it becomes clear their initial strategies are not

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4   SIGAR is the US government's leading oversight authority on Afghanistan reconstruction and state-building (www.sigar.mil).

working. The result can be poor final results and a massive waste of resources' (Booth, 2018a: 4).

Booth's warnings resonate throughout SIGAR's dissection of the US stabilisation and peacebuilding intervention in Afghanistan. SIGAR found that progress was primarily measured in two ways: first, by how much money was spent; and, second, by counting outputs, such as the number of person-days of labour hired, or the number of schools rehabilitated. The aim was to reduce local violence by increasing faith in local governance and decreasing support for the Taliban. Yet, there were limited attempts to test whether the desired state of increased stabilisation was, in fact, resulting from such outputs. According to SIGAR, this resulted from a tendency to focus on indicators and programmes that were more easily measurable, to the exclusion of those that were not. This was partly a function of perverse incentives to demonstrate impact, and to do so quickly. Political pressure to show results meant that [US agencies] 'faced more pressure to do something than to do the right thing', and amount of money spent – due to its measurability, not its usefulness – became a key metric of success (SIGAR, 2021: 91).

The following sections look at how different adaptive processes might be more relevant and/or feasible in different kinds of fragile contexts, and how some of the operational challenges described above have been circumvented or overcome by practitioners. First, we offer a definition of the main fragility dynamics in our two case study programmes.

2.2 Understanding fragility

Fragility is a contested and controversial concept.[5] While it lacks a universally agreed definition, it is often understood as a combination of exposure to risk and insufficient capacity of the state or community to manage or mitigate those risks (OECD, 2016; 2020; World Bank, 2020). Risks can be understood in terms of organised, armed, and/or politically motivated violence, and/or risks related to broader social, economic, or environmental factors. Fragility tends to be understood as complex and

multidimensional, with causes and implications that cut across a range of factors (OECD, 2008).

We find this general definition a useful starting point for our discussion of adaptive methods. However, in order to gain a better understanding of how different kinds of adaptive practices can be calibrated to different kinds of fragility, we define two 'ideal types' of fragile context, which correspond to the country settings for our case study programmes. An ideal-type approach to conceptualisation offers one possible way of sketching out a 'map' which practitioners can use as a point of reference when determining what to do and how to do it. Ideal types are not descriptions of actual cases, but analytical constructs that capture the essence of a category of cases (for example, the idea of 'liberal democracy' is clearly an ideal type, not a description of any one country).[6] These are extremes that we can use as points of reference when navigating the inherent complexity of fragile and conflict-afflicted settings.

2.2.1 Fragility in Libya and Lebanon

Since 2011 and the events of the Arab Spring, both Libya and Lebanon have experienced ongoing conflict and crises. Although each of the countries experiences fragility due to a range of factors, the fundamental drivers and dynamics differ in emphasis. We define these in terms of vulnerability and volatility – concepts that build on the initial understanding of fragility outlined above, while exploring the political drivers and broader implications in more depth. These concepts are not intended to be part of a comprehensive theory of fragility, but are rather ways of identifying salient differences in the country settings for our case studies, and structuring our discussion of adaptive practices in the following section.

We understand vulnerable contexts to be those where the state has not yet asserted or been endowed with a legitimate monopoly on administration of a territory. This may be due to the presence of competing state projects, or to the lack of projection of state authority in contested territories (Fukuyama, 2011; Weber, 2013; Herbst, 2014). A likely cause for this absence of a legitimate state is

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5   For a critical discussion of the concept as it is defined in the OECD 2020 States of Fragility report (OECD, 2020), see the ODI blog series 'Fragility: Time for a rethink?' The authors suggest there is a need for alternative ways of framing the multiple challenges faced by countries affected by war, conflict and violence.

6   Ideal types were used, for instance, by Max Weber when developing his categorisation of charismatic, patrimonial, and rational-legal authority (Weber, 2013).

Box 1   Libya: a more vulnerable context

The Libyan conflict exemplifies what we define as vulnerability: the limited inclusion and/or commitment of key factions and groups to a political settlement, leads to the perpetual risk of conflict being sparked or exacerbated (United Nations, 2021). Since the 2011 collapse of the Qadhafi regime amid a civil war and foreign intervention, Libya has lacked a coherent and stable central authority. The collapse of central authority led to the dispersal of state arsenals and the formation of countless armed groups, which in turn prevented the re-establishment of state control.

In the absence of such authority, struggles have raged over the control of the state and its resources, with warlordism blurring the boundaries between state and non-state actors (Costantini, 2016). In 2014, these escalated into a second civil war that caused state institutions to split. Neither of the two opposing loose coalitions, each with its own parliament and government, succeeded in winning a decisive military advantage or outright foreign political backing (Lacher, 2018).

The conflict has put extreme pressure on the relationship of the central state with local government municipalities. The reduced linkages to and funding from central authorities have further weakened the vertical linkages between national and sub-national institutions, resulting in power imbalances and grievances that perpetuate conflict, or threaten to spark new violence (Tziarras and Fredriksen, 2020).

Box 2   Lebanon: a more volatile context

The Lebanese political system is based on a consociational model along confessional lines, in which power is shared among different religious groupings through specified quotas. In 1975, this arrangement broke down and the country descended into 15 years of civil war. Although the Taif Agreement of 1989 brought an end to the civil war and relative stability to the country, Lebanon's political settlement remains fragile – based on power sharing between political and religious groups according to their demographic strength (Serhal, 2010; Hamd, 2012; Rocha Menocal, 2016; Malaeb, 2018). The Lebanese form of consociational democracy has led to the formation of a 'party cartel' of elites who are forced to share power, divided by their identarian and ideological disputes, but united in their collusion to protect economic privileges and capture the state (Assouad, 2021). Neoliberal policies have been hijacked through rushed privatisation and clientelist allocation of state contracts to benefit elites and maintain inequality (Daher, 2022). This type of political settlement both reinforces its own sectarian foundations and prevents the production of long-term investments in institutions and public goods, i.e. an inability to promote sustainable reforms for institutional resilience (USAID, 2019).

A lack of long-term resilience mechanisms have left Lebanon ill-equipped to respond to economic or political shocks (Malaeb, 2018; USAID-Lebanon, 2019; Assouad, 2021). Partly as a result, the country has experienced near constant political and economic instability since the onset of the Syrian civil war in March 2011, which was the precursor to a huge influx of refugees into Lebanon. Since 2018, there have been three different governments and a general election, along with extended phases of interim governments. In 2019, Lebanon experienced an economic crisis, as well as anti-government protests and resultant political instability. This was followed by a sharp devaluation of the currency, sovereign debt default, an insolvent banking sector, and shortages of hard currency to pay for critical imports (including fuel and medicine). These pressures were exacerbated by COVID-19 and then a huge explosion at the Port of Beirut in 2020. The blast led to further anti-government protests, which eventually lead to the resignation of Prime Minister Hassan Diab and his cabinet.

a political settlement[7] that can only be considered as preliminary or tenuous, with major factions or interests still excluded, or formally incorporated but not yet fully vested in it (Barnes, 2009; Laws, 2012; DFID, 2016). Vulnerable settings are, by definition, susceptible to a return to violence or forms of 'elite capture', where peace dividends are shared unequally (Cheng et al., 2018). These contexts are vulnerable because power imbalances may yet push society back into conflict, unless the settlement can be institutionalised through legitimate state institutions.

We define Lebanon as a more volatile context. Volatile contexts, in our understanding, lack institutions that are able to anticipate, mitigate, and respond to shocks, whether these are related to security (e.g. irredentism, violent extremism, organised crime), the economy (e.g. exchange-rate fluctuations, hyperinflation), climate, health, or social unrest (Ingram and Papoulidis, 2018). A likely cause is a highly competitive political settlement where capture of the state for rent extraction is the main goal of competing factions (Kelsall, 2016; Cheng et al., 2018; Kelsall et al., 2022). The focus on short-term power hinders the development of long-term policy solutions, which can rarely emerge and consolidate within the few short years that any one faction may control the state.

2.2.2 Fragility in Afghanistan

It is important to emphasise that volatility and vulnerability may both be present in the same country at the same time. Our emphasis on context, rather than on the country, in defining fragility, opens up the possibility that, within the same national territory, some regions may be vulnerable, others may be volatile, and some may be both. In addition, these ideal types are agnostic as to the level of governance, and so remain valuable whether we are looking at a state, a region, or a city.

Fragility in contemporary Afghanistan is a good example of a hybrid case at the country level, demonstrating a combination of both volatility and vulnerability. In terms of volatility, decades of conflict and foreign intervention have undermined the country's coping mechanisms and protective capacity (World Bank, 2017). Since overall improvements in tackling multidimensional poverty have slowed in recent years, many Afghans

across the country are highly exposed to shocks (i.e. conflict, natural disasters, and livelihood challenges) (Mayar, 2022; van Bijlert, 2022). The current liquidity and banking problems facing the country, and the decline in agricultural productivity since the Taliban takeover due to droughts and other environmental issues, are two major factors compounding volatility for urban and rural populations respectively (Bowden et al., 2022). Economic volatility has also been exacerbated by the decision of international donors to halt all development projects and to freeze US $9 billion worth of assets that belong to Afghanistan and its citizens (Mohseni, 2022).

In terms of vulnerability, the Taliban regime portrays the country as being at peace, and itself as being in full control (Watkins, 2022). In the aftermath of the takeover, opposition from supporters of the Ghani government was overcome quickly in Panjshir, Baghlan, and other northern provinces (Hakimi and Price, 2022). However, according to the International Crisis Group (ICG, 2022), although the emerging picture of Afghanistan's security landscape under Taliban rule is a country significantly more peaceful than a year ago, there are pockets of violence and resistance that threaten greater insecurity if not managed effectively. The targeting of Shia and Hazara communities in terror attacks, for example, have exposed a gap in the Taliban's assertion that it is providing full security for Afghans (Hakimi and Price, 2022). The Taliban are, moreover, fighting two insurgencies – one led by the Islamic State's local branch, ISIS-K, and the second comprising the National Resistance Front (NRF) and other groups aligned with the former government (ICG, 2022). In addition, the US assassination of the al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in the centre of Kabul in August 2022 has raised concerns, among both western leaders and Afghanistan's neighbours, that the country is once again becoming a haven for terrorist groups (Mohseni, 2022). How the Taliban manages the risks of inter-factional conflict will be a major determinant of the country's overall vulnerability in the coming months (Smith and Bahiss, 2022).

The heterogeneity of the Taliban is also relevant in understanding Afghanistan's vulnerability, as we have defined the term. The Taliban is a multi-factional coalition, including southern and Qatari groupings, and the Haqqani network. Afghanistan

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7   We follow Laws and Leftwich (2011) in defining political settlements as the informal and formal processes, agreements, and practices in a society that help consolidate politics, rather than violence, as a means for dealing with disagreements about interests, ideas, and the distribution and use of power.

is vulnerable, in the sense that the coherence or fragmentation of this coalition will have an important bearing on the prospects of future internal conflict. Research undertaken by Alcis and Mansfield (2022) is highly relevant in this regard. Their work describes how, since taking power, the Taliban has introduced new economic institutions which could be destabilising. Once in government, the Taliban moved quickly to regulate and centralise revenue collection, channel trade through formal crossings, and enforce effective management of official border crossing points. It will take time for the broader implications of these changes to become clear. However, the report argues these arrangements now deny some groups within the Taliban the revenue they earned as insurgents. While the new 'rules of the game' have reduced corruption drastically, in so doing they have effectively dismantled a political settlement that rested on an elaborate system of patronage.[8] How these elites will gain rents and favour under the new system remains unclear, as does its future stability (Alcis and Mansfield, 2022; see also Watkins, 2022).

Vulnerability and volatility are ongoing processes rather than static or binary categories (OECD, 2008; Department for International Development, 2010; World Bank, 2020). As such, their intensity will differ over time and in different parts of Afghanistan. Therefore, practitioners working with donors to design and implement assistance to the country in future will also need to be flexible, drawing on tools and processes to work around or to address different kinds of fragility, and to enable local leadership and management. Understanding how other programmes have tried to do these things may provide a useful starting point. The next section looks closely at two such examples.

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8   Alcis and Mansfield (2022) calculate that, under the Republic, powerbrokers siphoned off as much as US $767 million in bribes each year on undeclared goods at official crossing points, and levied a further US $650 million at checkpoints on arterial roads.

3 Adapting to vulnerability and volatility

In this section we present evidence from two programmes dealing mainly with different types of fragility: the Stabilization Facility for Libya (SFL) (Box 3), implemented in a context defined primarily by vulnerability; and the Lebanon Enterprise and Employment Programme (LEEP) (Box 4), implemented in a context defined primarily by volatility. It is important to clarify that these programmes worked mainly *around* their respective fragility dynamics, rather than *on* those dynamics themselves. In other words, for reasons we explore below, the projects tried to use adaptive methods in order to deliver their output objectives despite their fragile settings, rather than trying to address those fragility dynamics directly. It is also important to be

aware that although both programmes tried to work adaptively, they both fell short in certain respects according to the definition we have advanced above. Nevertheless, discussing both stronger and weaker elements of their adaptive practice, as they were presented to us during interviews with team members and in programme documents, may be useful for practitioners seeking to design better approaches in future.

In the rest of this section we discuss in turn the three components of adaptation from our framework: flexibility, context-sensitivity, and systematic learning. We look at how LEEP and SFL deployed these to suit the dominant fragility dynamics they faced (summarised in Table 1).

Table 1   Summary of adaptive practices and contextual variation in SFL and LEEP

	SFL – a more vulnerable context	LEEP – a more volatile context
Main fragility dynamics	The limited inclusion and/or commitment of key factions and groups to a political settlement contributes to a perpetual risk of conflict being sparked or exacerbated.	Neither state nor society has developed the longer time horizon necessary for building institutions that are able to anticipate, mitigate, and respond to shocks.
What does flexibility look like in our case studies?	Flexibility in the project design, workplan, and targets agreed with donors, so that the team can engage patiently with local communities, but move quickly once priorities are agreed.	Flexibility in the intervention design, delivery approach, and targets agreed with donors, so that the team can react quickly in response to new shocks, emerging crises, or opportunities.
What does context-sensitivity look like in our case studies?	Proactive convening and facilitation, led by local staff, to ensure all relevant stakeholders are included in the formulation of shared problems and the identification of potential solutions.	Recurrent horizon scanning, scenario planning, and structured political economy analysis (PEA), to anticipate and mitigate potential shocks, and help prepare partners.
What does systematic learning look like in our case studies?	Collaborating with donors regularly to check that goals and objectives remain relevant, and adjusting implementation strategies in response to changed circumstances and new insights.	Evidence generation and data collection built into core programme processes, to ensure quick feedback on what works, as well as fast response to early indications of change. Quarterly meetings to reflect and plan for more strategic adaptation.

Source: The authors, based on interviews and programme documents

Box 3   The Stabilization Facility for Libya

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), with the financial backing of 13 donor agencies, along with the Government of Libya, launched the Stabilization Facility for Libya (SFL) in April 2016, to support the Government of National Accord (GNA) and the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA). The project is due to finish in August 2022.

The SFL aims to strengthen the internationally recognised state authorities and foster national unity. It does this by creating opportunities for peaceful reconciliation at the local level, through community consultations, conflict analysis and reduction, inclusive municipal planning, reconstruction of critical infrastructure such as hospitals and schools, and improvement of access to and the quality of basic services.

The project worked in communities across Benghazi, Kikla, Obari, Sirte, Sebha, Beni Walid, Derna, Ghat, Tawergha/Misurata, Ajudabiya, Kufra, and Tripoli. By the end of 2021, a total of 339 projects had been completed in 24 municipalities, resulting in improved power grids; rehabilitated water and sewage networks; expanded educational, cultural, and health facilities; and streets cleared of debris.

SFL achieved these improvements according to priorities established during field-based assessments and community consultations with municipal authorities, local leaders, and civil society representatives.

SFL is implemented by UNDP, and decisions are made by a Governing Board jointly chaired by the Libyan Prime Minister's representative and the United Nations Deputy Special Representative. All activities are conducted in cooperation with Libyan local and national authorities.

Box 4   The Lebanon Enterprise and Employment Programme

The Lebanon Enterprise and Employment Programme (LEEP) was a £16 million programme that ran from January 2017 to September 2021, and was implemented by Palladium.

LEEP provided funding and advisory support for small and medium enterprises (SMEs)[1] to expand their businesses and increase sustainable employment, aiming to create long-term jobs for Lebanese workers, as well as temporary jobs for Syrian refugees. It was funded by DFID (later the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and its first iteration was established as part of the UK's commitments at the 'Supporting Syria and the Region' conference in February 2016.

Through partnerships with banks, financial institutions, and NGOs, LEEP provided a conditional matching grant based on the level of investment made by the SMEs and the number of jobs created. It also worked on policy advocacy for SMEs. As well creating sustainable jobs, the programme aimed to provide fair wages for newly recruited workers, increase turnover for supported SMEs, and create knock-on economic effects, such as greater demand for materials and services from suppliers and increased tax revenues. It was also thought that providing jobs to marginalised workers would reduce tensions among communities, thus mitigating an important driver of instability and conflict in Lebanon.

Included among the list of key achievements in the project completion review, are support provided to 502 SMEs with matching grants, as well as 450 strengthened with business development services; and the creation of 1,589 new jobs, all of which were retained for at least three months.

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1   SMEs are defined, by LEEP, as having less than 50 employees, or an annual turnover of less than US $3 million.

3.1   Flexibility

3.1.1   In a more volatile context

Adjusting to crises and windows of opportunity
Flexibility is important for reacting quickly to unforeseen events. This is likely to be important in all contexts. Arguably, though, the importance of flexibility, and the frequency with which it has to be employed, is amplified in more volatile settings, given the lack of institutions that are able to anticipate, mitigate, and respond to shocks, and the risk this poses for programming.

LEEP, for example, demonstrated flexibility in adjusting the nature of support it provided as it was tested in practice and new crises emerged. The team showed flexibility both at the level of tactics (day-to-day programming and decision-making) as well as broader strategy (the overarching plan for achieving a defined impact).

Tactical adjustments had to be made on a monthly basis, as the pipeline of SMEs that were eligible for loans fluctuated in response to new emergencies. This required almost constant market analysis and stakeholder engagement. There was also a need for far-reaching strategic adjustments, in response to bigger shifts in the political economy and more extreme volatility. According to the team, the most important example was early in the programme, following the onset of the 2019 financial crisis (see Box 2). LEEP was designed to support SMEs taking out loans from banks or microfinance institutions. But when the financial crisis occurred, banks almost completely stopped lending, rendering this approach unviable. LEEP was able to adapt its support by widening the eligibility requirements for SMEs and providing grants to match private investments. Another significant adjustment was made following the Beirut Port explosion in August 2020, with LEEP quickly adjusting its lending criteria to support businesses damaged in the blast, establishing partnerships with new financial institutes and NGOs, and investing in repairs and sustaining jobs.

Strong leadership and shared problem-solving
What operational factors were important in enabling flexibility for LEEP? During interviews, the team emphasised that the principal enabling factor for flexibility in programming tactics was a balance of decisive and proactive team leadership, with problem-solving capability and motivation shared evenly across the full team. Particularly in contexts

of rolling crises, leaders have to be prepared and supported to make fast decisions. One staff member commented: 'The intention and proactivity of leadership is important to make things run [adaptively]. [Here, there is a] mindset of approval'. At the same time, the entire team was engaged in finding solutions to programming challenges as they arose. Regular, informal team retreats and formal, strategic reviews (discussed in more detail below) were used to develop joint problem-solving approaches, and intrinsic motivation to work adaptively.

The more far-reaching strategic adjustments mentioned above had to be approved by FCDO. Given how fundamentally the 2019 crisis undermined the programme design, the team feared that LEEP could have been shut down entirely. Staff emphasised the importance of LEEP's systematic learning processes and sophisticated data-management system, which enabled them to make a sufficiently strong case to FCDO for the necessary strategic adjustments to programming. This demonstrates the contingent dependencies between the three elements of adaptive practice as we have characterised them: without sufficiently robust mechanisms for systematic learning, LEEP may not have been able to secure approval to adapt in the way it deemed appropriate to the context. LEEP also emphasised that, in order to get a quick response from FCDO on potential project changes of this scale, it was important to lay out clearly both the pros and cons of decisions, and a clear decision-making timeline.

3.1.2   In a more vulnerable context

Patient deliberation and quick delivery
Flexibility is also critical for adapting to vulnerability, but the experience of SFL draws attention to a shift in emphasis, in comparison to LEEP. Given the vulnerable Libyan context, the SFL team emphasised the need to strike a balance: taking a cautious and deliberate approach to stakeholder engagement and prioritisation in order to decide on investment activities, but moving quickly to implementation once priorities and locations were agreed. SFL found that, in the early stages of implementation in a vulnerable stabilisation context, it can be difficult to predict how long it will take to reach consensus on investment projects, given the dynamic and complex conflict environment. As such, it may be self-defeating to work to a rigid timeline dictated by pre-agreed outputs or disbursement targets. Again,

this is likely to be important for programmes in all contexts, but perhaps to a greater extent in more vulnerable settings, given the risks of doing harm.

These factors are visible in an example cited in SFL's 2018 Annual Report. Early that year, SFL began analysis and planning for conflict-mitigation work in Bani Walid, a city in the Misrata District in northwest Libya. The initial engagement with local stakeholders identified several potential conflict risks, and investments were postponed to allow for inclusive dialogue to take place. In particular, there were significant tensions between the Municipal Council and the Ministry of Planning, mirroring more general distrust between local and central authorities in Libya. SFL coordinators worked patiently alongside the Municipality and local sector representatives to address these issues, facilitating numerous meetings between the local Mayor's office and the central Ministry, and encouraging the Mayor to involve the Director of Planning in subsequent coordination of SFL investments.

However, long delays in implementation after an agreement is reached in a location are also potentially destabilising, particularly in areas where conflict experiences are still fresh, and/or where ceasefires are tentative and easily reversed. As such, once the initial analysis and deliberation had been conducted in Bani Walid and priorities agreed, it was important that SFL moved quickly into delivery mode, providing equipment and completing civil works and rehabilitation projects.

Working within administrative constraints
What operational factors were important in enabling flexibility in response to local conflict dynamics? In the case of Bani Walid, it seems clear that without sufficient flexibility in terms of contracting, financial disbursement, and delivery, SFL may have been unable to respond quickly enough to satisfy expectations that were raised during the initial engagement and deliberation.

The team emphasised, however, that speed of response was a constant challenge. They were often slowed down by UNDP's onerous procurement procedures, and felt they lacked sufficient administrative capacity to deal with these demands. According to the team, two factors were useful for working around these constraints. First, an operations manual was shared, describing the programme objectives and providing regulations, guidelines, and norms for different processes and procedures. Second, there was clear communication

and astute relationship management with programme participants, enabled by strong programme leadership. One SFL interviewee framed this as 'controlled flexibility': flexibility in supporting local communities to prioritise investments, but being clear from the outset about the scope of work, what the programme can provide, and managing expectations accordingly.

The need for SFL to control expectations also apparently extended to UNDP Libya senior management, who were sometimes inclined to make commitments to senior community leaders on behalf of SFL, that were unrelated to the inclusive consultative processes described earlier. This reinforces and expands on a broader conceptual point made above. In principle, for adaptive projects in fragile contexts, the degree of flexibility in programming should be modulated partly by robust tools and mechanisms for context-sensitivity. This draws attention to the second component of our adaptive framework.
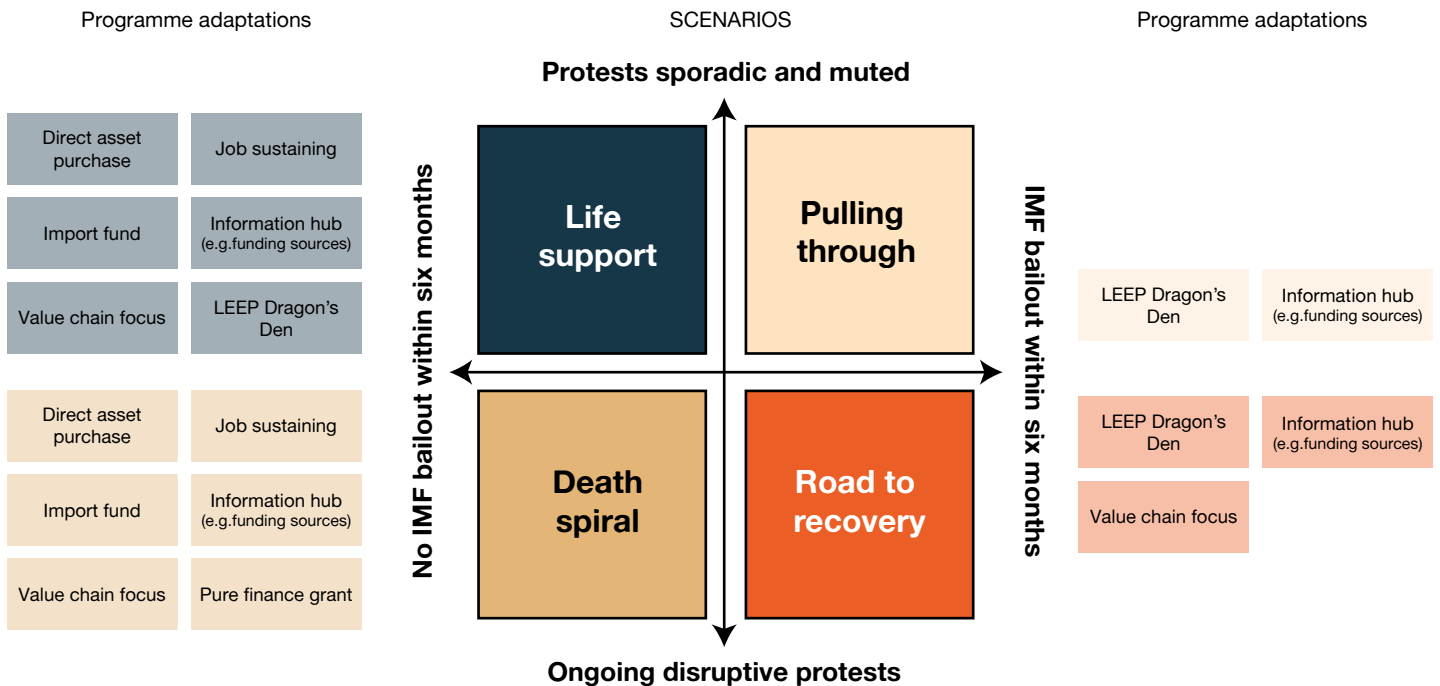
3.2 Context-sensitivity

3.2.1 In a more volatile context

Scenario planning to anticipate shocks
As we have described above, LEEP was susceptible to volatility in the SME lending market and the wider Lebanese political economy. Given the context of permanent crisis that characterised the country during the course of the programme, LEEP invested heavily in anticipating future shocks and the programme adaptations that might be required. Often, this took the form of structured scenario planning. The team developed, with FCDO, a range of future political and economic scenarios, and used them to build a menu of options for adaptations. This was used as a tool to map contextual factors, capture uncertainties, and define corresponding pathways for the programme to pursue.

For example, in 2019, Lebanon's gross domestic product (GDP) had plummeted. The team set out four potential scenarios, varying on two dimensions: whether a bailout could be agreed with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the depth and extent of social unrest and protests. For each of the four eventualities, adaptations were suggested, indicating high-level strategic adjustments that the programme may need to make in response (see Figure 1).

Figure 1   Political economy scenarios for Lebanon 2019–2020

Programme adaptations   SCENARIOS   Programme adaptations

Protests sporadic and muted

No IMF bailout within six months			IMF bailout within six months
Direct asset purchase	**Job sustaining**	**Life support** / **Pulling through**	
Import fund	**Information hub** (e.g. funding sources)		**LEEP Dragon's Den** / **Information hub** (e.g. funding sources)
Value chain focus	**LEEP Dragon's Den**		
Direct asset purchase	**Job sustaining**	**Death spiral** / **Road to recovery**	**LEEP Dragon's Den** / **Information hub** (e.g. funding sources)
Import fund	**Information hub** (e.g. funding sources)		**Value chain focus**
Value chain focus	**Pure finance grant**		

Ongoing disruptive protests

Source: LEEP 2019 Annual Review presentation, Palladium

In addition to periodic scenario planning, LEEP also used structured PEA to track more immediate developments and identify risks. As we discuss below, this evidence was used to validate the programme's understanding of the 'current state' of key actors during structured Quarterly Strategic Reviews (QSRs). For example, PEA presented at both the first and second QSRs in 2019 revealed shifts in lending practices and in loan appetites in Lebanon, and heightened risks in the country's business environment.

Short-, medium- and long-term scenarios

The team reportedly found PEA and scenario planning valuable for thinking through the kinds of programme changes might be required to meet different eventualities. However, a challenge identified in the literature on MEL for adaptive management is how best to balance the desire for more rapid feedback and monitoring, with consideration of the longer time horizons needed to judge whether sustained progress is being achieved (Buffardi et al., 2019). This may be a particular tension in more volatile settings, given the need to balance short-term responses to immediate crises with an awareness of longer-term and broader trajectories of change or path dependencies.

Interviews with LEEP suggest their scenario-planning approach did not always reflect a satisfactory balance. To map out realistic adaptations to improve a programme's relevance and effectiveness, it is important to plan for scenarios that are likely to arise during its lifespan. Conversations with the team leader in 2021, as LEEP prepared to close down, suggested that, among the four scenarios mapped out above, LEEP could see the most negative scenario playing out in Lebanon. However, there was too little time left in the programme to adapt, in any far-reaching sense, to those circumstances. Planning for longer-term country scenarios and understanding the contribution of individual projects to desired processes of change is important for donor planning and portfolio management at the country-office or regional level (Buffardi et al., 2019). But this longer-term planning may not be immediately relevant for informing feasible project-level adaptation. LEEP's experience indicates that, given the unpredictable pace of change in volatile settings, adaptive teams should also plan for a range of shorter and medium-term scenarios that are likely to align with their programme cycle.

3.2.2 In a more vulnerable context

Community consultations, non-negotiable inclusion
Inclusive community consultations were the
fundamental mechanism for context-sensitivity
in SFL, which were used to determine local
demand for infrastructure projects, and to enable
communities to prioritise projects and locations.
As noted above, this approach seems particularly
relevant to the vulnerable context for the
programme, given the care with which local conflict
dynamics need to be handled.

The team emphasised that inclusion and
representation of different groups in these
consultations was a non-negotiable principle. Even
if the programme faced resistance from community
leaders about including representatives of certain
groups, they would either negotiate to ensure
their inclusion, or withdraw the project. In doing
so, the programme used these spaces not just for
prioritisation, or to become aware of politically
sensitive dynamics, but for a more ambitious goal
of building dialogue and cohesion across different,
potentially contentious, community groups.
Even if this more ambitious goal was not met, the
consultations and requirement for groups to agree
on prioritisation helped ensure the programme's
infrastructure investments did not antagonise
existing conflict dynamics. We illustrate this point
immediately below, in combination with describing
the importance of local coordinators.

The role of local coordinators
With respect to enabling factors and operational
lessons, SFL emphasised the importance of local
staff and their sense-checking role in community
consultations. Delegating authority to competent,
well-networked frontline staff is recognised as
being important for adaptive programming (Quick,
2016; Honig and Gujulrani, 2018; Schreiber and
Loudon 2020). In the vulnerable Libyan context, SFL
colleagues made clear it was crucial for successful
stabilisation and risk management. One staff
member described how local political leaders often
tried to influence projects – to provide contracts to
family members, or to bring 'people from their own
side' to influence consultations towards projects in
their constituencies. Having a local coordinator who
understood these dynamics, and whether requests
were legitimate or self-serving, was key for SFL in
managing these risks. These staff provided valuable
contextual expertise; connections and political

savvy; and, often, personal investment in the issues
being addressed. These connections were the
fundamental route through which the programme
kept abreast of changing dynamics of inclusion and
exclusion as they related to project investments at
the community level.

To illustrate the important role of coordinators in
supporting community consultations and adjusting
SFL interventions at the local level, the team
described an example from Sebha municipality in
southwestern Libya. During the implementation
of a project drilling boreholes for clean water, a
nearby Tebu community was being bypassed. When
the elders brought this up and communicated their
dissatisfaction, the coordinator met with the leaders
of the community, engaged with the contractor
to consider extending the intervention to provide
access to water, and ensured additional funding
from project management. The initial community
consultations were 'points in time' that provided
an important snapshot and baseline. The local
coordinators played a crucial role in tracking, in real
time, the interaction between the investment project
and local community dynamics, and developing
appropriate solutions in response.

3.3 Systematic learning

3.3.1 In a more volatile context

Building data collection into existing processes
LEEP's approach was the first of its kind in
Lebanon, and was therefore treated as a policy
experiment (LEEP, 2019). The programme's theory
of change was based on assumptions about patterns
of lending, borrowing, and re-investing among
SMEs and Lebanese financial institutions. These
assumptions needed to be tested and refined
regularly as these stakeholders responded both
to the programme intervention and surrounding
political and economic volatility.

To do this, LEEP invested extensively in data
collection, while also thinking creatively about how
to reduce the MEL burden and the exposure of these
processes to volatility. Part of LEEP's approach was
to build data collection into existing programme
processes, rather than commissioning third-party
systems. For example, LEEP collected and tracked
substantial data from the SMEs' grant application
forms. Naturally, this data captured information
relevant to core project targets, and included
metrics such as the average financing amount of the

approved SMEs, the regional and sector distribution of applications, and the average time required to complete an application for financing. This data was then entered into an online dashboard, which visualised the information at a macro level, and allowed the team to spot trends or unexpected emerging results.

This approach helped minimise standalone data-collection activities, while providing a set of indices that LEEP used for donor reports. According to the team, developing this bespoke system paid dividends in the volatile context because it allowed for rapid iteration at the level of day-to-day programming. For example, single grant recipients could be identified easily and frozen in cases of fraud or non-compliance.

LEEP staff said this data-led systematic learning approach was resource-intensive, and it relied in part on a reasonable level of programme ambition.[9] LEEP's initial programme design envisaged providing multiple different financial products to different groups of stakeholders. But in response to the complex range of crises the team encountered, the programme was gradually simplified to focus on providing loans suitable for SMEs. According to staff, this more circumscribed scope made systematic learning more feasible, as the team was clear about which data to collect and metrics to track, and had sufficient resources to manage this. We were told that maintaining such a learning-oriented approach across a broader range of interventions would have stretched the team's capacity, and resulted in less effective adaptation.

Learning systems fit for purpose and context

The original business case and programme design for LEEP included a Randomised Control Trial (RCT)[10] to evaluate the impact of the project. However, the RCT came with requirements that proved incompatible with LEEP's need to test and trial a number of approaches to working with SMEs. For example, to ensure a sufficiently large and homogenous sample, it required the programme to support a minimum threshold of SMEs that met relatively strict conditions. Given the economic deterioration in Lebanon, the pipeline of SMEs seeking loans was not large enough to meet these demands. According to staff, the RCT conditions also threatened to undermine LEEP's commercial relationship with a key financial institution, which was uncomfortable with excluding SMEs from support to meet the needs of the evaluation. Eventually, the RCT was dropped and LEEP pivoted to a more experiential learning approach, as described above, but not without significant delay and absorption of programme resources.

The Quarterly Strategic Review

To inform adaptation at the level of project strategy, LEEP held quarterly strategy reviews (QSRs). Each QSR focused on detailed market and political economy analysis; analysis of grants; emerging challenges; and discussion of what adaptations the team might have to make in response. These sessions were the main tool for systematic reflection and provided the basis to adapt LEEP's intervention design and delivery approaches, revise the broader programme theory of change, and identify additional evidence gaps to improve the programme. In advance, the team invested substantial time in thinking through a range of possible adaptations, using the scenario planning method described above. LEEP drew upon a range of data to inform this planning, including the grantee monitoring data mentioned above, PEAs, and qualitative commentary from relevant stakeholders. The presentation of this data was used as LEEP's main reporting mechanism to FCDO.

LEEP staff said QSRs helped institute a learning culture, with the team working towards the end of each quarter with a view to generating insights that would require adaptation and/or donor input. Involving the full team in QSRs was said to create a shared sense of ownership of these learning processes.

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9   For a discussion of how donors can design and manage programmes to address complex challenges without creating excessively complex management and delivery structures, see Sharp et al., 2019.

10 In a randomised control trial (RCT) subjects are randomly assigned to one of two groups: one (the experimental group) receiving the intervention that is being tested, and the other (the comparison group or control) receiving an alternative (conventional) treatment. The two groups are then followed up to see if there are any differences between them in outcomes. The results and subsequent analysis of the RCT are used to assess the effectiveness of the intervention. Some regard it as a 'gold standard' evaluation method, although it is not without controversy, particularly when applied to adaptive programmes. See, for example, Aston et al., 2022.

Donor buy-in and engagement was also reportedly a critical factor for the success of these meetings in generating actionable learning. For funders to create an enabling environment for adaptive working, they need to recognise a loss of some control: trusting implementers to operate with a degree of day-to-day discretion, within constraints, and adapting their requirements to reflect that trust. This loss of control can prove challenging as funders' risk tolerance is often put to the test in contexts of ongoing conflict and/or crisis (Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2018). LEEP found that structured, regular communication with their donor was an important way to address this. During QSR sessions, FCDO was engaged on decision-making on possible project adaptations and prioritisation. Initially, the team had to make considerable effort to persuade FCDO to support project adaptation, especially if it went beyond the scope of the initial business case. As we noted above, using up-to-date market and programme data reportedly helped to justify adaptation, by demonstrating the extent to which the project was affected by volatility in the economic and political environment.

LEEP staff said once FCDO 'had faith in the process', QSRs worked successfully both for meaningful decisions on the programme and donor reporting. The FCDO programme lead said 'we had really regular and extensive collaboration between FCDO and LEEP. If you want to course correct – you have to do it regularly, [and you] have to have a structure like the QSR'. The team also felt that being challenged by FCDO to provide sufficient evidence for adaptations helped strengthen their approach, and mitigated the risk that 'adaptation' was being used an excuse for poor planning or management.

3.3.2 In a more vulnerable context

Stabilisation and local peace deals
According to the SFL team, in vulnerable contexts where the outbreak of conflict is a recurring threat, learning processes on stabilisation should ideally be geared not only towards improving infrastructure or rehabilitation projects, but also to test and inform a broader strategic vision about how to create stability

through those projects. For SFL, this means that, beyond merely monitoring progress against indicators in infrastructure or rehabilitation interventions, projects must explicitly monitor, evaluate, and learn about the interaction between their interventions and the context in which they take place.

This means collaborating with local partners to check regularly that goals and objectives remain relevant, and adjusting implementation strategies in response to changed circumstances and new insights. In a setting like Libya that is susceptible to the outbreak of local-level conflicts, the team recommended developing area-specific MEL processes tied closely to individual, local-level theories of change, to measure progress towards the objectives set for each target area. This approach needs to be grounded in an understanding of the political settlement: the type of agreement among elites that is sustaining peace locally, as well as the actors and interests that oppose the existing local peace deal, or could be threatened by its widening and deepening. Drawing on that understanding, projects should co-create local stabilisation goals, with project investments used to support interests that are sustaining peace, and to mitigate threats.[11]

Operational challenges
SFL, however, found it challenging to embed systematic learning into programming in a way that would do justice to these observations. We were told the central difficulty was that MEL was not prioritised early in the programme, with SFL not having its own dedicated MEL team. During interviews, SFL staff emphasised that an entity providing MEL expertise, experience, and proven tools to draw out learning was sorely needed, and that this lack of expertise undermined the capacity of SFL and UNDP Libya to contribute more to organisational learning on stabilisation.

An additional challenge for SFL was that these limited MEL resources tended to be absorbed in fulfilling accountability to the donors rather than for learning. Although the UNDP Country Office for Libya had dedicated MEL capacity, only a small percentage of time was devoted to SFL, most of which was reportedly spent on meeting

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11 This approach is well aligned with analysis undertaken by the UK's Stabilisation Unit (Cheng et al. 2018) as well as longer-standing thinking in the literature on political settlements (Laws, 2012; Kelsall 2016; Kelsall et al., 2022). This literature emphasises the centrality of elite bargaining as a mechanism to stabilise violent conflict. Stability, in this view, is feasible only when the allocation of benefits, opportunities, and resources (such as political positions or business prospects) is consistent with how power is distributed in society.

organisational reporting requirements, rather than learning about the effectiveness, or otherwise, of SFL investments in contributing to overall impact. In addition, although SFL had an overarching framework for results and reporting, its various donors also had individual reporting requirements. The team found that meeting such requirements drew heavily on their already limited resources, and slowed their speed of response.

As a result, SFL defaulted to a more light-touch, 'everyday' approach to learning. The team focused on the individual knowledge and political intuitions of frontline staff and coordinators, as well as feedback from conflict analyses and mediation efforts. According to the team, this approach helped ensure that local conflict dynamics did not undermine the Facility's infrastructure projects and other investments. But it was insufficient for learning how SFL could be used to build sustainable peace, and what additional measures might be needed.

Interviewees suggested that a key obstacle to funding an enhanced approach to MEL was that UNDP's senior management in Libya, which had oversight over the learning budget, had relatively little incentive to make the necessary investments. Their promotion prospects within the UN system were based on successfully completing large-scale infrastructure projects, rather than completing learning exercises focused on less immediately tangible peace and stabilisation goals. This became an important driving ethos behind SFL, and contributed to an operational culture that reportedly aimed for linear, predictable programming and visible results, rather than one of learning and reflection about higher-level impact.

4   Conclusion

This report has explored practitioners' perspectives on how adaptation can be calibrated to different kinds of fragility, and operational factors for helping or hindering these efforts. There is a growing consensus on the importance of working adaptively in fragile contexts, including for future aid to Afghanistan. But there is less detail available on how to tangibly apply these principles, how they translate into practice in response to different kind of fragility, and how different settings might provide challenges and opportunities for these ways of working. To help address this, we have discussed two programmes that were designed to work adaptively in response to different fragile contexts, looking both at the processes and tools they used, as well as enabling factors. We found clear differences in the ways that LEEP and SFL adjusted, respectively, to vulnerability in Lebanon and to volatility in Libya.

4.1   Core lessons

Flexibility was critical for both LEEP and SFL, but it was deployed for somewhat different purposes. For LEEP, given the high degree of instability in its volatile setting, it was used to keep the programme relevant amidst near-permanent political and economic crises. For SFL, given the risks of provoking local-level conflict in its vulnerable setting, flexibility was more important for achieving a balance between patient consultation processes with local communities, and rapid implementation of projects once priorities were agreed.

Both programmes invested in tools to help them understand their context, but again we found differences in emphasis, which seem sensible given their respective fragility contexts. For LEEP, the context of ongoing economic, social, and political crises in Lebanon meant that horizon scanning, scenario planning, and structured PEA were important for anticipating and mitigating potential shocks. LEEP's experience suggests that, given the unpredictable pace of change in volatile settings, adaptive teams should also plan for shorter and medium-term scenarios that are likely to align with their programming cycle.

SFL needed to understand complex local-level conflict dynamics and political relations and found that inclusive community consultations were central to this. To enable this approach, SFL emphasised the importance of delegating convening and decision-making power to locally-hired staff, who understood these dynamics and could adjust project interventions accordingly.

The third and final component of our adaptive framework is systematic learning. LEEP made extensive investment in data collection, while also thinking creatively about how to reduce the MEL burden and the exposure of these processes to volatility. QSRs worked successfully as a platform for learning – but this also required an appropriate level of programme ambition. In response to the wide range of crises the team encountered, the programme was gradually simplified to focus on providing appropriate loans for SMEs. According to staff, this more circumscribed scope made systematic learning and adaptation more feasible given the extreme volatility in Lebanon.

Systematic learning was a greater challenge for SFL. Staff and consultants to the project said that, in a context like Libya that is highly susceptible to local-level conflict, projects must explicitly monitor, evaluate, and learn about the interaction between their interventions and the deals among elites that are required to sustain peace. But the team said they lacked institutional support for the kind of MEL system this would require. Instead, SFL mainly drew on the individual knowledge of frontline staff and coordinators, and feedback from conflict analyses and mediation efforts. This helped ensure that local conflict dynamics did not undermine the Facility's infrastructure projects and other investments. But it was insufficient for learning how SFL could be used to build sustainable peace, and what additional measures might be needed.

4.2 Principles for adaptive assistance to Afghanistan

Our final observations relate to the relevance of the processes and principles of adaptation we have mapped out in this report for future assistance to Afghanistan and other fragile settings.

Although Libya and Lebanon differ from Afghanistan in many ways, we cited evidence in Section 2 that fragility in contemporary Afghanistan demonstrates some similar elements of the volatility and vulnerability shown in our case study countries. The intensity with volatility and vulnerability arise are likely to differ over time and in different parts of Afghanistan. Practitioners working with donor agencies will therefore need to be open and inquisitive, drawing on tools and processes to work around different local fragility dynamics and, crucially, to enable local leadership in spite of these challenges. Donor agencies also face considerable operational uncertainty about the future of development assistance and the kind of institutional architecture under which it will be delivered. Given this complexity and uncertainty, the relevance of the three components of our adaptive framework for guiding future assistance to the country seems clear.

For example, unless issues of international recognition are settled, aid which is being channelled through international organisations and NGOs to local counterparts in response to emerging crises and shocks, will have to be designed to avoid the reach of the Taliban. Afghanistan's volatility is related not only to the lack of mechanisms for coping with external shocks, but also the unpredictability of the new administration. As evidenced by the Taliban's abrupt decision in March 2022 to keep girls' secondary schools closed, despite promising for months that they would re-open, things are liable to change quickly on the ground, and in specific regions or districts. International assistance must therefore be flexible, to reach the most Afghans it can in the time available. This may also entail aid being increased, decreased, or even terminated if local Taliban officials divert or misappropriate assistance (SIGAR, 2022). The value of 'controlled flexibility' in more vulnerable settings is an important

transferrable lesson we draw from SFL: flexibility in supporting local communities to prioritise investments, but being clear from the outset about the scope of work, what the programme can provide, and managing expectations accordingly. This may be particularly important if NGOs are now able to expand into areas of Afghanistan that were not accessible during the conflict, and provide services to communities that may not have been focal points for aid under the previous regime.

The importance of sensitivity to the new context is also unlikely to be controversial, particularly in light of the country's vulnerability to both inter-factional conflict as well as intra-Taliban fragmentation, described in Section 2. At a macro level, this could involve donor agencies jointly developing a new theory of long-term change that can be empirically evaluated (McKechnie and Bowden, 2022). Drawing on LEEP's approach, scenarios that map possible trajectories of fragility for the country could be developed, with corresponding strategic adaptations in international assistance and engagement. At a meso level, the geographical divides between different elements of the Taliban on matters of policy also calls for frequent analysis of differences and divisions (Watkins, 2022).[12] And at the local level, donors will need a much more fine-grained understanding of community dynamics than was shown previously (see, for example, Amiri and Jackson, 2022). As we saw with SFL, patient and inclusive consultation, designed and led by locals and supported as needed by international staff with significant experience of working with Afghan communities, will be indispensable for generating the depth of contextual understanding that is required, and for agreement on priorities (Weigand and Jackson, 2019; Amiri and Jackson, 2022).

Finally, donors and local counterparts will need strong learning mechanisms. Much is unknown about how the Taliban intends to govern beyond the short term, and their ambitions for development. Leaders and influential figures one year after the Taliban takeover have still not reached consensus on a range of pressing policy questions (Watkins, 2022). To navigate this uncertainty and the associated risks, donors – led by Afghans – should treat all forms of

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12 Context-sensitivity at a certain level of abstraction may be possible from a distance. Tools for collecting data remotely, such as satellite imagery and geospatial mapping, can be used to track shifts in the political economy (see, for example, Mansfield and Smith, 2021; Alcis and Mansfield, 2022). But programme-level humanitarian action and development engagement would probably require enhanced in-country field presence, to understand the local context and respond to opportunities when they arise. Some argue this will require a strong presence of the UN and international financial institutions (IFIs), with staff on multi-year assignments who can develop local knowledge and relations with key actors (McKechnie, Bowden and Law, 2022).

engagement and assistance as an opportunity to generate learning, both about the Taliban and also the needs and challenges of local communities. This could involve engaging selectively with different parts of state and society to identify where there may be convergence of interests. This might be with officials in Kabul who share development objectives and practice and who can act as intermediaries with the political leadership, or local administrations or religious leaders willing to implement or advocate for heterodox policies, for example with regard to girls' education (McKechnie and Bowden, 2022).

In addition, the political economy of Afghanistan is complex and multi-layered, with national, provincial, and district actors with differing allegiances and agendas, as well as community and kinship groups (Barfield, 2010). As such, a continuous process of learning should be built into project implementation in order to understand how local variations in public authority and community preferences are interacting with programming. Collecting data through frontline programme implementation, while using structured, timely meetings to reflect and plan for the next iteration of programming, are two lessons from LEEP and SFL that could be integrated into future assistance. This analysis and planning should be connected to a broader theory of change about how individual projects are contributing to peace, stability, and resilience, that can be tested and adjusted in response to emerging results.

4.3 Fragility and adaptation in a global context

There is an urgent need to identify approaches, frameworks, and tools for the provision of aid in challenging environments and in response to different drivers of violence and instability. The international community is coming to terms with the shortcomings of the statebuilding and peacebuilding effort in Afghanistan, while facing both intractable and emerging crises and conflicts elsewhere in the world. The broad types of fragility we have discussed in this report also occur in many other regions and countries beyond Afghanistan, including Ethiopia, Mali, Myanmar, Syria, Ukraine, Syria and Yemen, among many others. As a result, we are likely to see continued interest among donors and their implementing partner organisations in innovative and experimental delivery approaches. There is now an established and growing literature

that documents different 'recipes' for adaptive programming in complex environments, in terms of tools, processes, and enabling factors (see, for example, Kelsall et al., 2021). The next step is to help international donors and domestic reformers apply these recipes to their own contexts and operational needs. We hope to have shown that using categories like vulnerability and volatility to understand broad patterns and drivers of fragility can provide useful initial guidance.

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