



Deliberate Adaptation: Structures for Flexibility in International Development

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Ian Axford (New Zealand) Fellowships in Public Policy

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Educated in New Zealand and England, Sir Ian held Professorships at Cornell University and the University of California and was Vice-Chancellor of Victoria University of Wellington for three years. For many years, Sir Ian was director of the Max Planck Institute for Aeronomy in Germany, where he was involved in the planning of several space missions, including those of the Voyager planetary explorers, the Giotto space probe and the Ulysses galaxy explorer.

Sir Ian was recognised as one of the great thinkers and communicators in the world of space science and was a highly respected and influential administrator. A recipient of numerous science awards, he was knighted and named New Zealander of the Year in 1995.

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- My strength is not that of one, but of many. (Māori proverb)

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This paper is the culmination of 15 years with the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and draws upon over six decades of USAID experience adapting to the political, geopolitical, economic, and social shifts that unfolded since its establishment. I am indebted to those from USAID and its partners and development counterparts from around the world who shared their insights with me. Capturing these ideas allows me to honour the efforts of colleagues, friends, and partners for whom this work was never just a job.

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Christine Pagen
Te Whanganui-a-Tara, Wellington, July 2026

Executive summary

This paper argues that development agencies can manage complexity and achieve desired goals by incorporating deliberate adaptation through purposeful structures that allow for adjustment and encourage flexibility in changing conditions. **Deliberate adaptation** is organised around three mutually reinforcing capabilities. **Partnership** values the knowledge, resources, and experience from other stakeholders, including partner governments, local communities, and private sector actors. **Alignment** ensures that interventions are connected through strategic coherence and portfolio management. **Adaptability** creates mechanisms through which learning informs decisions in design, procurement, and implementation.

The opportunity for Aotearoa New Zealand is to translate any useful lessons from the USAID experience around deliberate adaptation into the systems, values, and public-sector culture of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The most practical recommendations to ensure a disciplined approach to flexibility in international development cooperation are:

- Authorise and enable deliberate adaptation through **leadership mandates, operational policies, and practical guidance**.
- Embed deliberate adaptation across the programme cycle through **cross-functional design teams, documentation of flexibilities and accepted risks, responsive procurements, and iterative implementation**.
- Employ deliberate adaptation to inform decisions through **regular internal reflections, touchpoints, and pilots**.
- Influence through deliberate adaptation by **convening partners and engaging networks**.
- Build capacity in deliberate adaptation through **training, updated capability and skills matrix, and performance incentives**.

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1 Introduction

International development happens in uncertain contexts amidst institutional churn. Political transitions in both donor and partner countries alter priorities and funding. Natural and human-made shocks rapidly and fundamentally upend operating conditions. Institutional challenges compound this volatility. Knowledge is lost when personnel rotate or are compartmentalised. These features define the landscape, rather than being the exception.

Government structures and systems, however, are built for accountability and oversight. They serve to support fairness and the sound stewardship of public resources. Yet these same systems can become increasingly rigid over time as requirements accumulate in response to new policies or crises. Structures intended to manage risk can inadvertently make adaptation more difficult when they function as roadblocks instead of guardrails.

This paper argues that **effective international development requires accountability and coherence while intentionally enabling flexibility and learning as conditions evolve**. Achievement of results is most likely when systems provide both informed structure and safe space for learning and iterative decision-making throughout the programme cycle. Impact and effectiveness come not from choosing between overplanning and under-structuring, but from creating systems that deliberately and transparently encourage adaptation.

This is not a new approach nor is it uniquely my own. Development professionals across sectors and organisations have embraced adaptation for decades. Until 2025, much of this learning had been publicly available. The Development Experience Clearinghouse held more than two hundred thousand files capturing insights and learning from USAID partnerships with private entities, non-governmental organisations, academia, multilateral banks and agencies, donors, and diplomatic and military counterparts from across the US Government. USAID also iteratively updated its operational policy and implementation guidance online. In the absence of those resources, this paper drew from interviews with former staff, implementing partners, and other stakeholders, as well as those documents that I could locate. It argues that adaptation should not depend on individuals but rather be deliberately integrated into an institution.

At its core, deliberate adaptation is both a management approach and a posture of intellectual humility. It recognises that development agencies do not hold all relevant knowledge when an activity is designed, awarded, or implemented. They must create intentional space for other voices. Deliberate adaptation does not abandon accountability but rather strengthens it through programmes that are specifically designed to listen, learn, and adjust. The role of the development agency is not always to remain firmly in the driver's seat, but sometimes to ensure those closest to the road help determine the route.

Underscoring this approach are the three mutually reinforcing capabilities of partnership, alignment, and adaptability.

- **Partnership** asks us how knowledge enters the system, and from whom. It recognises that no single organisation holds all the expertise needed to address complex development challenges and deliberately creates space for other perspectives.
- **Alignment** explores how we make sense of that knowledge collectively. It connects diverse perspectives or programmes to shared strategic objectives so that adaptation strengthens rather than fragments a program.
- **Adaptability** requires us to intentionally translate learning into action as our knowledge and environment evolve. It establishes the authorities, processes, and decision points that allow evidence to influence priorities and resources.

Across the integrated programme cycle of design, procurement, and implementation, these capabilities help us to navigate complexity while maintaining strategic coherence. Without partnership, we have incomplete knowledge. Without alignment, our efforts are fragmented. Without adaptability, learning cannot change action. Deliberate adaptation is disciplined flexibility embedded throughout a system in service of better development outcomes. The use of deliberate adaptation may require internal cultural shifts as well as systems-level changes.

2 Deliberate Adaptation in Design

The design stage offers transformational opportunities to build flexibility into a development activity because it sets out the roadmap. Once an activity has been fully designed, solicited, awarded, and mobilised, many of its assumptions become difficult to revisit. Deliberate adaptation in design therefore requires purposeful choices about what is decided, when, and by whom, as well as how such decisions are revisited in a changing context.

Development organisations need to be clear about the outcomes they seek. Clarity of purpose, however, is not the same as predetermination of pathway. Having resources and authority does not mean having complete knowledge. A strong design process therefore asks: do we have a fixed understanding of the problem, or should problem framing itself be collaborative? Do we know the solution we want to procure, or do we need a process that allows possible solutions to emerge through consultation, co-creation, or early implementation learning?

Deliberate adaptation begins by bringing the right knowledge into the system early. Internally, this partnership approach requires designated design teams with clear roles and responsibilities who are engaged before major design choices are locked in. Technical experts, procurement specialists, legal advisers, monitoring and evaluation specialists, financial managers, and those responsible for implementation oversight will all see different risks and opportunities. Procurement and legal teams are particularly important to clarify what is required by regulation and what forms of flexibility can be built into the award structure. These colleagues are not compliance gatekeepers but partners in deliberate adaptation.

A development agency may leverage its relationships to give space to external voices and widen the knowledge base before design choices harden. Each stakeholder will see the problem differently. Industry days, market research, and problem-framing workshops can identify resources, constraints, and risks otherwise invisible to donors. Public consultations, requests for information, and requests for feedback on scopes of work can test assumptions and reveal gaps. Using a partnership approach to design builds legitimacy and trust along with improving the quality of the design itself. It sets an expectation that deliberate adaptation will be practised throughout implementation.

Alignment in design requires consideration of the strategies in which an activity is nested, such as government priorities or sectoral policies, and how existing and planned activities reinforce each other in a cohesive, integrated manner. Maintaining alignment to these strategies also requires regular, cross-activity engagement. At the portfolio, division, or country level, semi-annual programming reviews can assess alignment of designs with strategic goals and inform decisions about what not to pursue. At the activity level, an internal concept review can identify overlaps and clarify expectations of leadership. Internal reviews structured as safe spaces for surfacing uncertainty and

testing assumptions will be significantly more effective than exercises in defending a predetermined design.

Alignment is also an external discipline. Even across a large sector with diverse funding agencies, the use of jointly conceived theories of change or results frameworks establishes a collective structure without prescribing particular pathways of implementation. Government and partner roles can be discussed before award. Who advises, who implements, who validates evidence, who manages resources, and who represents local and community perspectives are all key building blocks for aligned designs. Similarly the governance structure can explicitly set expectations for timing and frequency of communication and decision-making.

Adaptability within deliberate adaptation applies first and foremost to how resources are allocated to activities. The scale, scope, and management burden of an activity must match the resources of the managing team, and this is a key decision point for a design team. In some cases, a larger mechanism managed by one lead partner may reduce the burden across multiple workstreams. In other cases, smaller or more localised partnerships may be more effective at advancing foreign policy priorities, even if they absorb more bandwidth. The question is not whether large or small mechanisms are inherently better, but which structure best balances impact and management capacity. A funding agency's policies may purposefully set aside periodic opportunities to review resource allocation.

Finally, adaptability may be structured explicitly into designs. Not only is it critical to proactively consider monitoring, data collection, and analysis, but mechanisms can be put into place to ensure reflection on progress and learning that can trigger decisions during implementation. These mechanisms may include pause-and-reflect sessions, geographic cross-activity reviews, quarterly feedback loops, joint work planning, and milestone reviews. Design can also take into account logistical realities of adaptation, for example how local labour laws or multi-year office leases with heavy break penalties can impact the implementing partner's ability to adapt. Deliberate adaptation means that the design explicitly names the formal and informal mechanisms through which new evidence or barriers are identified and reviewed.

In Practice: Illustrative list of stakeholders

- Communities
- Partner governments and parastatal organisations
- Local civil society
- Implementing partners
- Private sector entities
- International or regional organisations
- Multilateral banks and agencies
- Research institutions and academia

- Donors
- Faith-based organisations
- Entities in the donor government and funding agency

In Practice: Bringing in procurement expertise early ensures that design decisions match desired objectives.

USAID wished to scale a pilot intervention with proven evidence behind its approach. A more traditional procurement would be a Statement of Work, detailing the tasks the implementing partner should perform. The design team included a procurement officer, who recommended using a Statement of Objectives approach, based on the requirements of that situation. That approach allowed USAID to establish its desired objectives without prescribing a particular method. The choice allowed the development agency to set public purpose and accountability expectations, while inviting the expertise of applicants in determining the most effective approach to meeting those expectations.

In Practice: Think explicitly about how to coordinate different funding streams under a common strategy.

In response to an international crisis, USAID saw an opportunity to align multiple donors behind one strategic results framework. Different development agencies, however, operated under different legal and financial requirements. Rather than forcing every donor into the same funding model or accepting fragmented implementation, the design team worked with legal and financial advisers to develop one locally-led governance framework and special government bank account that allowed multiple donors to contribute through different mechanisms. The result strengthened coordination around goals and ultimately leveraged ten times USAID's investment while allowing each donor to meet its own requirements.

3 Deliberate Adaptation in Procurement

In procurement, flexibility without structure can waste time and resources, and structure without flexibility can lock in fixed or outdated assumptions. Deliberate adaptation in procurement sets clear pathways on how and when honest dialogue occurs and how it ultimately will influence implementation. The goal is a procurement process and award structure that makes adaptation transparent, resourced, and manageable.

Procurements can be highly adaptive or highly prescriptive in how problems and solutions are framed. The development agency identifies desired outcomes, statutory or policy requirements, and funding parameters. Within those boundaries, however, the procurement processes and documentation should match the priorities and intent of the design team. Each structure should also match the level of risk related to partner capacity and the development agency's ability to manage the mechanism well. Approaches can range from identifying a problem and asking for a solution, to inviting the applicants to propose models or sequencing while establishing clear geography, to requesting specific items to be procured.

Procurements that incorporate partnership are appropriate and responsive to the needs of the design without sacrificing competition. Dialogue can be specifically resourced, planned for, and engaged in with a wide set of stakeholders. These participants can bring a wide range of data to the table for consideration. In other words, collaboration in procurement can be disciplined without outcomes being predetermined.

Aligned procurements explicitly ask for what the development agency wants to see and do not inadvertently undermine the tough decisions that it has made in design. Priorities are named and reflected in the evaluation process and award management approach. Deliberate adaptation requires sharper choices in procurement documents where the procurement structure intentionally reinforces the design.

The award itself then carries the design team's adaptive intent into implementation. Procurements establish and require processes for review and decisions. To emphasise adaptation, applicants can be asked to identify what evidence would cause them to pivot, how they would track that data, and in what fora that data would be used to inform course corrections. These explicit touchpoints give the development agency and partner permission to revisit assumptions and take adaptive actions based on real inputs.

Deliberate adaptation therefore treats procurement as a strategic extension of design that considers appropriate dialogue, aligns intent with implementation, and specifies how and where adaptation can take place. It reflects conscious choices about where flexibility is useful and what evidence will justify change. When these choices are made explicitly, procurement can preserve competition and accountability while creating practical space for partnership, alignment, and adaptability during implementation.

In Practice: Solicitation processes set the tone for iteration and dialogue.

- To increase dialogue with potential implementing partners, procurements used pre-application conferences or structured questions-and-answers.
- To test assumptions and reduce applicant burden before receiving full proposals, procurement processes were structured with concept papers, oral presentations, and down-select processes.
- To promote local voices, procurements were released in a local language and include time and resources for simpler applications or technical assistance.
- To increase efficiency, a procurement can establish multiple funding opportunities towards a shared development objective in one solicitation.

In Practice: Application components and payment structures reinforce adaptation.

- To support complex or multi-partner activities, a procurement requested governance arrangements like steering committees and coordination meetings.
- To crowd in financial resources, a procurement explicitly required corporate partnerships and other external investment through award components.
- To facilitate responsiveness, procurements used a larger award with a prime partner to oversee grants under contract, fixed amount subawards, or other subaward structures.
- To incentivize outcomes without burdensome management, awards included milestone-based payments.
- To define incentives without distorting partner behaviour, procurements used performance-based fees in contracts.
- To reward specific innovations with minimal management burden, procurements used prize calls and grand challenges.

In Practice: Co-creation encourages collaboration.

USAID designed a procurement that stated a problem and encouraged innovative solutions from applicants. The solicitation described a transparent co-creation process, and after concepts were evaluated against criteria, the successful applicant entered into a structured co-creation with USAID to refine assumptions, governance, work planning, milestones, and risk controls before award. Rather than treating procurement as a one-way transfer of requirements, the process recognised that better programmes often emerge through dialogue. Competition requirements were upheld while co-creation allowed the development agency and partner to strengthen the activity together before implementation began.

4 Deliberate Adaptation in Implementation

Implementation is where the intent for deliberate adaptation built into design and procurement is put to the test. Partnership keeps knowledge flowing from those closest to the work, alignment ensures that changes remain connected to purpose and accountability, and adaptability provides the mechanisms for translating learning into decisions. Structures should be in place, and codified where appropriate, to allow adaptation to occur purposefully and in line with partner capacity and local voices.

Implementation that begins with an inception phase or joint work planning process has greater opportunity to adapt through partnership. This is a structured moment for stakeholders to update assumptions before the first work plan is finalised. Naming unresolved questions early makes later adaptation more legitimate. The design process should have considered how much time will realistically be needed.

Adaptation should continue to be embedded into the management rhythm of the activity, and the authority for decision-making should be clear and at an appropriate level. Built-in monthly technical check-ins, quarterly pause-and-reflect sessions, and other decision points create predictable opportunities to assess alignment, evaluate progress, and adjust course. These sessions should provide a safe environment in which to ask what barriers have arisen and, ultimately, whether activities should be adjusted. Without being deliberate, adaptation is more likely to happen only in response to a crisis or when it is too late.

Adaptation needs to be adequately resourced. Complex activities need staff responsible for relationship management, convening, follow-up, decision tracking, outcomes or milestone verification, and coordination. Staff also need to understand the flexibility that exists in the award in terms of approvals, clearance, legal or procurement review, and how changes are documented. Training and leadership support are essential as even well-designed adaptation opportunities may go unexplored without them.

Structured partner governance that is substantive rather than ceremonial extends the learning begun in inception beyond launch. The steering committees, advisory boards, and partner coordination meetings requested in the procurement provide venues to review evidence and make decisions. The more these exchanges happen, the safer they will feel to participants. Community feedback should also be treated as a management input. Listening sessions, scorecards, and grievance channels can illuminate whether the activity is working and relevant in a way that formal reporting may miss. Governance structures are useful only when they have a real role in helping the activity learn and adjust.

Project approaches that include multiple activity awards can be especially useful. Management across activities helps align and leverage investments. Annual or semi-annual reviews can look across activities to explore whether the overall portfolio is coherent and to identify opportunities to consolidate, scale, or exit. This matters because

individual activities can appear successful on their own while the portfolio remains fragmented. Monitoring, evaluation, and learning across activities should be connected to management decisions and trigger deeper analysis or decisions.

Deliberate adaptation is not purposeless drift. Changes remain tied to the development objectives and competition scope, and flexibility is a response justified by evidence and context. Adaptability ensures resources are being directed towards foreign policy priorities, especially when closing activities that are not working and expanding those that are.

In Practice: Awards codify which decisions happen at the work plan level to increase responsiveness to change.

A USAID team decided to specifically delay the Year One work plan until six to nine months post-award. This meant time and resources were dedicated to do rigorous work like baseline surveys or political economy analyses. This collective learning was then incorporated into the work plan, correcting any assumptions or errors inherent in the design or application.

In Practice: A donor's ability to convene creates space to share information and deconflict programming.

USAID regularly convened implementing partners and stakeholders to share information, reduce duplication, and identify complementarities that increased collective impact. These fora could span an entire country portfolio or focus on a single sector or geographic area. During COVID, this coordination identified an opportunity for one implementing partner to distribute materials developed by another, extending USAID's reach quickly and efficiently when movement was restricted in the country.

In Practice: Programmes listen, learn, and reflect systematically during implementation.

Regular reflection provided staff and programme participants with a platform to share concerns and discuss priorities. One activity responded to local interest in election registration because it had built-in listening sessions. The result was that up to one million young people registered to vote. The people affected by our work were not just beneficiaries of a plan. They were sources of knowledge about what the plan should become.

In Practice: Parallel mechanisms create a pathway for gradual transition and shared risk.

USAID had an award to an implementing partner paired with a related award to a government ministry. The ministry award started with very minor reimbursements that

helped test and strengthen systems. Over time, as systems improved, larger components could move from the implementing partner award to the ministry award, and the implementing partner was available for support where needed. This was adaptation and partnership but also risk management through structure.

5 Enabling Conditions: Leadership, Risk, Resources, and Incentives

Leaders should set a clear mandate that responsible adaptation is good management rather than an indication that the original design has failed. This means creating an environment conducive to questioning assumptions and acknowledging when an activity is not achieving its intended results. Staff and partners need to feel safe to report delays and constraints. A development agency that penalises bad news will not receive the information it needs to adapt. This mandate should be established in policy documents at the agency-wide strategic level and reinforced by leadership. Framing and expectation-setting from the top should happen early on.

Deliberate adaptation should be expressly built into systems so that the agency has the practical guidance it needs to evaluate risk responsibly and make changes as needed. Staff may otherwise conclude that the safest course is to continue with the original plan even when evidence suggests change is needed. Deliberate adaptation therefore encourages clear approval authorities, risk appetite statements, procurement or legal clearances, and risk analyses, complemented by how-to guidance notes on processes that foster flexibility. These might include structured challenge sessions exploring what safeguards are adequate for the context or a regular portfolio review process that specifically requests this kind of reflection.

Leadership also must commit resources to deliberate adaptation. Consultation and reflection all require time, staff, and budget, and they are the infrastructure of adaptive management. If they are not planned and funded upfront, an activity or a portfolio may be flexible in theory but rigid in practice, which will hamper efforts to achieve development objectives.

Internal incentives therefore also need to align with the mandate. If staff are expected to adapt, then skills frameworks and performance measures used in annual evaluations should reward those choices. Activity managers can be assessed on whether they used evidence and adjusted responsibly when circumstances changed. Design and procurement staff can be assessed on whether they included award language that encouraged learning and adaptation.

Leadership is ultimately what turns deliberate adaptation from an idea into an institutional practice. Leaders define the permission structure, set the risk appetite, allocate resources, protect honest reporting, and reward good judgment. With that mandate in place, adaptation becomes a reliable part of how development organisations pursue better outcomes.

In Practice: Existing authorities contain more room for innovation than established practice assumes.

USAID's procurement innovations were within the bounds of laws, regulations, and policies. Once conceived, the ideas needed to be socialised and vetted across the Agency. One example was an annual umbrella framework under which multiple procurements could be released as addenda. Using this approach, USAID established a business model requiring significant private sector or non-USAID contributions as part of the application process. When offices engaged using this framework, the benefit was not only more money but also different capabilities, audiences, expertise, and engagement from the private sector.

In Practice: Agencies reinforce adaptation through staff incentives, performance management, and training.

USAID used internal performance incentive awards for individuals or groups to promote uptake of agency priorities, such as the Administrator's Implementation Award, which recognised creativity and extraordinary accomplishment in the pre-implementation and implementation phases of activities. USAID also reformed its capability and skills framework to prioritize evidence-based responsiveness. It then invested in comprehensive training programmes for staff, including legal and compliance teams, on how to orient their work towards deliberate adaptation.

6 Recommendations for New Zealand

Aotearoa New Zealand already values relationships and responsiveness. The opportunity is therefore to make deliberate adaptation more explicit and consistent. These recommendations are suggestions to institutionalize deliberate adaptation in design, procurement, and implementation through partnership, alignment, and adaptability in ways that bolster foreign policy outcomes.

Authorise and enable deliberate adaptation:

- **Set an agency-wide mandate** for deliberate adaptation and responsible risk-taking. Senior leadership must signal that adaptation is good management, not failure.
- **Issue operational policies** that incorporate touchpoints across design, procurement, and implementation and establish clear approval pathways for pivots and modifications. These policies should be public and iterative.
- **Provide complementary practical guidance** on flexible tools, processes, and instruments. These can also be public and include partner learning.

Embed deliberate adaptation into the programme cycle:

- **Require cross-functional design teams** that represent policy, sectoral expertise, geographic interests, procurement, legal, finance, and implementation perspectives.
- **Document what is fixed and what is flexible** in the proposed design, including risk analyses, and include what would trigger reconsideration.
- **Build deliberate adaptation into procurements** by using award structures and evaluation criteria that reward learning based on evidence.
- **Resource flexibility and safe dialogue in implementation** through joint work planning, pause-and-reflect sessions, and dedicated resources to building partnership.

Employ deliberate adaptation across international development cooperation divisions:

- **Use regular portfolio reviews** at division and country levels to intentionally set aside space for critical discussions to inform decisions on programming.
- **Pilot deliberate adaptation** approaches in one portfolio, sector, or mechanism to refine the approach before scaling across activities.

Influence through deliberate adaptation externally:

- **Use MFAT's convening role** to bring partners together and engage relevant networks.

Build capacity in deliberate adaptation:

- **Strengthen professional capacity systems** through training, performance incentives, and an updated capability and skills matrix.

Methodological and AI Use Note

This paper draws on approximately 30 interviews with former USAID staff, implementing partners, multilateral organisations, donors, and private sector practitioners conducted during my Ian Axford Policy Fellowship from March through July 2026. Their insights informed the synthesis presented here but are not individually cited. The examples are illustrative rather than a representative sample.

In preparing this paper, I used AI tools to support summarisation of publicly available materials, editing, and reference preparation. I reviewed and revised all content, and I take full responsibility for the analysis, conclusions, and any remaining errors.

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