

AdaptScan

Improving your Team's Adaptive Management

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OVERVIEW:

What is AdaptScan?

In these complex times, our continued effectiveness requires an ability to experiment, learn, and adapt in response to unique and shifting dynamics in the contexts where we work. There are many ways to work adaptively: through your use of data, how you collaborate both internally and externally, or with nimble and responsive operations—to name a few.

Mercy Corps and peer organizations have studied adaptive management practices that have been pioneered by program teams across the globe, in a wide range of sectors and operating contexts. Case studies, research, and learning pilots have informed the development of the AdaptScan framework and accompanying co-assessment methodology.

Together, these tools help you identify ways your team can work more adaptively. They are also designed so that teams can periodically repeat the AdaptScan process to track their progress and continue to improve over time. The result: a team that better understands the what, why, and how of adaptive management, and an adaptive management plan that helps you take more of the actions that drive better outcomes.

This version of AdaptScan is designed to give teams the quickest returns from a workshop running about three hours. The process described here exactly matches the “AdaptScan”

module in Program Management at Mercy Corps. Teams interested in a deeper investment in the AdaptScan process should consider [AdaptScan Plus](#).



AdaptScan Framework

The core of the AdaptScan framework rests on a set of “adaptive factors”: capacities, structures, and practices that make adaptation possible. These factors are grouped under five themes (see a more detailed description of the themes and factors [here](#)):

Strategy

- Vision
- Theory of Change

Team

- Leadership
- Staff and structure
- Team culture

Processes

- Operations and finance
- Workflow and decision-making

Learning

- Context knowledge
- Data and knowledge management
- Learning approach

Partnerships

- Program partners
- Donor relationship
- Resourcing and budgeting

The AdaptScan workshop helps a team understand how these factors either enable or inhibit their ability to adapt program strategies and activities in ways that could lead to better development outcomes. By creating an adaptive management plan, the team then lays out the steps to improve these factors and their ability to work adaptively.

Planning and preparation

Running AdaptScan as a standalone workshop requires a small amount of planning and preparation. Teams committed to holding an AdaptScan workshop should:

- 1. Choose a workshop facilitator.** The ideal facilitator is a knowledgeable outsider (someone who is not on the program team, but who already has a strong familiarity with the program or can quickly get up to speed through meetings with the program lead) or an insider who can maintain objectivity and impartiality. They could be a staff member from another program in the same country office, trusted partners or researchers, or staff from Mercy Corps regional or HQ offices. They should have strong facilitation skills and a familiarity with adaptive management.
- 2. Decide when to run the workshop.** The AdaptScan process is best run with an ongoing program that has already established some of its practices. The three-hour workshop can be conducted as part of a team retreat, program review process, or standalone. It can also be integrated with a session of Program Management at Mercy Corps, Mercy Corps' program management training (the process described in this brief matches the Program Management at Mercy Corps module called "AdaptScan").
- 3. Invite and prepare the participants.** AdaptScan should bring together as broad a set of program stakeholders as possible. In addition to the program team, operations, finance, M&E, and country leadership should also participate in the workshop. Close partners can also provide useful perspectives. Participants do not need to do extensive preparation; however, if they have had limited prior exposure to the concepts of adaptive management, consider sharing the [Adapting Aid](#) case studies with them prior to the workshop, and even using those case studies to spark discussion.

Before running the AdaptScan, it is important to meet with members of the country's Senior Management Team to ensure their leadership and buy-in, preview the process, and answer any questions they have.



Running the workshop

The AdaptScan workshop is designed to take about 3.5 hours, including a fifteen minute break. The following at-a-glance agenda can be shared with participants; see the appendix for a more detailed facilitator’s agenda.

Session	Time	Objective
1. Overview and purpose	15 min	Review workshop goals and agenda.
2. How we’ve adapted: past actions taken	45 min	Explore the past “adaptive actions” taken by the program, what made them possible, and their impact on outcomes.
3. What makes us adaptive: co-assessment of adaptive factors	80 min	Jointly assess of which “adaptive factors” best enable or inhibit the team’s adaptation. <i>(Session includes 15 min break.)</i>
4. Adaptive management plan: improving our work	45 min	Plan for how the program will improve conditions for adaptive actions that lead to improved development outcomes in the future.
5. Wrap-up	15 min	Finalize plans and next steps.



Follow-up execution

Following the workshop, either the facilitator or a designated team member should compile the results—especially the adaptive actions timeline, the action chains, the factors co-assessment, and the adaptive management plan—into a workshop report. The report should be shared back with the participants and kept for future reference. The adaptive management plan should be finalized by program leadership shortly after the workshop.



APPENDIX

Workshop Facilitation Tools

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Facilitator's Workshop Guide

Agenda at-a-glance:

Session	Time	Objective
1. Overview and purpose	15 min	Review workshop goals and agenda.
2. How we've adapted: past actions taken	45 min	Explore the past "adaptive actions" taken by the program, what made them possible, and their impact on outcomes.
3. What makes us adaptive: finalize co-assessment of adaptive factors	80 min	Jointly assess of which "adaptive factors" best enable or inhibit the team's adaptation.
Tea/coffee break	15 min	
4. Adaptive management plan: improving our work	45 min	Plan for how the program will improve conditions for adaptive actions that lead to improved development outcomes in the future.
6. Wrap-up	15 min	Finalize plans and next steps.

Room setup:

Plenary space where all participants can see one another and a presentation space (e.g. U-shaped row of chairs); enough space for 3-4 breakout groups, either in the main plenary space or nearby.

Materials needed:

Projector/projection screen; flipchart paper; markers; post-it notes; pre-printed “action chain” templates, or pre-drawn templates on flipchart paper (for use in session 2 breakouts); printed copies of the [AdaptScan framework](#); flipchart sheets with factors written up (for co-assessment scoring in session 3).

15 min

1. Overview and Purpose

Align on purpose and terminology

Provide workshop context from “[Overview](#)” section of this brief.

Optional Warmup: Ask participants to each write a post-it note with a single word or phrase answer: What does “adaptive management” mean to you?

- Have them place the post-its somewhere visible on the wall, read each other’s post-its, and discuss any commonalities or differences.
- Allow space for critiques of adaptive management (e.g. that it’s just a buzzword, that it’s what the team already does, or that it’s too vague to be useful). Note that the AdaptScan process is designed to connect adaptive management to the practical reality of the team’s work.

Intro to AdaptScan Plus slides:

- 1. Review objectives:** This workshop aims to help you be intentional about how your team works adaptively. Together, we will assess the enablers and barriers to adaptive management in your program, and plan steps to improve them.
 - AdaptScan is a co-assessment: the team makes the assessment together, with me as a facilitator. Why? Because adaptive management is about how the whole program works together, so we need everyone’s perspectives. Moreover - adaptive management is different in different programs, so only the team implementing it can decide which parts are most important.
- 2. AdaptScan framework:** The framework for AdaptScan was originally created from case studies, by looking for similarities across how different teams are working adaptively. The final version was developed as part of research to demonstrate how adaptive management leads to better outcomes.
 - The framework consists of factors that enable the team to work adaptively, grouped into 5 themes: strategy; team; processes; learning; and partnerships.
- 3. Agenda at-a-glance:** For this process, we’ll start by sharing what we heard in the

pre-synthesis and giving you a chance to reflect on those. Then in session 3, we'll map out the actions your team has taken to adapt the program, what made those actions possible, and what impacts they had. After lunch, we'll finalize our overall co-assessment of enabling and inhibiting factors based on that discussion. Finally, we'll make a plan for how the team can work more adaptively in the service of incrementally improving our ability to achieve program outcomes and goals.

- 4. Workshop-Plan cycle:** Our adaptive management plan that we create during today's co-assessment workshop will be implemented over the course of our regular work. At some point in the future, we will revisit this co-assessment through another workshop. As we close, we can decide when to do that—whether in a year, or more or less frequently.

45 min	2. How We've Adapted: Past Actions Taken
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15 min	<i>Construct action timeline</i>
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- Prepare timeline on flipchart or whiteboard with any past program milestones (launch, midterm reviews, etc.).
- Ask team:

or **“** What changes have you made in the program since launching? Think both about outward-facing changes to the program's approach (such as new interventions working in new geographic areas) and inward-facing changes in how you work (such as new processes or new tools)?

- Ask team to write major changes in the program on post-it notes, first writing individually and then sharing.
- Add post-its to the timeline, asking for brief descriptions of each.
- Ask the team to identify the actions that have had the largest and most direct impacts on program outcomes; move those higher on the flipchart. Move internal changes and less impactful changes lower on the paper.
- Narrow the set of actions to the 5-10 most impactful, either by consensus of the group or with voting. Encourage the group to focus on actions that have clear results in terms of the program's outcomes (as opposed to internal changes in how the team works).

20 min	<i>Action chain breakout groups</i>
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- Split into 3-4 breakout groups. Each group takes 1-2 actions from the set of most impactful actions. Each group should be given copies of the “[action chains](#)” template

(either print copies for them to complete, or provide flipchart paper to draw the template in large format).

- Explain the process for completing an “action chain” for each of their selected actions. The steps are:
 1. Start by putting the action in the “Adaptive Action” box in the middle of the template.
 2. Then complete the “New Information” and “Decision” boxes: what new information did the team learn and what decision(s) were made that led to the action?
 3. Finally, complete the “Initial context” and “Result achieved” boxes: these focus on outcomes. For “Initial context”: What outcomes were not being achieved or what problems existed before the action was taken? For “Result achieved”: What new outcomes were achieved due to the action?
 4. Breakout groups can ignore the side box (“Factors that made the action possible”) for now.

10 min

Report-out and refine action chains

- Groups share their action chains for comment and refinement.
- Encourage discussion on the “factors” identified for each action. Reference back to the [AdaptScan Framework](#).

80 min

3. What makes us adaptive: co-assessment of adaptive factors

5 min

Initial factor discussion

- Put up the “[Adaptive Factor Rating Template](#)” (either as [slide](#), or written onto flipcharts)
- Describe background on this framework:
 - As discussed earlier, this framework focuses on the factors that can enable a team to work adaptively and take actions like the ones we’ve been discussing. They can also inhibit a team from working adaptively if a team is not doing well on them.
- Briefly talk through the framework:
 - The framework has 5 themes: **strategy** includes the vision for the program and its theory of change; **team** includes the ways that leadership encourages and models adaptive approaches, the way the team is structured, who’s recruited, how they’re mentored, and the team culture; **processes** includes both the

operations and finance systems that shape how a team operates, and the internal workflow, communications, and decision-making processes; **learning** includes how the program understands its context, the M&E and other data systems, and its approach to learning; and **partnerships** covers external relationships with program partners and donors, as well as how those relationships shape the program's resourcing and budgeting.

10 min

Return to breakout groups to select factors

- Each breakout group should re-convene to select factors that enabled the action.
- Hand out copies of the [AdaptScan factors framework](#) for them to reference.
- Encourage them to select at least 3 factors for each action, and to write out what aspects of those factors made the action possible. (E.g. Rather than just writing "program partners" or "operations and finance", the group might write: "close relationships with community councils helped us understand changing needs" and also: "operations team had supplier agreements in place that allowed us to move quickly with procurement when needed".)

20 min

Sharing and initial factor rating

- Back in the full group, each breakout should share the key enablers from each action.
- Following the discussion, ask everyone to look at the scoring template and silently reflect on each of the 13 factors:

“ How well does this factor enable or inhibit adaptive actions for the team? Even though our discussion has focused on enabling, think also about which factors may be getting in the way of working adaptively.

- Have everyone write a score 1-5 for each factor (1 = significantly inhibits program from adapting; 2 = somewhat inhibits; 3 = neither inhibits nor enables; 4 = somewhat enables program to adapt; 5 significantly enables), each on separate post-it notes, and then put those next to the factors.

* (For a larger group, tallying post-it notes may take too long. As an alternative, you can create a google form or survey monkey to share with everyone at this point in the workshop. Or, you can use "dot voting" with small stickers; in this case, give everyone 3 green stickers to vote on enabling factors and 2 red stickers to vote on inhibiting factors. This exercise is designed to make sure that it captures the opinions of those who may be less vocal, or who may hesitate to share opinions on sensitive topics, so ensure that whatever method you use creates the space for everyone to share their opinions honestly.)

15 min

Tea/coffee break

- Tally ratings of each factor during break, preparing an average score for each factor and an average score for each theme.
- Prepare scores on the “Adaptive factors scoring template” with average ratings in the second column.

30 min

Final co-assessment

- Present average rating back, one factor at a time.
- Encourage discussion, especially where the scores diverged. (For example, ask 1-2 people who rated a factor high to share why they voted the way they did, and do the same for 1-2 people who rated a factor low.)
- Find consensus, where possible, to either finalize the average rating or to adjust it based on the discussion. If no consensus is possible, settle on a range score (e.g. “3-4”, “3.5”, or even “sometimes 2, sometimes 5”).
- Ask the group for short statements that describe the key enablers and barriers under each theme, expanding on the scores with a qualitative statement. Encourage them to be as specific as possible. (For example, rather than “team communication is good” as an enabler, be more specific: “team makes good use of email to share updates, and staff meetings to problem solve”.)
- Add these statements to the template.
- Ask for group agreement that the co-assessment is complete and that everyone feels comfortable with the ratings given.

45 min

4. Adaptive management plan: improving our work

Explain the purpose of the adaptive management plan

“

In our final session, we will create an adaptive management plan. This plan will help your team improve your adaptive factors over time. We will focus both on factors that are currently enablers but could be better, and on factors inhibiting adaptive management.

30 min

Planning breakout groups

- Ask for 2-4 volunteers to lead planning breakout groups. Each lead will select 3-5 factors that they want to address, either selecting all the factors under a single theme, or choosing across themes. Groups should focus on factors that had low scores or where there were disagreements on scores. No need to assign every factor to a group.
- Other team members should join planning breakout groups based on interest. They will have an opportunity to contribute to other groups during the report-out.
- Each group should reflect on the enablers and barriers of each of their factors, then brainstorm steps they can take to improve the factor.
- Encourage them to use an effort/impact matrix to prioritize action items. (See [template below](#): an effort/impact matrix has four quadrants across axes for low-high effort and low-high impact.)
 - Suggest first having group members plot actions on a 2x2 and then overlay the quadrant names (“major initiatives” for high effort and high impact; “quick wins” for low effort and high impact; etc.) that show where their investments may generate the most value for the effort.

15 min

Report-out and compile adaptive management plan

- Groups should report back their top 3-5 next steps for group discussion.
- Compile these into the “adaptive management plan” (see template - either complete on a screen or flipchart).
- For each step in the plan, identify person responsible, others consulted/informed, success milestones, and date due.

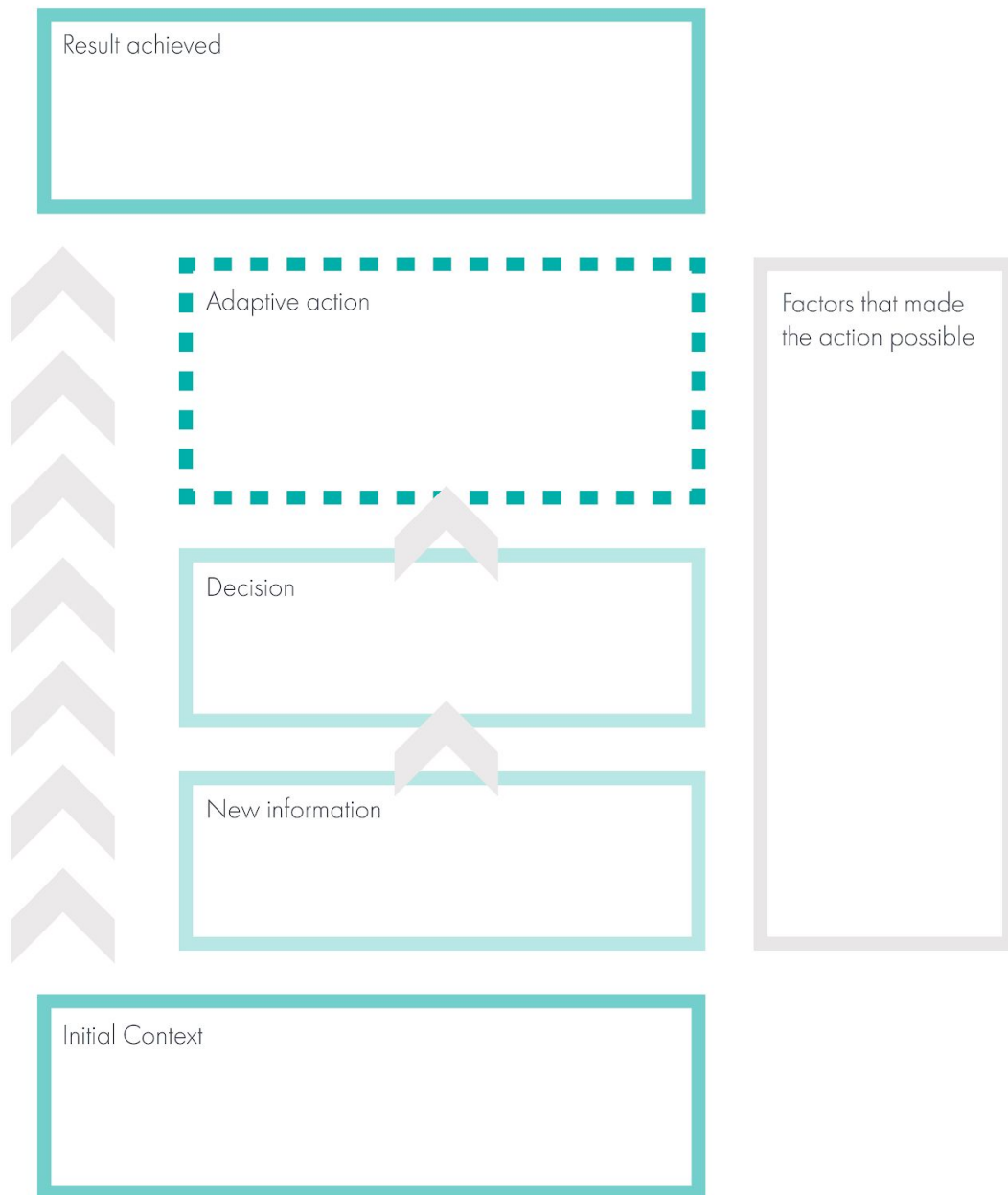
15 min

5. Wrap-up

Review and finalize

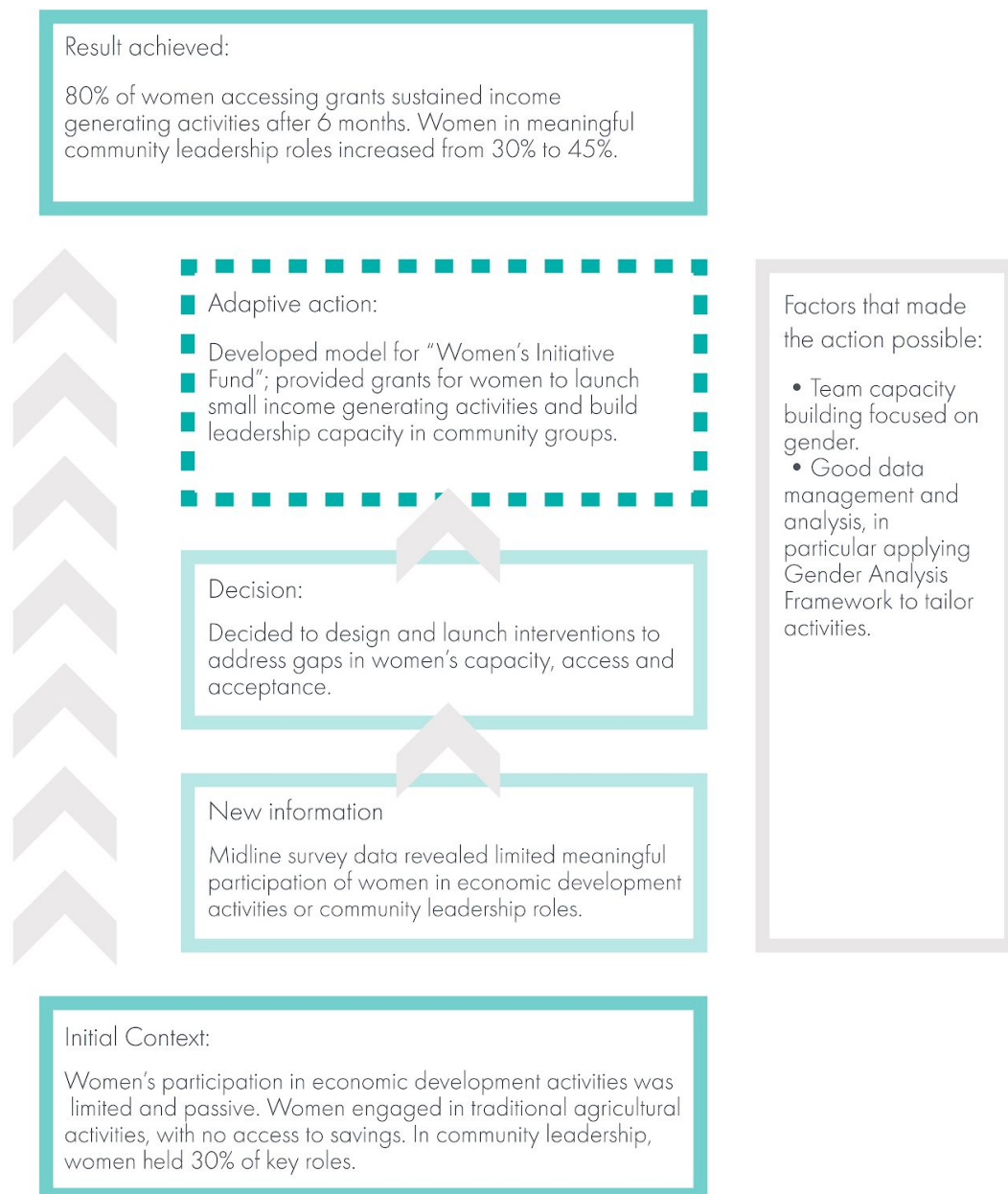
- Recap each session and the outputs. Provide space for final comments and adjustments.
- Designate a steward for the adaptive management plan. This should be someone who is empowered by leadership to facilitate the actions outlined, but they do not need to execute them all directly.
- Agree when the team will check on progress against their adaptive management plan and/or repeat the AdaptScan process to check on their “adaptive health”; this can be done as part of other pause-and-reflect moments, perhaps in line with key program moments.

Template:
Action Chains



Facilitator Reference: Action Chain Example

Note to facilitators: See below for a sample of how an action chain looks once completed. This is best used for your reference as the facilitator, as sharing it with the participants risks biasing their outputs.



(Example adapted from the Managing Risk for Economic Development II program in Nepal.)

Template:

Adaptive Factor Rating

Themes	Factors	Ratings	Key Enablers	Key Barriers
<i>Strategy</i>	Vision			
	Theory of change			
<i>Team</i>	Leadership			
	Staff and structure			
	Team culture			
<i>Processes</i>	Operations and finance			
	Workflow and decision-making			
<i>Learning</i>	Context knowledge			
	Data & knowledge management			
	Learning approach			
<i>Partnerships</i>	Program partners			
	Donor relationship			
	Resourcing and budgeting			

Facilitator Reference:

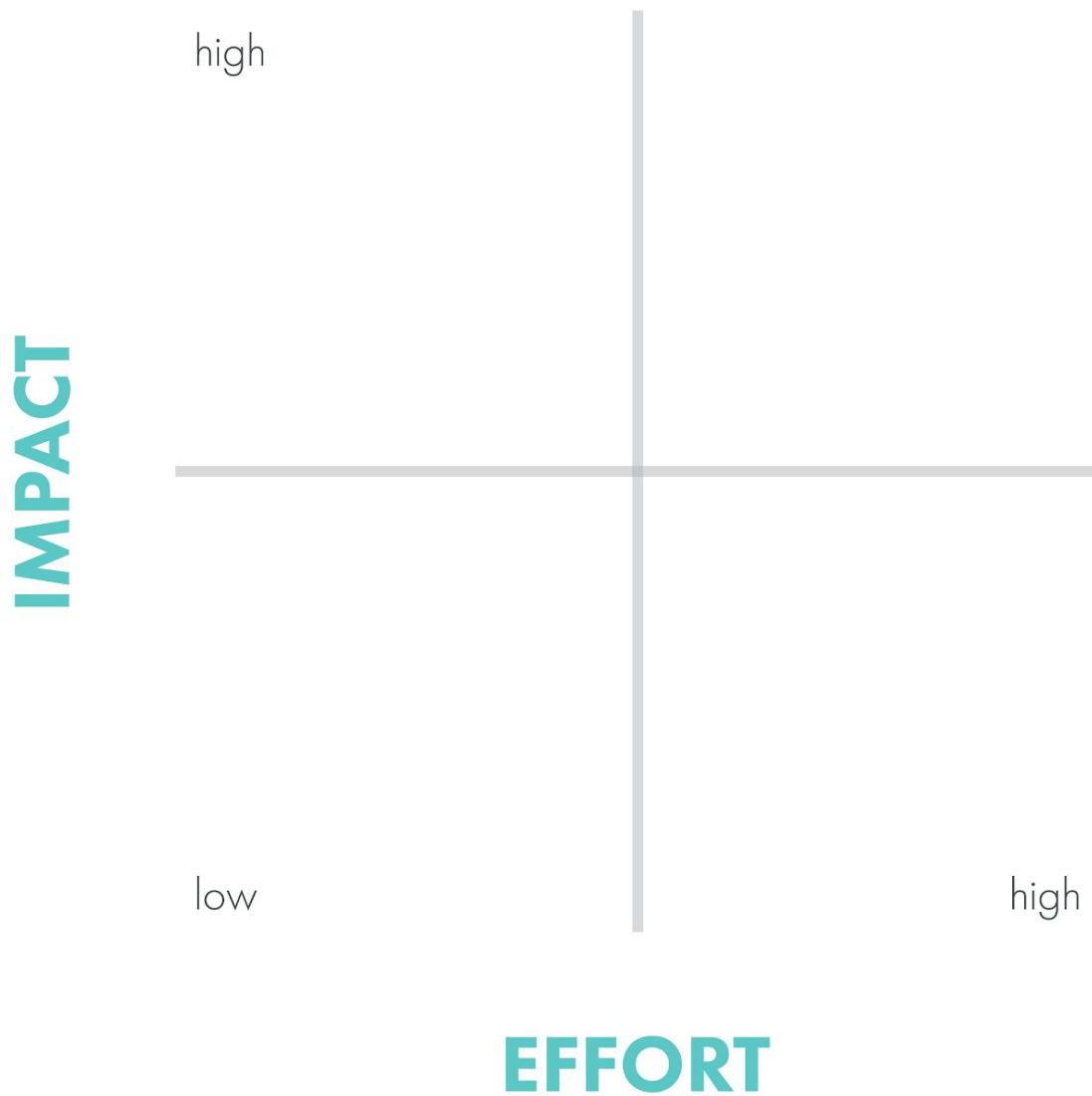
Adaptive Factor Rating Example

Note to facilitators: See below for a sample of what the first two sections of the adaptive factor template will look like once completed. This is best used for your reference as the facilitator, as sharing it with the participants risks biasing their outputs.

Themes	Factors	Ratings	Key Enablers	Key Barriers
<i>Strategy</i>	Vision	4	Vision for program approach and ToC are both clearly articulated and well understood by the program team. Vision includes the value of working adaptively. ToC allows for adaptation while pursuing clear outcomes.	Vision and ToC are not widely shared by program partners. The ToC is written in technical jargon that may not be accessible to non-specialists.
	Theory of change	3		
<i>Team</i>	Leadership	4	Leadership models adaptive behavior, e.g. by clearly sharing failures at team meetings and talking about what has been learned. Informal mentorship and coaching is common. Staff brings deep local knowledge and values adaptation.	Mentorship and coaching are informal, and do not reach all staff. Collaboration across teams (e.g. program/ops, and also among multiple programs) is hindered by lack of clear liaisons; staff often unsure who to approach.
	Staff and structure	2		
	Team culture	3	Team members feel comfortable sharing critical feedback and discussing failure, both in formal and informal settings.	Some concerns that staff are not drawn from program area communities in equal proportions.

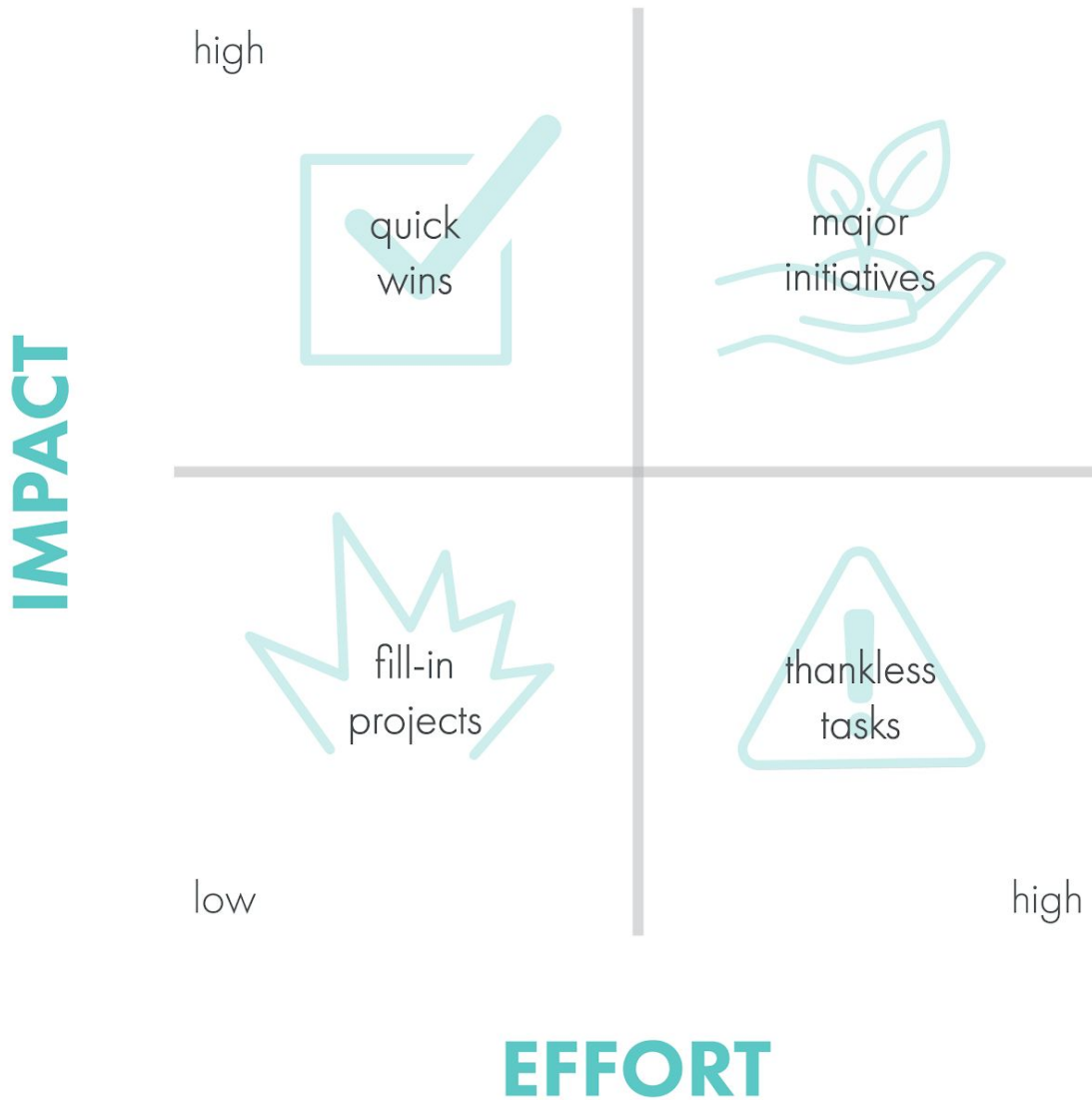
Template:

Effort/Impact Matrix



Example:

Effort/Impact Matrix



Template: Adaptive Management Plan

Add or remove lines from each section, as needed.

Theme	Action	Responsible person	Others consulted or informed	Success milestones	Date due
Strategy					
Team					
Processes					
Learning					
Partnerships					



Alternative Agenda

For new teams at program launch

The agenda above works best with a program that is already underway, where the team has already taken a few adaptive actions and has established practices under a few adaptive factors. In contrast, if you are conducting an AdaptScan at or shortly after program launch, the team will not have taken any adaptive actions to date.

For those teams, it may be more useful to start with a review of the [ADAPTING Aid case studies](#) and then run a shorter AdaptScan session by modifying the regular agenda in the following ways:

- Skip session 2 (constructing action timelines and action chain)
- In session 3, when asking the team to reflect on each factor, ask: *Which of these factors will be most important for this team to focus on in order to be adaptive?*
- Shorten the time in session 3 for the “final co-assessment” to 15 minutes, as there will be less to discuss and the scores will be less grounded in past actions.