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Learning and adaptation for effective peacebuilding:

lessons from
the PVE programming
in Kyrgyzstan



FOREWORD

Uncertainty around development paths and approaches challenge us to continuously revisit our assumptions and to constantly learn and adopt new approaches that enhance the impact of our work. The United Nations as a learning organization will question whether the programmatic solutions and approaches we apply are adequate and effective in an ever changing environment. These doubts are especially true in peacebuilding, where attribution is difficult, effectiveness is hard to measure (“how to measure something that was prevented from happening”), interventions are limited in scale and focused on specific priorities. Therefore, our prevention assumptions need to be continuously revised and take into consideration the shifting development and political landscape.

It is because of this imperative that we decided to develop, in cooperation with PeaceNexus, a learning and adaption strategy and to embark on continuous learning and adaptation exercises for the PBF portfolio in Kyrgyzstan which were aimed to affirm, reconfirm, or undermine, our assumptions and approaches. From the early stages of our prevention of violent

extremism (PVE) programme, we were confronted with contradictory or insufficient scientific evidence on causal factors of the phenomenon, and of appropriate mechanisms to mitigate or eliminate the roots of violent extremism in Kyrgyzstan’s communities. We also wanted to overcome the rigidity of the programming, in which Agencies, challenged by the duality of agency specific programming, management and reporting approaches and the expectations of the PBF for flexibility, integrated, coherent and coordinated approaches may not be flexible enough to react to new data, evolving country policies and community-specific context. As the report shows, the exercise worked better in some aspects, and less in others, and there are innovative solutions the UN should try to apply with regard to programmatic focus, coordination and project management.

We hope this report will contribute to UN-wide discussion on effective peacebuilding programming broadly beyond the immediate focus of PVE which informed our approach. My colleagues and I stand ready to further share our experience.

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Abstract

This report assesses the learning and adaptation approach adopted in the UN-funded project on preventing violent extremism in the Kyrgyz Republic. It addresses three questions.

First, how was the learning and adaptation strategy incorporated in the work of relevant UN agencies?

Second, what were the key benefits and challenges that the involved parties faced in applying the learning and adaptations approach in their work?

Third, what steps could help maximise the benefits of the learning and adaptation approach in the future?

The report draws on fifteen interviews with programme managers of the UN agencies and local implementing partners and a set of documents related to incorporating learning and adaptation in the project.

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Introduction

In 2018, the Secretariat of the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) launched a three-year program on preventing violence extremism (PVE). The program consisted of three projects (here also referred to as «outcomes»), implemented by six recipient UN organisations (RUNOs). These included UNDP, UNODC, UN Women, UNICEF, UNFPA and OHCHR.

At the start of the program, in February 2018, PeaceNexus, a Swiss-based foundation that works on strengthening the capacity of organisations working in peacebuilding, organised a workshop on “Conflict Sensitivity and Effectiveness of PVE programming”. The workshop resulted in an initiative of PeaceNexus, supported by the PBF Secretariat and RUNOs, to develop and adopt a learning and adaptation approach as an integral part of the program implementation. In the following months, Frauke de Meijer and Chinara Esengul of PeaceNexus Foundation developed «Learning and Adaptation Strategy» for the PVE program. The document provided a detailed discussion of the concept, purpose and mechanisms to put the L&A approach into practice, and became the basis for L&A-related activities in the project.

Given the L&A approach’s novelty, the Secretariat of the UN Peacebuilding Fund requested an independent assessment of the experience.

The tasks included identifying key lessons to be learned and developing recommendations for future programming. The present report provides the results of the evaluation.

The assessment relied on two types of data. First, data analysed included documents related to the application of the L&A strategy. They included the Learning and Adaptation Strategy and several documents summarising L&A-related events or activities. The second source of information were the representatives of relevant UN agencies and their local implementing partners. Fifteen interviews were conducted with representatives of six UN agencies (UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNODC, OHCHR and UN Women), five implementing partner organisations, and representatives of the PBF Secretariat and PeaceNexus Foundation. Annex 1 provides a list of interviews.

The report consists of four parts. The first section, below, sets out the broader context of the L&A approach in the PVE program in Kyrgyzstan. It also summarises key activities held as part of the implementation of the L&A strategy. Next section reviews the most significant opportunities that the RUNOs and implementing partners saw in the L&A approach. The third section turns to challenges encountered and examines the kinds of problems reported and their underlying factors. The final section offers several recommendations to improve the application and strengthen the impact of L&A in future programs.

The context: the Learning and Adaptation in the PVE program in Kyrgyzstan

Learning and adaptation refer to an actor's ability to acquire new knowledge and adjust behaviour correspondingly. The Learning and Adaptation, in turn, is a specific approach to enhance the effectiveness of the PVE program implementation through learning and adaptation. Are there changes in the context that necessitate adjustment of program intervention? How may the change in the context lead to unintended consequences? Do the theories of change, underpinning the program design, remain valid and relevant as the project progresses? These are some of the core questions that the L&A approach poses to actors involved in project implementation. Thoroughly addressing these questions and taking appropriate actions constitute the backbone of the L&A approach in practice.



Why L&A?

The proposal to develop and incorporate the L&A approach in the implementation of the PVE projects in Kyrgyzstan emerged during the workshop «Conflict Sensitivity and Effectiveness of PVE programming» in February 2018. As a follow-up, experts of PeaceNexus Foundation produced the Learning and Adaptation Strategy, a comprehensive reference document that a) unpacked the concept of learning and adaptation, highlighting its relevance and importance, and b) provided actionable advice on the implementation of learning and adaptation in the course of PVE projects. The Strategy, accessible here, set the basis for the subsequent L&A work by the PBF Secretariat and the RUNOs.

What were the reasons for developing a learning and adaptation strategy for the PVE program in Kyrgyzstan? The L&A Strategy helpfully points to key three reasons: a) the relative weakness of the evidence for «theories of change» underpinning PVE-related interventions, b) high level of context-dependence of PVE projects, and c) the lack of a flexible mechanism for reflection and learning in the context of PVE programming that would help address first two problems.

Two more factors were relevant. First, the L&A approach emerged as necessary, given the

multitude of agencies involved in the program. Six UN agencies were involved in three different projects (also referred to as «project outcomes» in relevant documents). They included cooperation with a host of local partners, including national and local government agencies, civil society organisations or independent experts. The L&A would provide a much-needed opportunity to bring different UN agencies both within and across various projects together. Such collaboration was critical not only because of the vagueness of critical concepts under the PVE banner but also because of essential differences in the mandates and organisational cultures among the UN agencies.

Second, the high level of contextual sensitivity of PVE is compounded by the country's general political instability. Kyrgyzstan is a relatively young polity that emerged as an independent state only in 1991. Outbreaks of ethnic violence in 1990 and 2010 and political turbulences in 2005, 2010 and 2020 remind that the basic terms of a social contract on the identity, roles and relations between the state, society and individual remain under negotiation. Therefore, Kyrgyzstan's broader political and social context remains inherently volatile and requires constant observation, learning, and adaptation.

What has been done?

The L&A activities conducted after the February 2018 workshop could be grouped into three based on the type of event, not chronology.

1

First, the RUNOs held regular learning and adaptation sessions after February 2018. The meetings had different formats. Some involved local partners within a project/ outcome and others brought agencies across the projects.

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Second, in May-June 2020, UN agencies conducted a major empirical study in 11 municipalities. Named a «localised analysis», the study examined critical factors contributing to radicalisation and violent extremism in given geographic areas. The study was conducted very much in the spirit of learning and adaptation, as the team sought to revisit key assumptions on the causes of violent extremism that underpinned the project.

Finally, the PBF Secretariat, with support of PeaceNexus, hosted a three-day workshop on learning and adaptation in July 2019. The event brought together representatives of all UN agencies involved in the PVE projects and aimed at conducting the first comprehensive L&A session at the program level. The workshop put the L&A approach in practice, covering key contextual changes and recording UN agencies commitments.

The Covid-19 pandemic changed the plans for the subsequent period as many project events, including learning and adaptation, were cancelled.

The following sections address the question of what worked well and the challenges in implementing this novel approach, learning and adaptation.

The added value of the L&A

Overall, the L&A approach designed for the PVE program in Kyrgyzstan could safely be named a ground-breaking exercise. It offers numerous opportunities, including some that are particularly important for activities in peacebuilding. Any party introducing the L&A approach will face substantial challenges, as discussed in the next section. However, they, in fact, only highlight the importance of L&A as an approach that paves the way to greater project sensitivity to the context, expanded role for local partners and better practice of adaptive management.



UN agencies and implementing partners interviewed for this assessment showed an overwhelmingly positive attitude towards the L&A approach used in the PVE program. Four particular issues reflect a broadly shared view across the involved parties on the added value of the L&A:

- Unpacking the complex concepts on problems of violent extremism and radicalisation,
- Developing a broader understanding of the context within which the PVE program was to be implemented
- Better understanding and collaboration between different UN agencies, and
- Developing more adaptive project implementation practices.

Unpacking the concepts

The first benefit of the L&A approach concerned the clarification of the core concepts of the PVE program. The public discourse on violent extremism and radicalisation has been on the rise

for some years. However, as many respondents noted, there was little consensus on what those terms meant. The conceptual toolbox that required deconstruction was multi-layered. There

was a necessity to reconcile the diversity/pluralism of views with radicalisation and extremism. In other words, clarity was needed on questions such as «when an extreme view becomes an extremist». Moving beyond the basic vocabulary interpretation, project teams also needed to grapple with the lack of consensus on what causes violent extremism and how to prevent it.

The L&A exercises, including the localised analysis preparation workshop and the July 2019 workshops led by PeaceNexus experts, proved to be crucial

in exposing the complexities and ambiguities of key terms of the PVE. As one respondent noted, such exercise was refreshing, mainly because the UN staff have limited opportunities to engage in such conceptual «unpacking» activities in their daily routine. Moreover, the discussions helped reveal, and partly bridge, the gap between a more rigid interpretation of violent extremism by law enforcement agencies (such as the State Committee for National Security) and more flexible approaches of the research and civil society organisations.

Appreciating the dynamic nature of the context

Next benefit of the L&A approach was a greater appreciation of the context within which the PVE program was designed and implemented. It is related to, but also distinct from, the «conceptual unpacking» discussed above. As one respondent noted, the biggest takeaway from the L&A workshops was a clarity on the «why» question of the PVE project. Routine project meetings often revolve around questions of «what» (what actions to be taken), «when» or «how». However, it is much rare for the UN teams to critically engage on the question of «why we do what we do». The L&A approach, in contrast, demanded constant and critical reflection not only on operational issues but broader strategic questions.

Keeping the focus on the broader context has led to some specific adaptations in the project. In one case, the project activities that initially targeted vocational schools' instructors were adjusted to include workshops with students and schools administrations. Similarly, activities focused on supporting vulnerable groups among women were changed to move beyond education topics to focus on women's economic opportunities. These adaptations reflected proactive engagement of implementing partners and UN agencies. At the same time, it was the L&A-inspired focus on the broader context of the PVE program that allowed smooth adjustments in the activities.

Collaboration between UN agencies

The third benefit of the L&A-oriented activities was a closer collaboration between different UN agencies jointly implementing the PVE projects. Noteworthy, there was no consensus among respondents on whether such impact of L&A was successful or even desirable. However, in most conversations, a better understanding and collaboration between project managers of different UN agencies came through quite strongly.

There were two ways in which the introduction of the L&A approach influenced inter-agency collaboration. First was about the format of L&A sessions. Most respondents very warmly recalled the joint workshops in February 2018 and especially July 2019 for a very informal and constructive environment. Regular coordination

meetings tend to be very formal and dull, featuring «strict dress code and strict communication environment», one participant put it. The L&A sessions that involved posing difficult questions and jointly seeking answers demonstrated how the «barriers» between different UN agencies could swiftly disappear.

The second and more deliberate impact of the L&A approach came through direct inter-agency collaboration on project-related activities. The L&A activities included smaller sessions on lessons learned between different agencies. Moreover, the involvement of more than one UN agency per each project created the basis for joint actions. Thus, UNDP and OHCHR worked together in providing expertise on the law on extremism.

Improving project management

The fourth opportunity that the L&A approach presented to the involved parties was about the practice of project management. Remarkably, the L&A workshops and sessions highlighted the importance of deliberate, focused and critical questioning of the project's premises, goals, expected outcomes or indicators of success. The

above tasks are not novel for project managers. However, it was novel for many to engage in the purposeful deconstruction of the concepts, moving away from the «taken for granted» approach. Most importantly, such questioning revealed some significant confusions in the project proposal, several participants confirmed. Vague formulation

of indicators, confusion between «outcomes» and «outputs» were some of the issues exposed and discussed in the L&A workshops.

The L&A also positively affected project implementation practice through encouraging direct involvement of UN agencies with the project's target communities on the ground. The best example of this was the planning and carrying

out an empirical study, the «localised analysis». It sought to understand the preconditions and factors contributing to violent extremism, focusing on 11 pilot municipalities across the country. The UN project managers often stay in their offices while implementing partners engage on the ground. As an L&A exercise, the localised analysis sought to address this problem by involving the UN agencies in the study.

L&A in practice: the key challenges

The 2017-2020 PVE program was the first time when the L&A approach was put into practice. This is a relatively brief period. Nevertheless, the initial phase of a new approach implementation is the best time to identify the process's critical challenges. RUNO's three years of work with the L&A allowed them to identify several issues that prevented reaping this new approach's benefits in full.

In particular, five points could be emphasised, including:

- A disconnect between the concept and practice of L&A
- Insufficient coordination of L&A activities
- Differences between UN agencies
- Work overload of key project staff
- Incomplete guidelines for putting L&A in practice



Two caveats are essential before proceeding. First, the issues discussed below do not lend themselves to a neat taxonomy. Some topics are related to others, and some are even constitutive of others. Nonetheless, there is a broad consensus that the single biggest issue being the discrepancy between the idea and implementation of L&A approach. Remaining four points came through as factors contributing to such a discrepancy rather than standalone topics.

Second, it must be stressed that respondents voiced out the listed challenges in response to deliberate and direct questions on challenges they faced in implementing the L&A approach in the PVE program. In other words, the topics discussed in this section primarily serve the purpose of improving the L&A application in the future rather than represent a verdict on it.

A disconnect between the concept and practice of L&A

The biggest challenge that the RUNOs faced in the implementation of the L&A approach concerned the discrepancy between an excellent idea and somewhat inconsistent implementation. Some phrased the problem as a gap between a good start and a weak follow-up. Others, in a slightly different but related context, juxtaposed a more successful “learning” aspect with a less successful “adaptation” part. The shared understanding was that taking full advantage of the promises of the L&A approach would very much depend on addressing these discrepancies.

Operationalising the «disconnect» problem is difficult because it very much derives from the expectations of respondents. There is no objective

benchmark against which one might build expectations on the L&A. The concept was novel, brought in after the project launch. Therefore, despite a consensus on the importance of the L&A, the participants could develop different expectations, reflecting individuals’ previous professional background, organisational culture, or reading/interpretation of the L&A-related guidelines.

Reflecting different expectations, project teams pointed to different facets of the disconnect between idea and practice of the L&A. Thus, for some, the biggest problem was the lack of follow-up after the July 2019 workshop. They spoke of the workshop positively but regretted no more similar

events took place after that. Some organisations found less incentive than others to follow-up on «commitments» taken in L&A sessions. For others, the L&A approach was problematic directly because it was about new work. In other words, even though some project managers

appreciated the L&A goal, they argued that full implementation of it was a priori unrealistic for practical reasons. In this context, the following four issues were identified as factors contributing to the «disconnect» problem.

Insufficient coordination for L&A

Successful implementation of the L&A approach rests on effective leadership and coordination. The PBF Secretariat, and the Office of Resident Coordinator, have played a central role in pushing forward the L&A-related events and activities. However, multiple respondents suggested that the initial enthusiasm about the L&A faded over time, not least due to less active coordination efforts. There was no single person in charge of the L&A, both at the program scale and also within the projects. Leading agencies within each outcome did not assume responsibility for a systematic carrying out of the L&A. The involvement of the PBF Secretariat, in turn, was also not consistent throughout the project duration.

The problem with coordination stemmed from two factors. First, the involvement of multiple UN agencies required extra efforts to get the

balls rolling. As the report on the July 2019 workshop notes, progress on L&A approach was greater within projects than across them, already pointing to the coordination as a primary culprit. Second, the introduction of the L&A to the project teams did not come with a clear-cut assignment of ownership over the exercise. Therefore, the progress depended on the initiative and proactiveness of particular team members, which varied across the projects.

The Secretariat team, however, had reservations about taking a more proactive coordination role. One issue was the time deficit that many project managers reported (discussed below). While some UN agencies displayed greater enthusiasm about the L&A, others did less, and the Secretariat was reluctant to press too hard.

Differences between UN agencies

Closely related to the above problem, the multitude of and differences among UN agencies also contributed to relatively slow progress with the L&A activities. One manifestation of the problem was technical. For each organisation or its project manager, the PVE project was just a small component of broader work scope. RUNOs had different annual working plans and calendar events, difficult to synchronise. As some respondents reminded, at times, even agreeing on a date that suited all parties at times posed a challenge.

The second and more important manifestation of the problem was UN agencies' differences in

their mandate, internal organisational culture or operating procedures. Culture of learning is different among the agencies, a respondent said, pointing to some organisations being more open to new approaches than others. Although sitting in the same workshop, colleagues across different agencies differed in their understanding of «what, why and how» of the L&A approach. Such difference explains the variation in terms of the L&A practices between the projects and difficulties with progressing at an inter-agency level. As one of the respondents stressed, while the L&A aimed at *steering* greater collaboration between the UN agencies, its success at the same time *depended* on such cooperation.

Overloaded project managers

There was a reasonably clear consensus among interviewed representatives about the impact of their daily workload on the ability to follow-up on initiatives such as the L&A. Project managers run multiple projects. Each of them contains a specified and scheduled set of activities. Doing justice to the expectations of the L&A approach became a difficult task in this context. The fact that the L&A approach was a «newcomer» in the broader map

of project-related activities meant it could not sit high on project managers' work schedule.

The workload issue appears to explain why some project team members saw the «learning» part as more exciting than the «adaptation» part. Learning exercise was about scheduled activities, be it a workshop featuring an exchange of views on the context or field research. Adaptation, in contrast,

required more substantive work to follow-up on the results of learning. In one case, such a follow-up activity required rewriting of a fairly detailed “terms of reference” for the implementing partners in order to enable changes in project

activities. With the L&A approach seen more as «optional» than «mandatory», doing systematic project adaptation proved challenging for many.

Incomplete guidelines for putting L&A in practice

The final cluster of comments on challenges with the L&A concerned the incomplete nature of its implementation scheme. Put differently, while the necessity of the L&A was compelling, it missed a comprehensive and detailed implementation plan. Three specific issues reflect the point.

First, the PVE projects lacked an overarching plan on what and how would they introduce the L&A in their work. The L&A Strategy contained detailed guidelines on the issues to cover, questions to raise and proposed regular meetings at different levels. However, the document remained a strategy. Missing was the schematic, clear-cut and actionable document based on the Strategy that would serve as an L&A working plan for the project.

Related to the above was the second problem, the ad hoc nature of the L&A exercises. The L&A

workshops or sessions were not regularly held, and thus, could not compare to more regular, routine project meetings. The Localised Analysis, while a significant endeavour in itself, was an ad hoc experience, conducted more a pilot exercise than part of pre-planned L&A activities.

Finally, the third observation on the L&A approach was its reliance on weak evidence. The results of the discussion of the context reflected what particular project managers chose to say during the meeting. While project team members are professional and knowledgeable, the practice of the L&A in the PVE program lacked proper regularised research, excluding the Localised Analysis.

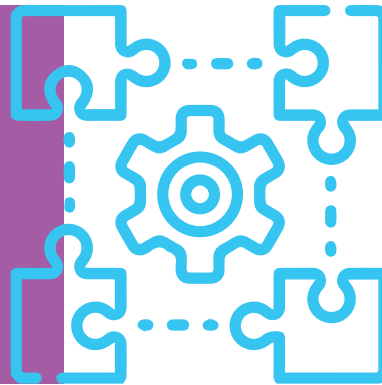
Looking forward: lessons learned and recommendations

Two questions arise in light of the opportunities and challenges that the UN agencies encountered with the L&A approach. First, should the PBF Secretariat continue and develop the L&A approach in its future programs? Second, assuming a positive

answer to the first question, what should be done to maximise the opportunities and address the challenges encountered? These two questions are the basis for a set of recommendations below.

1. Fix it, don't nix it: the L&A is here to stay.

The first recommendation is to keep and improve the L&A approach as opposed to concluding it was irrelevant, redundant or ineffective. The opportunities that the L&A approach offers clearly outweigh challenges faced in its implementation. Moreover, there are all reasons to consider the L&A not only desirable for future programs but also critically important.



Two reasons could be mentioned here. First, the essence of learning and adaptation is to address significant problems in development organisations: insufficient reflexivity, a high degree of inflexibility and a discrepancy between top-down and bottom-up perspectives. The case of the PVE program in Kyrgyzstan illustrates the danger of these. Thus, Kyrgyzstan is a fairly unstable

state and society. Frequent and unscheduled changes in the ruling regimes only underscore the weakness of fundamental norms and rules that regulate state-society relations. Alertness to changes in the context is critical in such places. The PVE is nothing but a tangle of inconclusive and potentially contradictory statements. Pausing to reflect on how we define the key concepts and

theories of change is what the L&A approach offers. It is safe to assume in the work of PBF, instabilities on the ground and contradictions in concepts will be more of a rule than an exception which calls to keep and improve learning and adaptation.

Second, the introduction of the L&A approach is in line with a broader trend towards strengthening reflexivity and flexibility in the work of development organisations. The UN Peacebuilding Fund's Strategy for 2020-2024 states that the Fund "is increasingly supporting new approaches in high-

risk environments, which requires adaptation and learning from failure". It further stresses that "monitoring and evaluation alone do not automatically lead to learning and quality improvement", which points to the growing importance of effective feedback loops. The L&A approach fits the bill in this regard. Furthermore, other developmental agencies have also moved in the same direction, with the USAID's "Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting" framework setting one of the best examples.

2. Enhance leadership and coordination on L&A

The success of the L&A approach requires proactive and consistent leadership. The experience of L&A approach in the PVE project in Kyrgyzstan vividly demonstrated the point. Many involved RUNOs suggested the L&A experience was incomplete to a certain extent because of the insufficient leadership on the subject. The PBF Secretariat did an excellent job introducing the L&A approach but lacked the same enthusiasm in subsequent stages. Similarly, within the projects, the leading UN agencies did not assume leadership in implementing the L&A-related work.

The PBF Secretariat, and the RC Office more broadly, would be well advised to consider moving the L&A higher up on their schedule. This is not a recommendation for an ad hoc action. More active leadership on L&A will depend on close consideration of the remaining recommendations by all relevant actors. Hesitations of the PBF Secretariat was partly a response to reluctance it saw from the side of RUNOs. However, the key message here is that any cross-agency initiative in the context of an ongoing project will critically depend on the existence and leadership of the focal point.

3. Upgrade the L&A ownership

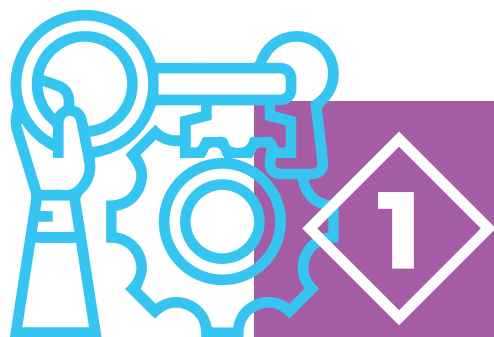
Improving the L&A approach will require greater vertical integration. The L&A Strategy that guided the PVE project in Kyrgyzstan emphasised both strategic and operational levels as necessary parts of the exercise. However, project managers of respective RUNOs remained the primary level of discussing and implementing the L&A approach. Heads of agencies were not part of the initiative, at least not equally across six RUNOs.

Involvement of the UNCT level in the L&A-related work will help address several problems. One will be a definitive “green light” that project managers will need when embarking upon an activity that was not part of their routine. It is not only about boosting confidence and enthusiasm of project

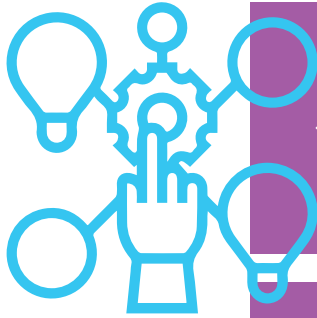
managers but also ensuring the L&A becomes part of the project processes rather than having an “optional” status.

Furthermore, a bigger role of the UNCT level is not only desirable but necessary if the L&A approach is to live up to its promise. While learning might be an exciting exercise for all, adaptation is a stage that requires decision-making power at higher levels. Moreover, there are bigger political and societal changes that are better captured at a higher level. Heads of UN agencies maintain communication with other actors in the country that project managers do not, and thus, will have unique insights to share on broader societal changes.

This recommendation depends on several factors.

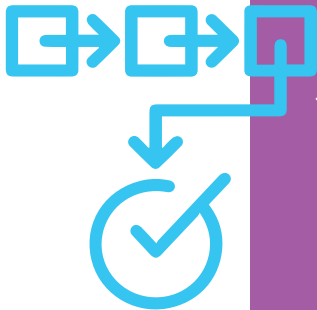


First, as suggested earlier, the leadership of the RC Office is critical to elevate the L&A and involve the leadership of UN agencies.



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Second, the heads of UN agencies will need a substantial “induction” to the L&A approach. Chances are slim for progress if key actors remain unaware or, even worse, unconvinced, about learning and adaptation.



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Third, moving L&A up in the ladder should also include the Joint Steering Committee (JSC) that oversees the PBF programme. It includes representatives of the parliament of the country, offices of the President and of the Government, governmental agencies, civil society organisations and UN agencies. JSC’s awareness and endorsement of L&A approach will open facilitate relevant activities.

4. Invest in staff time and expertise

The success of an L&A approach requires investment. The pioneering work of PeaceNexus on L&A approach for the PVE project revealed the importance of two types of resources. First is the staff time. Project managers have a full load of work following their prescribed roles. Activities related to learning and adaptation appeared to create new work. As discussed earlier, such a situation negatively affected the chances for follow-up L&A activities.

Related, but distinct is the deficit of expertise needed for successful L&A activities. Learning, as part of L&A, requires quality research and assessment. However, project managers have different professional backgrounds. Some UN agencies recruit staff that are experts in the field. Others, as a rule, rely on technical staff fluent in project management but less so on specific subjects related to the projects. Reflecting this

difference, some RUNOs interviewed for this assessment stood out for greater enthusiasm about learning and adaptation compared to others.

One solution might be to delegate the L&A-related work to a dedicated staff or an external organisation. The expertise of PeaceNexus Foundation, an external partner, was crucial to initiate and advance the L&A work in the PVE programme. Next step might be to involve an external partner or a dedicated staff member to oversee the entire L&A process, from leading data collection, facilitating discussions and ensuring follow-up activities. Involving independent think tanks and/or universities could be a viable option.

Attracting additional workforce would require resources. However, it might lift part of the burden from project managers, ensure greater work consistency, and provide an external insight into project topics.

An alternative solution is to integrate L&A activities into existing processes gradually. In other words, if designed and integrated into the projects' mandatory elements, the L&A work will turn into a known and expected component of work rather than an «extra» assignment as it was in the PVE program. This may not resolve, or even exacerbate, the problem of a deficit of staff's time if not designed carefully. Next subsection addresses the issue in detail.

5. Build L&A into existing processes

The previous recommendation stems from the fact that the L&A approach came as a new work for the staff of PVE projects. Now, a critical question that the PBF or other leading agency must address is whether the L&A should a) transform into a new “routine” process within the UN, b) remain a standalone and ad hoc exercise, or c) merge with related existing work processes. As the «challenges» section demonstrates, application of the L&A approach on an ad hoc basis will prevent reaping benefits of the approach. The

question, therefore, is how best to formalise and «normalise» the L&A work as part of the existing ecosystem of work processes.

Building the L&A into existing processes will ensure its sustainability as a practice. Best way to proceed will be for the RC Office to take charge in turning the L&A approach into part of the UN's work, both vertically and horizontally. Proposal preparation, project reporting, programme evaluations, regular progress discussions at all

levels are some of the processes where the L&A should feature centrally. This will rest on enhancing the leadership and upgrading the ownership over L&A, discussed in previous recommendations. Moreover, making learning and adaptation part of «standard operating procedures» will also require further work on operationalising the L&A approach, discussed below.

An alternative approach may be integrating the L&A into the work of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) teams. There are specific tasks that M&E teams conventionally cover. Learning and adaptation, however, is not something unrelated. Instead of being seen as additional work, learning and adaptation could well become a core of M&E work.

However, this option risks downgrading the L&A. The M&E teams are conventionally focused on more «technical» aspects of projects to ensure that planned activities are completed, and indicators are achieved. L&A, in contrast, requires thinking beyond the existing results framework and asking if goals still remain valid and if planned activities still help with the goals. Therefore, merging L&A with M&E will require a fundamental revision of the latter, and possibly turning it into MELA (monitoring and evaluation, learning and adaptation) or MEL (monitoring, evaluation and learning) as some development agencies do.



Either way, integration of the L&A activities into the rules of the UN bureaucracy is also critical to bridging the gap between decisions taken and decisions implemented. As respondents reminded, there were times when an adaptation decision, i.e. adjustment of certain aspects of project work, was hampered by inflexible terms of reference that a

UN agency might have with local partners. In other cases, decisions taken at project managers' level had to get approved at higher levels. The above highlight the need for the L&A to become part of «standard operating procedures» as opposed to unplanned, and thus, possibly distractive, exercise.

6. Streamline L&A: from an «approach» to a «framework»

The L&A exercise in the PVE project was an instance of developing a new approach to increase project effectiveness. Next step will require transforming L&A from a valuable and attractive concept to a specific and actionable model.

The L&A Strategy already offers fairly detailed guidelines on how to conduct learning and adaptation. However, producing a «lighter» version of the document would help make the L&A more equally accessible to all parties involved. Called an L&A framework, or a model, it would

- a) offer clarity on procedural matters, and
- b) help locate the L&A within the broader ecosystem of the UN agencies' programmatic work.

Importantly, such a document will have value when used in conjunction with, not instead of, the L&A Strategy.

An L&A model would bring three benefits. First, the framework would provide more actionable guidelines on learning and adaptation. Thus, learning is naturally a continuous process. However, L&A will be more successful if boundaries are evident on a «threshold» for new information, on standards of evidence for «change in the context», and on criteria to decide when an adaptation is necessary and when it is not.

Second, with greater attention to the entire project lifecycle, and schedule-able action plan, the framework document would move away from reliance on one-time events. The latter approach could be justified when piloting the concept. However, consolidation of the L&A approach will require having less ad hoc events and more systematic, pre-planned, and followed-up activities.



Finally, the L&A framework will also need to specify how the L&A work is documented and integrated into routine project reporting. More user-friendly templates must be developed to assist involved parties to record L&A-related decisions and actions. Keeping the L&A paperwork separate from regular project updates and reports downgrades the work done. Moreover, it also makes the L&A documents inconsistent between agencies and over time, which complicates learning and evaluation in the future.

RC Office
UN agencies ➔

Developing a more actionable L&A model will require investing resources and time. Not less importantly, it should not be seen as a task that can be done entirely by an external partner and then used by UN agencies. Instead, the task will require a close involvement, or even leadership, of the RC Office and UN agencies.



7. Prioritise local actors in L&A

The full benefits of the L&A approach will require the more active involvement of local partners. Most UN agencies support projects that Implementing Partners (IPs) carry out on the ground. National partners, i.e., government agencies both at national and local levels, are also crucial in creating an environment conducive for successful project implementation. These organisations have essential value to add to the L&A.

Local non-governmental organisations have a wealth of knowledge and expertise. They are mostly in direct communication with potential project beneficiaries, be it women entrepreneurs, medrese students or village authorities. Simultaneously, the IPs are well-aware of the ToRs that regulate their roles within specific UN-funded projects. In this context, the L&A will become more comprehensive and more effective if IPs

are involved systematically and equally across all projects.

Involving national partners is equally important. Different approaches may be required to turn cooperation with government agencies into a driver of change. These actors operate under more complicated circumstances, not least related to electoral cycles and hierarchy. That said, development work can hardly be successful if done without the government agencies on board.

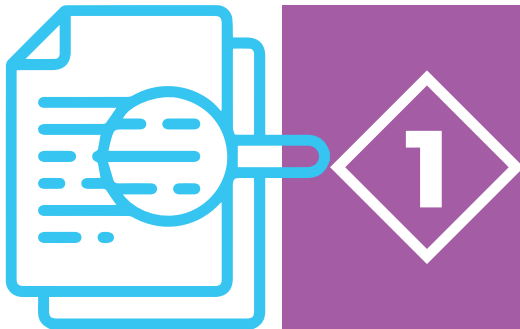
Correspondingly, for the learning and adaptation to be effective, its modality must reserve a vital role for national partners.

The L&A model, discussed above, should specify the modality of local partners' engagement. The L&A process will likely remain multi-layered. One level will involve local partners and UN agencies, and another level may be limited to RUNOs. Key is to ensure active and systematic involvement of local partners in the L&A.

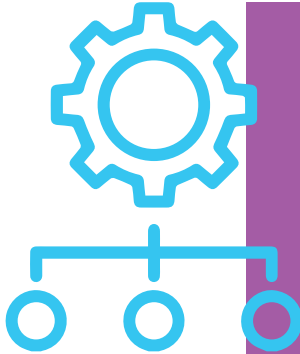
7. Prioritise local actors in L&A

The final point concerns the role that the Peacebuilding Fund can play to catalyse the development of L&A. The above recommendations called for greater leadership of the UN agencies

and the RC Office. At the same time, there is a role that PBF can play, particularly to advance L&A in peacebuilding programmes.



First, as a primary funding agency for peacebuilding projects, PBF can require an L&A strategy to be part of project documentation, from proposal to all types of reports. It will make learning and adaptation mandatory for involved agencies and speed-up its integration into existing processes.



Second, PBF's explicit endorsement and advancement of L&A approach will communicate its actual openness for change and adjustment. Peacebuilding or development projects can be notoriously inflexible due to multiple layers of donors and implementing agencies. Project managers are keen on getting the results framework (goals, strategies, activities) implemented as per plan, and not so keen to consider changes. The PBF, as a key funder for peacebuilding projects, must therefore communicate its openness for changes that result from rigorous learning, reflection and assessment.

Conclusion

The PBF Secretariat's introduction of the L&A approach was a pioneering exercise. While neither learning nor adaptation is a novelty on its own, the design of L&A strategy for PVE program and its implementation with six different UN agencies involved in three projects was a groundbreaking exercise. However, institutionalising new approaches in project management will require time, persistence and adaptive leadership. This assessment sought to support the latter by discussing challenges revealed in the PVE project experience in Kyrgyzstan and proposing recommendations for the future.

Significant barriers may emerge on the further development of the L&A work in peacebuilding. In overcoming them, it is worth keeping in mind three overarching values that the L&A approach brings. First, it paves the way for greater sensitivity of peacebuilding interventions to the local context, which may be complex and volatile. It adds greater flexibility and new feedback loops, critical for successful peacebuilding. Second, the L&A approach expands an opportunity to make peacebuilding more locally-driven, not less. Finally, the L&A creates a valuable opportunity for the UN team to pause, reflect on and make decisions to better address issues of peace.

Annex 1

List of interviews

**in no particular order*

| Name | Organization / Agency |
|--|--|
| Artur Bukalaev | UNDP |
| Erkin Isakulov, Iulia Votslav | OHCHR |
| Ulan Aralbaev | UNODC |
| Gulzhigit Ermatov | UNICEF |
| Sanzhar Alimzhanov | |
| Samara Papieva (former project coordinator) | UNFPA |
| Anara Aitkurmanova, Diana Mamatova, Dildora Khamidova | UN Women |
| Nuraim Shamyrganova | IDEA Central Asia |
| Tajikan Shabdanova | For Tolerance International (FTI) |
| Aikanysh Abylgazieva | Center for the Study of the Religious Situation under the State Commission on Religious Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic |
| Alexandr Ivanov | Educational Initiatives Support Foundation |
| Ainura Dzhunushalieva | Development Policy Institute |
| Frauke de Weijer | PeaceNexus Foundation |
| Ulan Shabynov | PBF Secretariat |



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