

Adaptive Aid in Haiti?

How aid organizations learn and adapt in fragile states

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	iv
Abstract	v
CHAPTER 1: Introduction.....	1
Definitions	4
CHAPTER 2: Literature Review	6
Fragile States: Context and Context Sensitivity	6
Knowledge Management and Learning in Aid Organizations.....	10
Three Generations of Knowledge Management.....	10
Tacit versus Explicit Knowledge.....	11
Single versus Double Loop Learning.....	12
Barriers from the literature.....	13
Theories of Organizational Change and Adaptation	14
CHAPTER 3: Research Questions and Framework	17
Research Question	17
Building the MOCA Framework – Factors that impact effectiveness.....	18
Market Orientation (M): Knowledge Producing Behaviours	18
Organizational Learning (O): Knowledge Questioning Values	20
Complexity Absorption (C): Consistency with Qualities of Complex Adaptive Systems.....	21
Adaptive Capacity (A): Propensity for Continuous, Intentional Adaptation	23
CHAPTER 4: Methodology	24
Study Location and Context.....	24
Mixed method approach: Mechanics of the Methodology	25
Survey.....	26
Semi-Structured Interviews	30
Scope and Limitations	32
Ethical Considerations	33
CHAPTER 5: Findings.....	34
Testing Assumptions: The ability to learn and adapt is critical to organizational effectiveness in Haiti.....	35
Answering the Research Question: To what extent do organizations employ MOCA practices?.....	36
Organizations varied in the number of learning and adaptation practices they employed.....	36
Market orientation and organizational learning practices were more commonly employed than complexity absorption and adaptive capacity practices.....	37
Development organizations employed more MOCA practices than humanitarian assistance organizations	40
Answering the Research Question: What are the enablers and barriers to learning and adaptation in Haiti?	42
Project Level Enablers.....	42
Quality and competencies of project staff	42
Working Relationships with Beneficiaries.....	44
Informal Personal Knowledge	44
Authority for project staff to adapt.....	45
Project Level Barriers	46

Challenges with hiring.....	46
Lack of time and space for staff to reflect.....	47
Project-focused structures and cultures	47
Lack of information	48
Organization-level Enablers.....	50
Corporate learning functions	50
Monitoring and evaluation	51
Informal sharing and learning opportunities	52
Organization-level Barriers	52
Barriers to using monitoring and evaluation data for learning	52
Focus on accountability to the funder	54
Project-based silos and cycles	55
Cultural barriers to learning.....	56
Organizations lack feedback loops	57
Sector-level Enablers.....	58
Informal networks and information sharing.....	58
Individual contributions to sector level learning.....	59
Sector-level Barriers.....	60
Challenges applying sector-level knowledge	60
The Media	61
Risk aversion and the negative consequences of failure.....	61
Other Barriers.....	64
CHAPTER 6: Analysis and Discussion.....	65
Interpreting the MOCA framework.....	65
Contributions of adaptive capacity and complexity absorption to the MOCA framework.....	66
Complexity absorption.....	66
Adaptive capacity	67
How MOCA was employed by organizations in Haiti	69
Implications of project-level enablers and barriers	73
Implications of organization-level enablers and barriers.....	76
Implications of sector-level enablers and barriers.....	81
Impact of fragility on learning and adaptation practices.....	83
CHAPTER 7: Recommendations and Conclusions.....	84
Summary.....	84
Contribution	86
Recommendations for Organizations	88
1. Whole Organization Commitment.....	89
2. Identify Opportunities for Incremental Improvement.....	90
3. Focus on Social Dynamics	90
Future research	92
Conclusion	93
Appendix A: Full MOCA Survey Findings.....	95
Appendix B: Interview Questions.....	105
References	107

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Abstract

If we understand development as an emergent property of a complex system, then effective development assistance needs to adapt and evolve in-context. This thesis explores how learning and adaptation practices might help aid organizations apply complexity thinking to improve their effectiveness. Based on a new framework of organizational practices, this study uses a mixed methods approach to assess the extent to which 12 small and medium international aid organizations in Haiti learn and adapt.

The study supports the assumption that learning and adaptation contribute to effectiveness, and finds that organizations vary significantly in their learning and adaptation practices. It finds that development organizations employ more learning practices than humanitarian assistance organizations, and that organizations are generally better at collecting information and adopting learning attitudes, than they are at establishing the structures and processes they need to be truly adaptive. The research also finds that the barriers that make learning and adaptation more difficult for organizations are largely structural and related to aid system dynamics, while organizations benefit from enablers that are largely attributed to individual agency.

This thesis argues for the important role that aid organizations can, and must play in making aid more effective – at the project, organization, and aid system levels. However, the aid system itself does not encourage learning. International aid organizations will therefore need to actively engage in learning if they are to play an effective role in development, and be a meaningful part of the system-level aid effectiveness dialogue.

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

There is an important discussion taking place in universities, in the boardrooms and lunchrooms of aid organizations, amongst donors, and in the day-to-day discussions of aid recipients everywhere: *How can aid be better, smarter, more effective?* This question has been particularly pertinent in fragile states, where increased complexity makes it especially challenging to achieve results. Fragile states present a mix of technical and social problems, wrapped in highly politicized, rapidly changing contexts. de Weijer, who studies effectiveness and complexity in Afghanistan, argues that one of the most critical failures of international development is the failure to differentiate between problems that have technical solutions, and those that are socially-based, and therefore complex, requiring a different kind of approach (de Weijer, 2012, p.2). This *different kind of approach* is at the core of this research. I have started with the assumption that aid effectiveness, in the face of complexity, requires continual adaptation, iteration, experimentation, and above all, learning. Fundamentally, this thesis questions whether or not organizations in Haiti are set up to deliver aid in a way that is consistent with this understanding of aid effectiveness in fragile states. It looks at the extent to which 12 small and medium-sized aid organizations in Haiti learn and adapt, and the dynamics that help, and hinder, their ability to do so.

In the past decade we have applied complexity thinking to development – and to fragile states – in a number of ways, and it seems interest in this area is only growing. The international discourse on aid effectiveness has applied complexity thinking to a certain degree, through their focus on context-sensitivity. The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Principles for International Engagement in Fragile States, and the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding all recognize the inherent complexity of peacebuilding and statebuilding and try to account for it through their emphasis on context-specific interventions. Building more strongly on complexity theory, Ben Ramalingam's book *Aid on the Edge of Chaos* focuses on the importance of systems thinking in development and positions aid's role as supporting the evolution of solutions:

Complexity thinking implies that the role of 'aid' in development and humanitarian assistance would shift from 'external push' – filling gaps in a predictable and linear fashion – to 'internal catalyst.' Catalytic aid would not create development, but it would identify, expand, and sustain the space for change (2013, p.361).

Owen Barder's work on social impact bonds, and other practical applications, is another example of complexity thinking becoming more embedded in how we think about development. He published a video lecture in 2012, titled "Development and Complexity," based on the work of Eric Beinhocker and Tim Harford, which has become very popular with development practitioners. The conclusion of his presentation is that development itself is an emergent property of a complex adaptive system (Barder, 2012, para. 3).

This view of development – as an emergent property – seems to resonate strongly across the field. There are likely a number of reasons for this. Maybe complexity thinking provides a satisfying explanation for why it is so difficult for aid projects to achieve results. Or maybe complexity more accurately reflects the unpredictable connection between cause and effect than the logic models, which are still prevalent across development work. Whatever the reason, complexity thinking has become popular enough that a number of authors have commented on the fact that it is fashionable these days to refer to complexity theories at conferences even if these references are not always accurate or appropriate (de Weijer, March 2012, para. 11). Still others have identified the application of complexity theory to development as a critical area of research and exploration – the beginning of something that could have a significant impact on how we do development work (UKCDS, 2015). This thesis builds on the broader interest in the application of complexity to development, and looks to apply ideas found in the complexity literature in one particular area of inquiry: how aid organizations learn and adapt.

I have looked at organizations in particular because organizations matter to aid effectiveness. They are the entities tasked with doing this work – iterating solutions, or creating the conditions in which development can emerge. Ultimately the system holds them responsible for delivering development results, even as our understanding of what it means to deliver development results is changing. We are transitioning away from a paradigm in which *the solution* mattered most, towards a paradigm in which *the process* of developing and continually adapting solutions is what matters. As we make this transition, the actors themselves – both the organizations, and the people within those organizations – matter more than they ever have.

In the same way as we recognize the complex system that gives rise to development, this research also recognizes that organizations themselves are complex entities that simultaneously shape and are shaped by the environments in which they work. They cannot be treated as simple implementation mechanisms in the development machine – but rather they need to be considered and studied, as a critical part of the complex system that strives to evolve towards positive development outcomes.

As we study these actors in the development system, it is critical to remember that the task of organizational learning is fundamentally hard. Former World Bank expert, Elliot Berg sets the scene in his paper titled “Why aren’t aid organizations better learners” when he stated that:

Organizational learning in the aid business is enormously difficult, far more so than for most other organizations. Few organizations have to deal with external environments so complex and so dynamic, with so much suspicion or hostility in their political environments, with so many anti-learning elements in their organizational cultures (2000, p.11).

In the face of this significant challenge, it is important to better understand the dynamics that enable aid organizations to be good learner/adaptors if we want to make aid more effective. We need to understand the initial conditions that help shape positive outcomes – the systems and cultures that enable trusting relationships and adaptive projects, and the processes and structures that help organizations be resilient and effective in complex environments.

Both practitioners and academics recognize that fragile states pose unique strategic and operational challenges, and that there is currently limited research aimed at understanding how organizations can be effective within these environments (Baranyi & Desrosiers, 2012, p.451-452; Campbell, 2008, p.28; de Weijer, 2012, p.1; DiCaprio, 2013). Furthermore, the literature on complexity-informed approaches to development is also in its infancy and there is limited academic work done on the role of aid organizations in this field as well. Ramalingam identifies this gap in the literature specifically, stating that: “despite the fundamental role of agencies in the delivery of aid, there are very few examples of empirical work on organizational issues” (2013, p.75). However, the *organizational* literature has leveraged complexity thinking to make the connection between effectiveness, and learning and adaptation practices for decades. This thesis therefore brings together practices from both disciplines to form the MOCA framework¹ – a tool for measuring the extent to which learning and adaptation practices are applied by organizations working in Haiti. This thesis aims to draw conclusions about organizations operating in fragile states more generally, using a sample of 12 organizations in Haiti.

Specifically this thesis aims to answer the following questions:

1. *To what extent do organizations in fragile states employ MOCA learning and adaptation practices?*
2. *What are the enablers and barriers that influence the extent to which organizations employ MOCA practices?*

¹ MOCA: **M**arket Orientation, **O**rganizational Learning, **C**omplexity Absorption, and **A**daptive Capacity.

The MOCA framework developed in this thesis presents one approach to applying complexity thinking to organizational behaviour. This research focuses on organizations based on the idea that adaptive structures, processes, and cultures of aid *organizations* will fundamentally enable learning and adaptation within aid work itself.

Definitions

For the purpose of this research, I use the following definitions.

Organizational learning and adaptation

Elliot Berg presents a definition of organizational learning that I will adopt for this thesis. Berg openly acknowledges the impossibility of suitably defining organizational learning or adaptation, but provides a helpful conceptual model:

The notion of “organizational learning” is full of ambiguities. Organizations do not learn, individuals do. ...Despite its ambiguities it is convenient to use the term “organizational learning” as shorthand for the process by which organizations obtain and use knowledge to adapt old policies, programs and strategies, or to innovate more broadly (2000, p.1).

In this thesis, I use a combination of four factors to create a framework of what I mean by organizational learning and adaptation: market orientation, organizational learning, complexity absorption, and adaptive capacity. Together they form a learning and adaptation framework that I will refer to as MOCA. These four factors represent the most relevant thinking and research I could find that identify specific organizational practices that positively impact organizational effectiveness. They are each drawn from a different part of the organizational, marketing, and adaptation research and they all contain important contributions to a more comprehensive understanding of how organizations can be effective in a complex environment. In this research I bring these four factors together for the first time in order to develop a complexity-informed framework of practices to help explore the extent to which organizations in fragile states are able to work towards development results.

In more detail, the factors that make up the MOCA framework are:

1. Market Orientation (M)

Market orientation can be understood, at a high level, as using data from an organization's stakeholders (customers, donors, beneficiaries, etc) to change organizational behaviour to better meet stakeholder needs. There are multiple definitions for market orientation available in the

literature, however this research uses the following as its primary: “Market orientation is the organization-wide generation of market intelligence pertaining to current and future customer needs, dissemination of the intelligence across departments, and organization-wide responsiveness to it” (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990, p.3).

2. Organizational Learning (O)

Organizational learning focuses on an organization’s ability to learn from its actions and past experiences. The definition that I use for this research comes from Campbell: “Organizational learning is identifying, and acting to correct, misalignment between an organization’s aims and the outcomes of its activities in relation to those aims” (2008, p.21).

3. Complexity Absorption (C)

Complexity absorption is defined as one of two possible reactions that organizations can have to operating in a complex environment: organizations can either make their internal systems more complex (complexity absorption response), or they can seek to simplify their internal systems (complexity reduction response). Ashmos et. al. define complexity absorption as “pursuing managerial strategies that reinforce the nature of the organization as a complex adaptive system” (2000, p.578). By this, they specifically mean that organizations increase the complexity of: goals, strategy, interactions within the organizations and organizational structure.

4. Adaptive Capacity (A)

Adaptive capacity is a general term that has been used to define many different concepts in the past. This research uses a specific definition from Staber and Sydow who understand adaptive capacity as the ability of an organization to be continually adaptive to on-going, unpredictable change. They focus on three structural dimensions to adaptive capacity, which I use in this research: multiplexity, redundancy, and loose coupling (2002).

In developing the MOCA framework, I scanned the literature for frameworks and theories that empirically, or theoretically, linked specific organizational learning and adaptation practices to effectiveness. These four literatures were the only four I found that made this connection.²

Learning and adaptation practice

In this research I define learning and adaptation practice as an organizational behavior or system that is defined in the MOCA literature as positively contributing to organizational effectiveness. The term “learning and adaptation practice” will refer specifically to practices that have been previously tested or theorized in the literature on market orientation, organizational learning, adaptive capacity, or complexity absorption.

² Additional research into the knowledge management and “learning organizations” practitioner literature may reveal additional practices that have been theoretically linked to organizational effectiveness or performance. At a high level, the MOCA framework captures many of the practices identified in these literatures, however they were not extensively explored as part of this research because they are less developed in academic work, and less rigorously connected to performance.

Organizational Effectiveness

This research will not seek to measure or define organizational effectiveness beyond the general assertion that aid organizations are more effective when they are able to achieve greater results for their beneficiaries. The idea of organizational effectiveness is even less well defined in the literature than organizational learning. A 2009 review of the literature identified that: “of 213 papers identified as including a performance variable, 207 different measures of performance were used” (Richard, Devinney, Yip & Johnson, 2009, p.719). Because of this lack of consensus, this study does not seek to measure effectiveness directly; instead it relies on the definitions of organizational effectiveness that have been wrapped into the work already done on market orientation, organizational learning, adaptive capacity, and complexity absorption.

The following chapter expands on these concepts as it outlines the literatures on context and context sensitivity in fragile states, knowledge management and learning in aid organizations, and theories of organizational change and adaptation.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

The literature that informs this research comes from three different areas of study: fragile states, knowledge management and learning in development, and organizational change theory. Within the field of fragile states research, I am particularly concerned with the literature on context and context-sensitivity, as well as the contemporary international efforts to improve effectiveness in fragile states. I review the knowledge management and learning literature as it has been applied in aid organizations and identify how this work relates to the MOCA framework that I use in this research. Within the organizational change literature, this review focuses on the organizational adaptation literature informed by complexity thinking, from which I examine practices that have a positive impact on organizational effectiveness.

Fragile States: Context and Context Sensitivity

To date, significant academic focus on fragile states has been on studying and measuring effectiveness at the donor and state levels and the challenges associated with statebuilding, peacebuilding, post-conflict reconstruction and development in fragile states (Barakat, Evans, & Zyck, 2012; Booth, 2012; Desrosiers

& Muringa, 2012; Egnell, 2010; Feeny & de Silva, 2012; Green & Kohl, 2007; Kaplan, 2008; Manning & Trzeciak-Duval, 2010; Paris & Sisk, 2007). In parallel, there is a robust critical literature that challenges the liberal imperialistic echoes of the International Dialogue on Fragile States. It questions whether an externally-led peacebuilding and statebuilding enterprise can, or should try to, bring lasting, authentic peace and development in fragile contexts. In other words, can the International Dialogue approach effectively grow local solutions, or is it another western import, doomed to be poorly adapted, and forgotten (Chandler, 2006; Duffield, 2006; Richmond, 2013; Donais, 2009).

While these higher-level debates try to determine what role international donor and aid organizations *should* play in fragile states, we know very little about how these organizations actually operate. The fragile state literature contains very little work on effectiveness at the organizational level, or how aid effectiveness principles might be operationalized. This gap in the academic literature is problematic because many of the high-level policies and principles for aid effectiveness discussed by the international community have direct implications for organizational operations. The discourse often talks about “context sensitivity,” and occasionally “organizational learning,” neither of which fully accounts for organizational learning and adaptation as it is defined through MOCA. The MOCA framework takes a broader view, and explores the mechanisms and practices through which organizations can be sensitive to their contexts, including how organizational structures can enable learning and adaptation. Nonetheless, context and context sensitivity are important underlying concepts that are consistent with the MOCA framework and are therefore addressed as part of this literature review. As we continue to explore the best role for international aid organizations in an effective, big-picture, aid system, it is important that we also understand the micro realities of aid organizations. A better understanding of organization-level dynamics may help determine what these actors are, or are not, well suited to contribute.

This literature review looks specifically at the limited academic work that has been done to date on the implementation of context sensitivity in fragile states. Since the DAC principles were released in 2007, some authors have examined the degree to which the DAC principles, specifically the first DAC principle on context, have been (or not been) applied in specific countries such as Burundi, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and Haiti (Desrosiers & Muringa, 2012a; DiCaprio, 2013; Ibrahim & Beaudet, 2012). Other scholars have taken a prescriptive approach by developing context indicators that correlate to different types of conflict risks, and consequently suggest particular types of response from statebuilding agencies or the international community (Colletta & Muggah, 2009). While this approach

may provide important data for organizations to use as part of context-based decision-making, this tendency towards developing a checklist tool to aid decision-making could actually be detrimental to learning and adaptation if it directs attention away from the structures and processes that are needed to collect and use context-based information in a continuous and timely manner. It may also encourage decision makers to divorce themselves from the truly complex nature of their environment, and the hard decisions that accompany it.

Regardless of how little we know about *how* to be context-sensitive, a number of international agreements and principles on aid effectiveness from the past eight years have referenced context sensitivity in some way. The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness emphasizes the need to “adapt and apply aid to differing country situations” (OECD, 2005/2008, p.2). The DAC principles for good engagement in fragile states, puts a large emphasis on context with its first principle: “Take context as a starting point” (The International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding, 2012). The New Deal for Fragile States, promotes context sensitivity through country-specific fragility assessments, country plans, and context-specific compacts (agreements between donors and fragile state governments). While the emphasis on context in these high-level agreements and principles is helpful and necessary, it is only the starting point for implementing a context-based approach that is truly adaptive. Policy statements alone do little to help organizations understand *how* to operationalize this focus on context, or context-sensitivity, which is an important part of the puzzle.

Analytical tools like the fragility assessment that contributes to “one country, one plan” in the New Deal for Fragile States, and the Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA) tool are important first steps towards context sensitivity. While strong analysis is an important part of having the best information to start making choices in challenging environments, there are limitations of any tool in finding solutions to complex problems. While the periodical in-depth context analysis represented by the PCIA tool is an important component of establishing and maintaining context sensitivity, it is not enough. If we understand context as fluid and constantly changing, then it becomes important for organizations to be able to be more intimately connected to their context – to know how the context is changing and be able to adapt to it on an on-going basis. To do this, organizations require systems for collecting information about context, and processes for integrating this information into organizational decisions and actions, not only as a planning tool, but also as a *way of doing business*. Integrating context sensitivity into how aid is carried out requires an awareness of how all parts of the system support or detract from this aim –

the structures, processes, attitudes and individual actions – that help or hinder ongoing context-informed adaptation.

To date, this dynamic, systems-based view of context has not been widely adopted in the fragile state literature – which tends to remain either theoretical or analytical. However, practitioners have made some advancement towards better understanding context sensitivity, some of which are beginning to think of context as dynamic.

The Conflict Sensitivity Consortium – note *conflict*, not *context* – funded by DFID, is perhaps the most organized and extensive example of practitioners who are exploring how organizations can incorporate one element of context into their operations. This group of 37 think tanks and development organizations working on conflict sensitivity take a broad view of conflict sensitivity and include the design and implementation of conflict sensitive policies and programs, as well as organizational learning systems that enable conflict sensitivity as a part of on-going organizational practice. In this way, the Consortium’s approach to conflict sensitivity is similar to how this research approaches organizational learning and adaptation. However, there is a key difference. While the consortium focuses on conflict sensitivity “mainstreaming” – that is building conflict sensitivity thinking into existing organizational processes – I argue that learning and adaptation practices need to go further and broader than mainstreaming, to re-define how organizations are structured and how they interact with their context day-to-day, if they are to be effective in fragile states.

Frauke de Weijer reflected this concern over mainstreaming and the need for a more fundamental shift in mentality in a blog post in September 2012:

For a new approach to fragility to emerge, the policy making and operational systems in use in development cooperation need to undergo fundamental change. This goes beyond using the language of complexity theory in policy documents, which has become increasingly fashionable, but has not yet managed to change the underlying mental model. It means going beyond a mentality in which experts know the solutions. It means humility. And, most importantly, it means putting ‘learning systems’ at the center of development policy (March 2012, para. 11).

This research will start with the idea that organizations are more effective when they are responsive to their context – and consider how organizational management practices, learning mechanisms and organizational structures can help achieve necessary responsiveness and adaptability.

Knowledge Management and Learning in Aid Organizations

In 1996, the new president of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, made his first annual meeting address, which introduced the concept of the World Bank as “Knowledge Bank.” Since then, the field of international development has paid closer attention to how learning happens, and how knowledge gets moved around.

The work that has stemmed from this announcement has most commonly been focused on Knowledge Management, which has largely been defined and practiced as capturing and sharing information and lessons learned. While capturing and sharing information is an important part of MOCA, it is only *one* part of what MOCA suggests is needed for learning to have a positive impact on effectiveness. There are a number of important debates and concepts that shape our understanding of how aid organizations manage information and knowledge, and how they use those assets to get better and smarter at achieving results. The following section outlines some of them: three generations of knowledge management; tacit versus explicit knowledge; and single and double loop learning. This section then identifies barriers to learning in aid organizations that have already been identified by the literature.

Three Generations of Knowledge Management

Through the work of practitioners and development think tanks, the way that we think about knowledge management and learning in aid organizations has evolved over time to incorporate more of the concepts that are included in the MOCA framework. Le Borgne and Cummings reference a meta review of knowledge management literature in which Ferguson et. al identified three generations of knowledge management:

First generation: knowledge should support strategic decision-making (taking lessons from the past) and it is seen as a commodity that can be stored. The approaches following this focus on capturing knowledge, with a heavy focus on IT systems and on information management.

Second generation: knowledge supports value creation throughout the organisation (not just management). Knowledge is not seen as a commodity any more but rather as a value-creating resource that helps improve practice. Heavy emphasis is put on human relations and knowledge sharing turning tacit into explicit knowledge. Intra-organisational communities of practice and best practices are flourishing. Human Resources have a role to play.

Third generation: knowledge as such does not matter as much as its co-creation to jointly adapt it to the context (which is leading). Knowledge sharing goes outside of the organisation to embrace a wider set of actors, and create meaning together in a more participatory way. Key approaches and tools used in this generation are storytelling (to create meaning) and inter-organisational communities of practice (Le Borgne & Cummings, 2009, p. 42).

Third generation knowledge management is an important starting point for this research – it incorporates the importance of context sensitivity and sees knowledge as inherently based in context, while also emphasizing knowledge as something that exists within, and is used by, the individuals that make up the organization. The MOCA framework builds on this concept to identify organizational practices that enable this type of knowledge to be created and used through market orientation and organizational learning indicators. However, third generation knowledge management does not fully capture the structural learning and adaptation practices that are represented in the MOCA framework through adaptive capacity and complexity absorption. This evolution – from first generation knowledge management, through second to third generation – demonstrates the core debate in this field. To what extent is knowledge material – a commodity to be captured, transferred, and applied? And to what extent is knowledge intangible – something that exists only in the minds of people, that is continually shaped and reinvented through human interaction and meaning making. This debate is further reflected in the distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge.

Tacit versus Explicit Knowledge

An important distinction that is made in the knowledge management literature is the difference between tacit and explicit knowledge:

Tacit knowledge is unconscious and intuitive; it allows experts to make decisions without referring to rules or principles (e.g. knowing how to perform medical operations, knowing how to network at a conference);

Explicit knowledge is clearly articulated and accessible to anyone who reads, hears or looks at it (e.g. a training guide on using a software package or the conclusions of a policy briefing paper); (Ramalingam, 2005, p. 4).

The following quote helps to further develop the two ideas and differentiate between them.

“There is a reason why Western observers tend not to address the issue of organizational knowledge creation. They take for granted a view of the organization as a machine for “information processing.” This view is deeply ingrained in the traditions of Western management, from Frederick Taylor to Herbert Simon. And it is a view of knowledge as necessarily “explicit” – something formal and systematic. ... Japanese companies have a very different understanding of knowledge. They recognize that the knowledge expressed in words and numbers represents only the tip of the iceberg. They view knowledge as being primarily “tacit” – something not easily visible and expressible. Tacit knowledge is highly personal and hard to formalize, making it difficult to communicate or to share with others (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, p. 8, as quoted by Choo, 2003).

The journey of the knowledge management field has been to shift from a purely explicit understanding to knowledge, to accept the greater complexity of tacit knowledge.

An important series of research papers were published in 2004 that further explored the means by which aid organizations could better enable tacit knowledge. This group of authors³ developed a perspective on learning and change that focused on the individual and the process of “reflection and reflexivity, leading to the reframing of knowledge and understanding, and improved actions and outcomes.” They felt that:

The implications of this type of learning for an organization are thus less to do with knowledge management systems and processes, and more concerned with developing new tools for dialogue and holistic analysis, and attitudes and skills for working collaboratively (Pasteur, 2004, p. 6).

Single versus Double Loop Learning

Tacit versus explicit knowledge is a debate about *what* it is that we are moving around when we talk about knowledge management or learning. Other authors have focused on the *how* of aid organization learning and adaptation. The dominant “how” model is single and double loop learning, which understands learning as feedback loops that exist at different levels of abstraction.

Single loop learning refers to day-to-day improvements in operations as well as the ability to continuously adapt to a changing environment. Campbell quotes a UN official to describe how single loop learning applies to peacebuilding operations:

“This type of organizational learning is not based on learning discrete, concrete ‘rules of the game,’ because the game is constantly changing. When the UN learns on the ground, it acquires the ability to adapt to the changing contexts of civil wars – the organization engages with its environment and invents mechanisms to understand it” (Campbell, 2008, p.22).

Double loop learning, on the other hand, is about asking the bigger questions. Campbell quotes Argyris in explaining that double-loop learning “occurs when individuals within an organization openly and honestly examine the underlying assumptions and behaviours that may have caused gaps between the intended and actual outcome of the organization’s actions” (Campbell, 2008, p.22).

Single and double loop learning is helpful in providing a framework within which we can start to tease out the complex interactions between various levels of abstraction that contribute to organizational learning and adaptation. Like all models, this distinction is a simplification, and should be held lightly as we seek to understand learning dynamics within complex adaptive systems.

³ The Organizational Learning Partnership – a small group of researchers that explored learning and change in three development agencies: ActionAid, DFID and SIDA.

Barriers from the literature

The literature consistently reflects how challenging it is for aid organizations to learn, and past research has found significant barriers to implementing knowledge and learning strategies.

A number of reasons have been given why learning would be different, or more difficult, in the aid sector: aid agencies suffer no penalty for not learning; aid work takes place in messy, volatile and complex environments and is therefore an intrinsically risky enterprise; aid work is about influencing power relationships which is more complex than selling products and services; and the role of aid projects, particularly those of NGOs, is to be experimental or innovative. None of these arguments however stands up as a convincing excuse for not learning, to the contrary, they seem to emphasize learning as a necessity and a priority (Van Brabant, 1997, p. 2).

In recognition of the importance of these barriers, this study will specifically look into the enablers and barriers that organization in Haiti face to learning and adaption. In preparation for this research, below is a list of examples of some of the barriers that the existing literature has identified:

- Shortcomings in formal evaluations (Berg, 2000)
- Slow horizontal and vertical information flows (Berg, 2000; Ostrom et. al, 2002; Krohwinkel-Karlsson, 2007)
- Blueprinting (applying models used in the past in context where they are inappropriate) (Berg, 2000)
- Not enough focus or value on project supervision (too much focus on planning and appraisal) (Berg, 2000)
- Too much weight on analytic shortcomings and not enough focus on matters of process (neglect of ownership, limits of local capacity) (Berg, 2000)
- Internal power systems (political environment, incentive structure, division of labour) not conducive to learning from mistakes (Berg, 2000; Ostrom et. al, 2002; Krohwinkel-Karlsson, 2007)
- Valuing new project generation and volume of spending over results (Berg, 2000)
- Cost of IT infrastructure for sharing information (Ramalingam, 2005)
- Challenges of agreeing on success criteria when development can be ambiguous, members have diverging interests, and power is unequally distributed (Ostrom et. al, 2002; Krohwinkel-Karlsson, 2007)
- Rapid rotation of staff, lacking mechanisms for post-field knowledge transfer, temporary staff (Ostrom et. al, 2002; Krohwinkel-Karlsson, 2007; Berg, 2000)
- Lack of time and space for reflection and implementing new ideas (Ramalingam, 2005; Krohwinkel-Karlsson, 2007; Pasteur, 2004).

In her 2004 literature review, Pasteur identifies what may be the most relevant barrier for this thesis. She lays out the work of a number of authors who argue that the dominance of positivism in development practice leads to organizations that are structured and socialized in ways that make learning and reflection difficult (2004). She identifies a number of authors who have called for a paradigm shift that will be needed for aid organizations to become learning organizations – to move

from centralized control, mechanistic thinking and high levels of specialization, towards organizations that are more open and experimentalist, holistic and pragmatic (Pasteur, 2004, p. 18).

This thesis draws from third generation knowledge management thinking while incorporating elements of this “new paradigm” that Pasteur and others have referred to. Current initiatives that advance “new paradigm” learning models in development, tend to be highly applied and process-specific. For example, Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation is an applied model for evolving solutions in context. Social impact bonds and cash-on-delivery aid represents efforts to change the incentives in the system to drive intrinsic learning behaviours. These initiatives provide important insights into ways that organizations can improve learning practices, but their application to date is limited.

Theories of Organizational Change and Adaptation

There are three critical debates in the organizational change literature that inform this research’s assumptions on adaptation – Do organizations change? How do organizations change? And what mechanisms cause organizations to change? The first debate focused on whether organizations *can* change, or whether the organizational landscape evolves by natural selection (firm failure). This was debated in the 1970s and 1980s, with the majority of the field siding with the organizations-are-capable-of-change camp, most famously defended by Child in 1972 and Child and Kieser in 1981 (Demers, 2007, p2). The oil crisis of the 1970s led organizational scholars to think critically about *how* organizations change – whether by slow increments (evolutionary gradualism) or large transformations, often brought on by external shocks (Allaire & Firsirotu, 1985; Miller & Friesen, 1984; Tushman & Romanelli, 1985, cited by Demers, 2007). At the end of the 1980s, change as “transformation” was popular, but simultaneously a view of change as a process began to be explored in the literature starting with Pettigrew in 1985. As scholars recognized that the economic turbulence was becoming increasingly normal, change as a process became the dominant understanding. This group argued that it was important to study “the dynamics of changing, rather than the specific change episodes” themselves (Demers, 2007, p115). This is consistent with various organizational change theories including evolution, learning, emergence, structuration, translation, and improvisation. Like these authors from the 1970s, this research will focus on the “dynamic of changing,” and will further evolve that concept to understand not only the dynamics of changing periodically, but also the dynamics of continual organizational adaptation.

Within this perspective of change, the debate shifted to *which* dynamics inside organizations are the mechanisms of change – natural evolution or social dynamics. The natural evolution scholars adhere to a realist epistemology and are based in natural sciences and mathematics. They include behavioral learning, the evolutionary and complexity perspectives, amongst others, and focus on structure and environmental factors as important determinants of organizational change. This group tends to understand change as something that happens because it is necessary for the organization to remain competitive or respond to the needs of its beneficiaries. The social dynamics scholars tend to come from the social sciences and humanities, and take radical and postmodern approaches to organizational change. They understand interpretation, human agency and its social context as the central factor in organizational change (Demers, 2007, p116-120).

In this research I draw on factors that have their roots in both the natural evolution and social dynamics branches of the literature in order to consider both the structural and environmental elements, as well as the social and human elements of organizational learning and adaptation. This blending is consistent with much of the organizational literature from the late 1990s and early 2000s, which draws on these two perspectives and recognizes that both influences should be considered in a comprehensive understanding of organizational change (Jones, 1999; Pettigrew 1985; Weaver and Gioia, 1994 cited in Demers, 2007, p117).

Complexity theory is a sub-field of the natural evolution perspective of organizational change. It is important in organizational change theory because it represents a shift in thinking from organizations as equilibrium-seeking, linear entities, to organizations as non-linear, dynamic systems that are unpredictable and can function out of equilibrium. I chose to focus on complexity theory because it most closely reflects the nature of organizations as complex adaptive systems, and specifically the reality faced by organizations in fragile states.

I am not the first to apply complexity theories to the development context. In fact there is a long list of authors who have explored this intersection.⁴ The major debate in this field currently seems to be *how* best to apply complexity theory to international development and aid. Where is it most helpful? In what

⁴ The Overseas Development Institute has a list of working papers on complexity and development; Ben Ramalingam's book *Aid on the Edge of Chaos*; Faulke de Weijer's work on how complexity theories can be applied to fragile states; Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett, Michael Woolcock have used complexity theory to look at how problem-driven iterative adaptation can help escape capability traps in fragile states; and Owen Barder amongst others, has built from these theories into the realms of social impact bonds and other practical applications.

ways can understanding development as an emergent property help us save lives or make the world better? While everyone seems to agree that it is interesting, not everyone seems convinced that this theoretical construct can actually contribute to making aid more effective (Barder, 2014). We are only now at the beginning of exploring any practical benefit that aid might gain from this theoretical perspective. This thesis suggests that applying a complexity lens to organizational learning and adaptation will bring forth new insights that could ultimately make aid more effective.

There are two main theories of change within complexity theory – chaos theory and complex adaptive systems (CAS) theory. Chaos theory suggests that, left alone, organizations as groups of interacting individuals, would exhibit chaotic and highly varied behavior – they would have a high dimensionality (lots of freedom to have highly varied behavior). By applying various structures, which could include mechanisms such as a common vision, performance management, operating procedures, or organizational culture, this dimensionality is reduced (there is less variation of behavior due to lower degrees of freedom). However the behavior of the system remains chaotic within the adjusted dimensionality. This means that small changes, for example the decision of one individual, can still be amplified to produce large effects, for example a large spike in revenue, or the loss of a major partner. In complexity language, this disproportionality between the size of the action and the size of the impact is described as non-linearity, making organizations non-linear entities (Demers, 2007, p155-157).

Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) theory takes a slightly different, although not incompatible view. Instead of understanding organizational behavior as chaotic within a given bound, CAS emphasizes the self-organizing nature of a large group of interacting individuals and focuses on how small actions can abruptly produce unforeseen macro-level changes – or a new emergent order. This is true at any level of analysis – actions by individual group members create the emergent reality of a team, actions by teams create the emergent order of an organization, and actions by individual organizations create the emergent order of a network or a broader system. An important element of this theory is that CAS are open to their environment and constantly in a two-way relationship with it – influencing the systems of which they are a part, while being influenced by them. The trick for organizations is to be able to continuously interact in this dynamic environment while achieving set objectives. This has been called operating “at the edge of chaos” or self-organized criticality. It is at this “edge,” theorists suggest, that organizations are more competitive because “occasionally one small change can trigger a large change in outcome, but most small changes produce only small effects,” which allows organizations to learn and adapt readily while maintaining the degree of order required to build off lessons and existing success

(Demers, 2007, p160). The main authors to develop CAS theory in the organizational literature are Anderson (1999), Brown and Eisenhardt (1997) and Stacey (1995).

By applying both chaos theory and complexity adaptive systems theory, this theoretical framework allows us to consider the effect of system dynamics, as well as how these dynamics shape, and are shaped by individual agency.

Assumptions about organizations from the literature

Based on this literature, this research will assume that:

- Organizations are capable of intentional change, but that change is difficult.
- Within complex environments, organizations are more effective when they understand change and adaptation as a continuous and ongoing process, as opposed to a periodic reaction to shifts in the external environment.
- Initial conditions have an important impact on outcomes. In other words, the systems within which organizations exist, and the structures that characterize organizations themselves, matter to effectiveness.
- Organizations are complex adaptive systems and therefore actions by individuals or groups can have disproportionately large impacts on outcomes.
- As systems, organizations are open to their environments – they simultaneously construct and are constructed by their environment.

CHAPTER 3: Research Questions and Framework

Research Question

This study explores the following research questions:

1. *To what extent do organizations in fragile states employ MOCA learning and adaptation practices?*
2. *What are the enablers and barriers that influence the extent to which organizations employ MOCA practices?*

Fundamentally, this research tries to understand the extent to which organizations in Haiti are set up to act in a way that is consistent with a complexity-based view of development, and aid delivery. To do this, I assume that organizations need to be good at learning and adapting. In order to measure the extent to which organizations learn and adapt, I first needed to find a framework of practices, behaviours, and

values that are consistent with a complexity-informed view of organizational learning and adaptation, against which I could measure actual organizational behaviour. After searching the literature, I found that no such framework exists. Instead, I found a number of literatures and theories that articulate different parts of a bigger picture; I brought together these parts to create the MOCA framework.

Building the MOCA Framework – Factors that impact effectiveness

In parallel to the theoretical literature that addresses how organizations change and adapt there are a series of practical bodies of work that reflect this theoretical background, and my own assumptions about organizations. In scanning the academic literature, I looked for bodies of work that articulated organizational practices, and that connect these practices to effectiveness. Market orientation and organizational learning were the two clear choices. They are well developed bodies of work, with clear indicators, clear theoretical and empirical connections to effectiveness, and they have been successfully applied in the development context.

However, market orientation and organizational learning did not fully account for my understanding of organizations as complex adaptive systems. They lacked the theoretical underpinning that would allow me to explore, and better understand, how organizational structure and strategy relate to effectiveness. For this, I sought out complexity-informed theories of organizational learning and adaptation, and found complexity absorption and adaptive capacity. These were the only two bodies of work I could find that applied a complexity lens to organizations, and connected learning and adaptation practices with effectiveness or performance.

As a result, the MOCA framework includes elements of market orientation (M), organizational learning (O), complexity absorption (C), and adaptive capacity (A). Specific practices, behaviours, and values have been selected from each of these literatures for inclusion in the MOCA framework, in an effort to capture the unique contributions of each, while building a more comprehensive and complexity-informed framework of organizational learning and adaptation. The following sections outline the basic concepts within each of the four literatures, and identify the practices, behaviours and values from each that have been included in the MOCA framework.

Market Orientation (M): Knowledge Producing Behaviours

The basic premise of market orientation is that organizations are more effective when they are focused on their stakeholders – or in the case of most businesses – their customers. Market orientation is

theorized to have a positive impact on effectiveness by causing the organization to more accurately reflect the needs of its customers or stakeholders, thereby creating superior value and making it more competitive (Slater & Narver, 1994, p.22). The idea of market orientation has gained traction over the years, and continues to be relevant today because it has consistently been shown to have a positive impact on performance (Boehm, Vigoda-Gadot, & Segev, 2011; Deshpandé & Farley, 2004; Gainer & Padanyi, 2005; Modi, 2012a; Slater & Narver, 2000). In the late 1990s the concept was picked up by scholars in the not-for-profit sector and was studied with similar results.⁵

The contemporary concept of market orientation comes out of the business and marketing literature of the 1990s, and two teams of authors are most often cited: Jaworski and Kohli, and Slater and Narver. Jaworski and Kohli (1990) focused on intelligence generation, intelligence dissemination, and responsiveness, assuming that human actors inside organizations are rational and predictable (Lafferty & Hult, 2001). Slater and Narver (1990) focused on customer orientation, competitor orientation and inter-functional coordination, arguing the importance of the beliefs and behaviours of individuals and organizations as a whole. In adapting existing market orientation scales for my purposes in this research, I drew most heavily from Modi's version of the Slater-Narver scale (2012), and his concepts of Beneficiary Orientation and Interfunctional Coordination, with less emphasis on Peer Orientation. I excluded Modi's concept of Funder Orientation completely. While it is obvious that organizations are more effective when they can consistently secure funding, this was not the focus of my research. The concept of market orientation is useful for my research because it makes the case that the ability to continuously adapt based on feedback from the market (or the operational context) is positively linked to organizational performance. Additionally, it employs a well-developed set of measurement tools that have already been adapted to multiple fields. While market orientation was originally developed in a corporate context, it has been successfully adapted and tested for use with both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations in development contexts and there appear to be no incompatibilities when using it to provide insight to learning and adaptation practices for organizations in fragile states.

⁵ Pratik Modi provides an extensive list of studies that showed that market orientation improves performance of different types of not-for-profit organizations such as: Universities, Public service organizations, Charities, Cultural organizations, and Hospitals (Modi, 2012b, p.447).

Organizational Learning (O): Knowledge Questioning Values

Like market orientation, organizational learning has been found to have a positive impact on organizational performance in both the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors (Baker & Sinkula, 1999a; Campbell, 2008; Mahmoud & Yusif, 2012; McElroy, 2000; Md.Som et al., 2011). The main argument behind this concept is that organizations are more effective when they have processes and cultures that support the continuous assessment and active questioning of the organization's operations and its underlying assumptions about how to achieve results. Organizational learning is very closely related to market orientation, although tends to focus more on the values and behaviours of individuals (Baker & Sinkula, 1999a). Sinkula makes the distinction that "market orientation is reflected by knowledge-producing behaviors. Learning orientation is reflected by a set of knowledge-questioning values" (Baker & Sinkula, 1999a, p.413).⁶ Organizational learning is useful in this research because it provides insight into the culture and values of an organization – the people dimension. Additionally, it provides a set of organizational practices and indicators of knowledge development and dissemination that have been demonstrated to contribute positively to organizational performance, and which may enrich the indicators associated with market orientation.

In developing the MOCA scale, I drew most heavily on:

- Sinkula et al's (1997) concepts of Information Collection; Information Dissemination; Commitment to Learning; Shared Vision; Open Mindedness; and Marketing Program Dynamism.
- Jerez-Gomez et al's (2005) concepts of Knowledge transfer and Integration; Openness and Experimentation; Systems Perspective; and Managerial Commitment.
- Mahmoud and Yusif's (2012) concepts of Knowledge Sharing, and Shared Vision

Gaps

The literature on market orientation and organizational learning define practices that have a positive impact on organizational effectiveness, however, they are silent on two important areas of analysis that are critical for aid organizations to be complexity-enabled actors that can contribute to results in complex environments:

- 1. Organizational structure.** Market orientation and organizational learning are not well suited to question or examine organizational structure. Complexity absorption provides specific theories

⁶ There is a significant group of authors looking at the intersection of market orientation, organizational learning and performance, all of whom have found that the two factors positively impact each other, and organizational performance (Baker & Sinkula, 1999b; Mahmoud & Yusif, 2012; Slater & Narver, 1995; William E Baker & James M Sinkula, 1999).

about the way that organizational structure impacts effectiveness and is therefore a useful contribution to the framework.

Adaptive capacity introduces three concepts relating to organizational structure into the analysis: multiplexity, redundancy and loose coupling. Each of these structural characteristics enables organizations to be continually adaptive to changing contexts and be resilient to any large unexpected changes. Adaptive capacity is therefore also important to include in this research.

2. **Organizational Strategy.** Market orientation and organizational learning do not address the complexity associated with organizations' goals, objectives and strategies. Organizational learning, specifically double-loop learning, provides one tool for analyzing organizational strategy, however, organizations must also consider how they can choose their goals and strategies to best enable them to thrive in complex environments. Complexity absorption provides a framework for this analysis, and will therefore be an important part of understanding learning and adaptation in fragile states.

Complexity Absorption (C): Consistency with Qualities of Complex Adaptive Systems

"When organizations arrange themselves in ways that are consistent with the qualities of complex adaptive systems, successful co-evolution and self-organizing is more likely" (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000, p. 578).

Complexity absorption is less well developed in the literature than market-orientation and organizational learning. This literature is grounded in complexity theory and looks at the way that organizations respond to complex environments, specifically how organizations structure themselves and their internal processes, in relation to their environments. Scholars in this field⁷ identify two possible organizational responses to complex environments — a *complexity absorption* response or a *complexity reduction* response. A *complexity reduction* response is characterized by organizations that try to simplify their internal environment to cope with a complex external environment (e.g. focusing on one key objective instead of many, increasing the number of rules and operating procedures, concentrating decision-making abilities). It is generally seen as risk adverse behavior that uses rules and centralization as ways to reduce ambiguity.

On the other hand, *complexity absorption* is represented by organizations that try to organize themselves dynamically in the face of complex external environments (Lengnick-Hall & Beck, 2005). This

⁷ These ideas had their origins in Ashby's "requisite variety" in 1954 (1958), but were really developed through Max Boisot's work in the 1990s (1999) and built on by John Child (1999), Ashmos and Duchon (2000) and others.

might include increasing the number of different strategies that an organization employs to achieve a stated objective, increasing the number of cross-functional working groups, using matrix management models or decentralizing decision-making power. This type of behavior might be accompanied by language like “let’s make decisions as close to the action as possible” or “in order to survive we need to encourage experimentation.” While this may appear counter-intuitive to some, this type of behavior is being increasingly represented in the leadership literature as important instincts for leaders to internalize to be successful in complex environments (Olmedo, 2012).

Complexity absorption successfully links complexity-informed structural management approaches to organizational effectiveness, making it an important contributor to the MOCA framework. At least two studies of health care organizations found that those organizations that choose a complexity *absorption* approach outperform organizations with complexity *reduction* responses in complex environments (Ashmos, Duchon, & Jr, 2000; Walters & Bhuian, 2004).

In developing the MOCA scale, I drew from Ashmos’ concepts of Interaction Complexity, Goal Complexity, Strategic Complexity, and Structural Complexity (Formalization). Additionally, I used indicators from Wilden et al’s concept of Structural Complexity.

- **Interactional complexity** refers to the degree to which different groups of people are involved in strategic decision-making processes. Complexity absorption argues that when a greater diversity of people are involved in decision-making, the decisions tend to better reflect an organization’s complex environment, although are often more difficult to make.
- **Goal complexity** refers to the degree to which an organization focuses on multiple and sometimes diverse goals. The intention of Goal Complexity is to provide the organization with options should the environment change drastically – it reduces the tendency for organizations to pursue one high risk/high reward goal. In the not-for-profit sector this might be useful in cases where a major funder shifts their funding priorities, for example.
- **Strategic complexity** refers to the degree to which an organization pursues a diversity of strategies to achieve any given goal. In the for-profit world this might include having multiple development teams working in parallel to develop one product. In the pursuit of social good, multiple strategies could help “hedge the organization’s bets” in terms of which strategy ends up having the greatest impact in any given environment, and multiple strategies could also serve to re-enforce each other creating a better end result.
- **Structural complexity** refers to the autonomy of individuals and groups within an organization to make decisions and re-configure themselves as needed to meet the demands of their work. Structurally complex organizations are relatively decentralized and less formalized.

The literature on complexity absorption, although limited, is useful because it brings the concepts of complexity theory together with organizational theory in a way that allows us to define a series of organizational practices. By combining these practices with the practices that have been defined in the

market orientation and organizational learning literature, I was able to develop a more inclusive framework of learning and adaptation indicators.

Adaptive Capacity (A): Propensity for Continuous, Intentional Adaptation

The term ‘adaptive capacity’ has been used to represent multiple variations on a core concept in fields as diverse as climate change, population biology, and disaster preparedness. In this research, I use adaptive capacity to explore how organizations are able to continually adapt in order to survive and achieve their objectives in a changing environment. I use Staber and Sydow’s definition of adaptive capacity, which introduces a series of structural and complexity based organizational practices.

Staber and Sydow focus on three structural dimensions to adaptive capacity: multiplexity, redundancy, and loose coupling. Multiplexity refers to “the number and diversity of relations between actors in organizations or inter-organizational networks” (Staber & Sydow, 2002, p.414). This perspective assumes that having a greater variety and number of connections improves an organization’s ability to transfer information in diverse ways, which allows it to be versatile in complex environments. Essentially suggesting that organizations that engage often and fluidly across departments, functional groups and levels are better able to know what is going on and make decisions to adapt appropriately. Redundancy can be generally understood as extra, free, or duplicated resources. Traditionally, redundancy has been seen as a negative – a waste of organizational resources – and has therefore been minimized in efficiency-seeking organizational models. However, multiple scholars theorize that redundancy of resources, information and tasks can all be critical for an organization to experiment and innovate, as well as to make the organization resilient in the face of volatile and unpredictable changes. If done properly, redundancy should improve the overall efficiency by which an organization is able to achieve its stated objectives in rapidly changing environments. Finally, loose coupling means “the various units and activities [within an organization] are relatively independent and can adjust to changing demands in different ways and at varying rates” (Staber & Sydow, 2002, p.417). While this has been shown to lead to inefficiency in relatively stable environmental conditions, it tends to improve effectiveness in conditions of extreme uncertainty, such as those often found in fragile states (Staber & Sydow, 2002, p.418). The diversity that is allowed to flourish in organizations with loosely coupled, or weak ties, tends to make them highly adaptive.

In developing the MOCA scale, I drew specifically on indicators from Staber’s concepts of redundancy and loose coupling. Staber’s concept of multiplexity is already well covered by other indicators from the market orientation and organizational learning literatures.

Adaptive capacity is useful in this research because it provides a very different concept of how structures and practices can impact an organization's ability to adapt, specifically in cases where the environment is highly volatile. Additionally it re-enforces the notion that learning and adaptation is not only something that organizations "do" but must be built into the way that organizations conduct themselves on a day-to-day basis. Finally, it challenges the dogmatic notion that coordination and standardization are always good and always leads to greater effectiveness in organizations. Given that fragile states can be extreme environments, it is important to deconstruct the assumptions that we carry over from organizational practices based in more stable contexts. These four factors – market orientation, organizational learning, complexity absorption and adaptive capacity – form MOCA, the basis of this research. The practices that make up this framework have been demonstrated individually to have a positive impact on organizational effectiveness within the existing literature. I bring together practices, behaviours and values from each of them in this research to be able to look more holistically at how organizations learn and adapt in fragile states, to measure existing management practices against this framework, and to understand the enablers and barriers to applying MOCA learning and adaptation practices in fragile states.

CHAPTER 4: Methodology

This research was conducted as an exploratory study on how aid organizations learn and adapt in fragile states. I brought together different parts of the literature to create the MOCA framework – and then used both qualitative and quantitative tools to measure organizations against the framework and identify barriers and enablers that organizations face to employing these practices.

Study Location and Context

I conducted an exploratory study to determine the prevalence of learning and adaptation practices in aid organizations in Haiti, based on the assumption that findings *may* be transferable to organizations working in other fragile contexts.

Haiti was chosen as the location for this study because it exhibits all of the classic characteristics of a fragile state – it is weak economically, socially, and politically despite receiving significant development assistance over the past six decades. Haiti scores high on most fragility ratings and has been the focus of many humanitarian and development interventions (Carment & Samy, 2011). Haiti was also chosen for

practical reasons: there are a large number and range of organizations operating on the ground in Haiti, including large international donor organizations, as well as the full spectrum of NGOs, from large international aid organizations to medium and small scale NGOs, both foreign and domestic. This breadth of organizational activity made Haiti an appropriate candidate for this project because it had a sufficient number of organizations that fit the selection criteria for this project: small and medium sized aid organizations.

This study assumes that the dynamics that shape the learning and adaptation practices, enablers and barriers faced by international aid organizations in Haiti, will be similar to the dynamics faced by international aid organizations operating in other fragile contexts. In other words, that the system conditions in Haiti, are close enough to the system conditions in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or Somalia, as it is relevant to aid organization management practices – and more specifically to how aid organizations learn and adapt. This assumption suggests that the findings of this research should be generalizable to international aid organizations in other fragile state contexts.

Mixed method approach: Mechanics of the Methodology

A mixed method approach was taken in order to be able to quantify organizational practices across a broad sample of organizations, while also being able to use interviews to understand the realities of a few organizations in greater depth. SADEV (Swedish Development Agency) conducted a review of knowledge and learning literature and methods in 2007, and confirmed that a mixed methods approach is preferred in this field (Krohinkel-Karlsson, 2007, p.9).

I used a survey that asked respondents to answer likert-scale questions about their organization's learning and adaptation practices in relation to the MOCA scale (a full list of survey questions are available in Appendix A). I coupled this with semi-structured interviews that explored the enablers and barriers to learning, adaptation and effectiveness more generally (interview questions available in Appendix B). The mixed methods approach was especially important because the MOCA framework is new. Most of these indicators have not been used with organizations working in fragile states and it would have been very difficult to interpret survey data without any qualitative context. Semi-structured interviews provided the context I needed for this interpretation.

Survey

MOCA Scale Development

I developed the MOCA scale based on existing survey questions from the market orientation, organizational learning, and complexity absorption literature, as well as new questions based on the adaptive capacity literature. Once the MOCA scale was developed, I tested the scale by piloting the survey with three individuals in Ottawa who are familiar with operational realities of not-for-profit organization, to ensure clarity and relevance of the questions. The validity and reliability of the MOCA scale was not tested as part of this research. Instead, I relied on the validity of the scales from which I drew the MOCA practices, as well as qualitative cross-referencing.

Survey Data Collection

I surveyed individuals employed by 12 small and medium sized aid organizations in Haiti, which included humanitarian assistance organizations, capacity building organizations, and “other”⁸ organizations.⁹

Recruitment was done by e-mail initially. I used online directories and Internet searches to find e-mail addresses for country directors and other senior leaders within aid organizations. This approach yielded very few responses. As a secondary approach, I relied on contacts that I met in Haiti, snowball sampling, and in-person meetings with staff at organizations’ headquarters, and phone inquiries to eventually obtain sufficient survey data. This necessary adjustment to the research design may have introduced an element of selection bias. This bias does not appear to be significant, however if it did have an impact, it would result in participating organizations having better learning and adaptation practices than the average.

Once I was connected with a key contact within an organization (generally a senior leader), this contact was asked to distribute an e-mail letter to staff that contained links to the online survey and an information letter that provided the details of the study, including the voluntary and confidential nature of participation. Employees were able to connect to the online survey directly and their supervisors and colleagues were not made aware of their participation, or lack thereof.

⁸ “Other” organizations consist of one financial services organization, an advocacy and human rights focused organizations, and a scholarship and education-focused organization.

⁹ I applied these categories based on the major activities conducted by each organization, and the categories do not necessarily capture all of the nuances of how each organization operates. For example, some primarily humanitarian assistance organizations provide capacity building support, and some primarily capacity building organizations lead humanitarian assistance-type projects.

I elected to exclude large organizations, such as major country donor agencies, the UN, and the Haitian government, from this study because their learning and adaptation systems are likely more complicated and would require significantly more time to fully assess. Additionally, it would have been difficult to gain access to the number of individuals required to have a comprehensive perspective of such large organizations. Originally this research was open to including for-profit organizations with stated social objectives (social enterprises), however no for-profit organizations were available to participate in the study. The participating organizations were all not-for-profits, and more specifically, aid organizations of different types, making this research more narrowly focused on international aid organizations working in Haiti.

Fifty-seven respondents from 12 organizations completed the online survey.¹⁰ The majority of respondents were managers of staff or functions (23) or senior leaders (15). An additional 9 survey respondents were front-line staff, and 10 respondents self-selected as “other.” The large majority of survey respondents had been with their organizations for between 1 and 3 years (38), with only 13 having been with their employers more than 3 years, and 6 having been there for less than 1 year.

Table 1: Respondents by Position

Number of Respondents	Position
15	Senior leader / executive
23	Manager (of staff or function)
9	Front-line staff
10	Other
57	TOTAL

¹⁰ The survey was collected through an online survey platform. Although all organizations were offered the option to have employees complete the survey on paper, in either French or English, none took advantage of the paper option, preferring to have employees complete the survey online. A qualified professional translator translated the survey from English to French.

Table 2: Respondents by Time with Organization

Number of Respondents	Time with Organizations
3	More than 10 years
3	7-10 years
7	4-6 years
38	1-3 years
6	Under 1 year
57	TOTAL

Surveys were collected from a minimum of three respondents in each organization to ensure multiple perspectives were included in the organization's overall score. This approach made it possible to include perspectives from different levels and roles within the organization, and reduced the impact that the views of a single individual might have on the results. In cases where respondents did not indicate their organization, or where there were fewer than three respondents from one organization, the data was not included in the study. Incomplete surveys were included, provided respondents answered a minimum of one third of survey questions. The number of respondents by organization can be found in the following table. This sample size is sufficient to provide a baseline understanding of practices used by aid organizations in Haiti.

Table 3: Number of Surveys (complete and incomplete) by Organization

Organization Code	Number of Responses	Survey Status	
		Complete	Incomplete
C	5	5	0
E	3	2	1
H1	3	3	0
H2	8	5	3
H3	3	3	0
H4	4	4	0
M	6	5	1
O	3	3	0
P	3	3	0
S	7	5	2
T1	8	7	1
T2	4	4	0
TOTAL	57¹¹	49	8

¹¹ 14 other survey responses were not included in the data either because the respondent answered fewer than 1/3 of the questions, because they did not indicate which organization they were from, or because I was not able to collect the minimum of three valid survey responses from their organization.

Analysis of Survey data

Once the surveys were collected, I analyzed the data to answer the research questions. First, I calculated average scores by question and by organization (i.e. for each survey question, I found the average score for each of the 12 organizations). Using these organizational average scores, I determined whether or not each organization “employed” each practice. Details of how “employed” was defined for each question is included in the footnotes of Appendix A.

This analysis allowed me to quantify how many MOCA practices each of the 12 organizations “employed.” It also allowed me to see trends by MOCA practice – for each MOCA practice I was able to determine how many of the 12 organizations were behaving in that way. I chose not to group indicators together to form secondary level models.¹² This was partially due to the fact that I did not test the validity or reliability of the MOCA scale, and therefore could not statistically verify more complicated model development.

A second step in the analysis was to identify trends by organization type. I assessed the major activities conducted by each organization in the study and assigned them to a category – humanitarian assistance, capacity building, or other. I then identified trends and used the interview data to theorize explanations.

The original research design was to collect survey data first, and use the results to help shape the interview questions. However, in practice I was unable to collect a significant sample of survey responses before arriving in Haiti, and therefore I collected qualitative and quantitative data in parallel. This necessary modification to the methodology may have changed the *content* of the data collected, because the interview questions remained more general, rather than being made more specific in response to the survey data.

¹² I had originally anticipated analyzing MOCA practices by grouping them into categories, however I opted to consider each MOCA practice individually. There was significant variation in scores across MOCA practices that would have been included in a category making it difficult to rationalize grouping indicators together. Additionally, a complexity-based theoretical framework argues against an aggregated analysis of these indicators, and rather suggests that each could have disproportionate impact on the system as a whole, and therefore should be considered separately.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Development of Interview Questions

The semi-structured interview questions were developed to purposefully be broad enough that interviewees could speak to the major enablers and barriers that they and their organizations face to learning and adaptation, without necessarily being confined to the practices outlined in the MOCA framework. While the MOCA scale drew on existing knowledge in the literature about learning and adaptation practices that contribute to effectiveness, I was curious to understand the factors that aid practitioners perceived to really make a difference in their organizations.

Twenty-two interviews were conducted as part of this research – 17 of which were done with employees of three of the organizations included in the survey; the remaining 5 were conducted with other key informants who brought additional perspectives to the research. Of the 22 interviews, 17 were conducted in Haiti, and 5 were conducted in Ottawa at the headquarters of organizations included in the study.

Table 4: Interview Codes and Numbers of Interviewees by Organization

	Interview Code	# of interviewees
Capacity Building Organization 1	CB1	3
Capacity Building Organization 2	CB2	5
Humanitarian Assistance Organization 1	HA1	9
Funder	Funder	1
Background Interview 1 (Researcher and subject matter expert)	BG1	1
Background Interview 2 (Ex-employee of a capacity building organization)	BG2	1
Background Interview 3 (Researcher and evaluation consultant)	BG3	1
Background Interview 4 (Employee of a humanitarian assistance organization)	HA2	1
TOTAL		22

In addition to the survey and interviews, evaluation reports and templates were collected from individuals employed by two of the three organizations interviewed. They were reviewed as part of the research as a third reference point informing my conclusions, although this document review was not comprehensive enough to contribute meaningfully to my findings.

Interview Data Collection

Originally I had intended to conduct interviews after the survey data was collected and to interview at least one organization that had adopted *very few* MOCA practices, at least one organization that had adopted *some* MOCA practices, and at least one organization that had adopted *many* MOCA practices. However, due to the fact that surveys and interviews were done in parallel, I was not able to be intentional about this selection. The organizations with which the interviews were conducted ended up being reasonably well spread out across the spectrum of organizations that responded to the survey – 5th, 7th and 12th overall by total MOCA score. The fact that this distribution is weighted towards the bottom half of survey responding organizations, means that the interview findings may be somewhat skewed towards the realities of organizations that scored lower on the MOCA scale.¹³

I interviewed more individuals within the humanitarian assistance organization, because it was significantly bigger than the two capacity building organizations. Where possible I interviewed the manager responsible for learning and adaptation practices, although this was only possible for two out of the three organizations.

Interview Data Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Interviews that were done in French were translated during the transcription process. The transcribed interviews were tagged and sorted into themes to identify key trends. The interview data was then used to reinforce, challenge and interpret survey data to the extent possible. In many instances, the surveys suggested where to look (i.e. the data suggested practices where there may be barriers and enablers present), but the interview data was needed to be able to explain more fully what those barriers might be, and if or how they might be overcome. Using the quantitative and qualitative data in combination has proven essential to being able to more fully understand organizational dynamics.

¹³ The importance of organization type was determined after the data was collected, and therefore I was not intentional about ensuring a diversity of organization types in the interviews. I ended up with one humanitarian assistance organization, two capacity building organizations, and no “other” organizations included in the interviews. This was unfortunate, as the “other” category proved to be some of the higher performing organization in terms of total MOCA score. Without any interview data it is difficult to hypothesize as to why this might be the case.

Scope and Limitations

The substantial potential for scope-creep, and the challenges of project definition are well known in the organizational learning literature. It is hard to imagine organizational processes or individual behaviours that are not in some way related to the ability of the organization to learn and adapt. As an exploratory study I have allowed the findings and analysis to extend from the project level, to the organization corporate level, and out to the sector level. As a snapshot, this study does not explore the corporate knowledge management strategies of these organizations in detail. Instead, this study reflects what I heard about project-level, organization-level and sector-level dynamics from the perspective of front-line staff, field managers, and corporate learning advisors. This study does not include a substantial document review, observational time, or consideration of past or projected learning and adaptation performance – rather it provides a point-in-time picture of organizational practices, as described and rated by the employees of 12 organizations.

This research does not consider the learning and adaptation needs or perspectives of southern partner organizations, many of which are the beneficiaries of the organizations included in this study. Hovland highlighted this gap as a major inadequacy of the existing literature, and this thesis does not help fill this gap, but does further support the importance of more research in this area (Hovland, 2003, p15).

Relationship between MOCA practices and organizational effectiveness

This research does not make any definitive claims regarding the impact of MOCA practices on organizational effectiveness. Instead, it relies on the strong connection that has already been made in the literature between MOCA practices and organizational effectiveness. The research is also predicated on a broader recognition that context sensitivity and adaptability are key to achieving results to complex social problems.

Validating the MOCA scale

This research does not verify the reliability or validity of the MOCA scale in depth. The rigor required to verify the reliability and validity of a new measurement scale is beyond the scope of this masters thesis. However, the MOCA scale is largely based on three surveys that have been previously tested and validated in the literature, which lends to its reliability. Additionally, the mixed method approach allows the survey data to be checked by qualitative data, furthering the reliability of the study's conclusions.

Limitations of the Survey

The MOCA survey provides a useful high-level snap shot of organizational practices, however some indicators are difficult to interpret. In future research it would be helpful to clarify the intended level that each question is aimed at. For example, consider the MOCA practice “operations are based on client needs.” A respondent could read the question at different levels of abstraction. They could be thinking about the extent to which the day-to-day operation of their housing project is based on client needs (we identify people who need houses the most, and deliver). Or, they could be thinking at the organizational strategy level (we identified housing as the greatest need in the area, and so we created a project to address this need). It would be helpful in future studies to make these questions more specific to the level of analysis, so as to be able to be more specific when drawing conclusions. A survey may or may not be the best tool for this more detailed level of analysis.

Limitation of the Interviews

The fact that interviews were only conducted with employees from two of the three types of organization was a limitation. In future research, it would be helpful for interviews to be conducted with employees from a broader cross section of organizations (e.g. two capacity building organizations, two humanitarian assistance organizations, and two “other” organizations), to provide an accurate and nuanced picture across all organization types. Similarly, greater attention should be paid to ensuring that interviewees are selected based on their roles and positions within the organization. The randomness by which interviewees were distributed throughout their organizations proved to be a limitation, as there were gaps in understanding specific organizational processes.

Ethical Considerations

Because this study involved human participants, it received ethics approval before any research activity was undertaken. All participants were adults able to provide informed consent, and all surveys and interviews were captured anonymously. The researcher will keep all demographic data secure. This thesis will be shared with participating organizations as an electronic PDF document after it has been defended and approved by the University of Ottawa.

CHAPTER 5: Findings

This research was initially designed to use a mixed methods approach so that the interviews could help explain and interpret the results of the MOCA survey. Instead I found that interviewees only mentioned about 30% of the practices in the MOCA framework. Unexpectedly, the interviews revealed more micro (human dynamics) *and* macro (system dynamics) at play that fundamentally shape organizational learning and adaptation behaviour.

As a result, the findings presented in this chapter start with interesting trends in the survey data, and quickly shift towards the broader trends revealed in the interview data. The following table provides a summary of key findings, as they relate to the research questions.

Table 5: Summary of Findings

Question / Assumption		Finding
Assumption: Learning and adaptation contributes to organizational effectiveness		Interviewees agreed that the ability to learn and adapt is critical to organizational effectiveness in Haiti.
Question: To what extent do organizations employ MOCA practices?	Organizations showed significant variation in their learning and adaptation practices.	
	Market orientation and organizational learning practices were more commonly employed than adaptive capacity and complexity absorption practices.	
	Development organizations employed more MOCA practices than humanitarian assistance organizations.	
Question: What are the enablers and barriers to learning and adaptation?	Project Level	Enablers: • The quality and competencies of project staff • Relationships with beneficiaries • Informal, personal knowledge • Authority of project staff to adapt Barriers: • Challenges with hiring • Lack of time and space for staff to reflect • Project-focused structures and cultures • Lack of information
	Organization Level	Enablers: • Corporate learning functions • Monitoring and evaluation • Informal sharing and learning opportunities Barriers: • Barriers to using monitoring and evaluation data for learning

Question / Assumption	Finding	
		• Focus on accountability to the funder • Project-based silos and cycles • Cultural barriers to learning • Lack of feedback loops
	Sector Level	Enablers: • Informal networks and information sharing • Individual contributions to sector level learning Barriers: • Challenges applying sector-level knowledge • The media • Risk aversion and the negative consequences of failure • Other barriers

Testing Assumptions: The ability to learn and adapt is critical to organizational effectiveness in Haiti

Interviewees across all organizations consistently talked about how effectiveness in Haiti is dependent upon developing context-appropriate projects that continually apply new learnings, and are able to adapt. This finding supports the major assumption that underlies the MOCA framework, and reinforces the relevance of this research. The following quotes represent sentiments shared by many interviewees:

We need to have a vision that is open enough to be able to learn, without insisting on realities that are different than Haiti's. Here in Petionville we can have context x... even if it worked in Petionville it might not work in Delmas, and what worked in Delmas might not work in Port au Prince, and what worked in Port au Prince might not work in St. Marc.... that is why we need to be able to give time to learn about the new realities and from these learnings to see how we can adapt. – CB1

You have to be ready to question things... Because when we arrive from Canada, we come from a place where it works like this, but here it works differently. Here you have to be ready to put these things into question, to take the basic principles and make them apply. And find ways to have them accepted by your partner. That is effectiveness. – CB2

The most important is that you adapt to the local context - that you match your implementation to the local capacity. – HA1

Is it important to be adaptive in Haiti? Of course. You develop 5-year programs, but you don't know what will happen along the way. ... the funds we get are based on assumptions - it might be that the assumptions are wrong. It's not that we are stupid; it's just that we couldn't know. Or in some cases maybe we were stupid and we should have known, and sometimes maybe reality hasn't developed the way you thought it would. – HA1

The rest of the findings in this chapter answer the research questions more directly – exploring how organizations in Haiti learn and adapt, and the enablers and barriers that they face to getting better and smarter at what they do.

Answering the Research Question: To what extent do organizations employ MOCA practices?

Organizations varied in the number of learning and adaptation practices they employed.

The survey revealed that the 12 organizations ranged from employing 86% to 45% of the MOCA practices. A full list of survey questions and detailed results can be found in Appendix A.

Of the 12 organizations:

- 4 organizations employed *many* practices (between 31 and 36 of 42 practices);
- 5 organizations employed *some* practices (between 25 and 29 of 42 practices); and
- 3 organizations employed *few* practices (between 19 and 21 of 42 practices).

Table 6: Number of Learning and Adaptation Practices Employed by Organizations

Org Code	Total # (of 42)	% practices employed (of 42)
H3	36	86%
H4	36	86%
T1	33	79%
S	31	74%
P	29	69%
H1	28	67%
E	26	62%
T2	26	62%
O	25	60%
M	21	50%
H2	20	48%
C	19	45%

In addition to the 42 practices captured in the table above, the survey measured “operational complexity” as a separate organizational practice. To do this, it asked respondents to indicate the importance of a number of organizational strategies (6) and goals (9). Organizations varied *significantly* on this measurement. Respondents from one organization rated all but one strategy or goal to be

“important” (93%), while respondents from another organization identified only three of fifteen organizational strategies and goals as “important” (20%). Detailed results are available in Appendix A.

Market orientation and organizational learning practices were more commonly employed than complexity absorption and adaptive capacity practices

The number of organizations that employed each MOCA practice varied significantly by practice. Some practices were universally employed, while others were employed by very few organizations. For example, “conducts client research” was the most employed practice – employed by all 12 organizations with an overall average score of 6.30 on a 7-point scale. “Ease of hiring,” on the other hand, was employed by only one organization, with an overall average score of 3.57 on a 7-point scale. The full list of these practices, their rankings, and a summary of the survey data are available in Appendix A.

Across 42 learning and adaptation practices:

- 4 practices were *universally employed* (employed in all 12 organizations);
- 13 practices were employed by a *large majority* of organizations (10 or 11 out of 12 organizations);
- 11 practices were employed by a *small majority* of organizations (7 to 9 of 12 organizations);
- 10 practices were employed by a *minority* of organizations (4 to 6 of 12 organizations); and
- 4 practices were employed by *very few* organizations (1 or 2 of 12 organizations).

The consistency with which organizations employed MOCA practices depended somewhat on which part of the framework the practice was drawn from. Overall, organizations were consistently strong on market orientation practices – practices focused on generating knowledge about their clients and context. Three out of four of the “universally employed” practices were market orientation practices. Organizations were similarly strong on organizational learning practices – practices focused on knowledge questioning values – although there were important exceptions in this category (i.e. relatively few organizations employed the following practices: employees aware of vision; lessons shared formally; invests in professional development; rewards innovation). Organizations were consistently less strong on practices associated with the two complexity-informed parts of the MOCA framework – complexity absorption and adaptive capacity.

The following tables show the MOCA practices, broken up into the four literatures from which they were drawn. The colour coding makes it easy to see that market orientation and organizational learning have a significant portion of the “green” practices (practices employed by 10 or more organizations), while complexity absorption and adaptive capacity have a greater share of “orange practices” (practices employed by 7-9 organizations) and “red practices” (practices employed by 6 or fewer organizations).

Table 7: Market Orientation (Knowledge Generating Behaviours)

Survey Question	Average Score	# orgs employed
Conducts client research	6.30	12
Operations based on client needs	6.20	12
Considers effects of changing context on organization	6.04	12
Employees have contact with clients	6.06	11
Works closely with partner organizations	5.70	10
Collaboration across organization	5.20	8

Table 8: Organizational Learning (Knowledge Questioning Values)

Survey Question	Average Score	# orgs employed
Open to employee contribution	6.05	12
Open to outside ideas	5.99	11
Employees committed to organization's goals	5.85	11
Practices continual improvement	5.85	11
Leadership emphasizes knowledge sharing	5.66	11
Leadership values learning	5.93	10
Employees recognize changing context	5.36	10
Makes strategic, program and operational changes regularly	4.63	10 ¹⁴
Employees aware of how they contribute	5.58	9
Employees aware of objectives	5.44	8
Captures lessons from unsuccessful initiatives	5.44	8
Lessons shared informally	5.24	7
Employees aware of vision	5.21	6
Lessons shared formally	4.66	6
Invests in professional development	4.57	4
Rewards innovation	4.46	4

¹⁴ Employ = anything over 3.99, as averaged across three questions on frequency of organizational changes.

Table 9: Complexity Absorption (Consistency with the qualities of complex adaptive systems)

Survey Question	Average Score	# orgs employed
Considers front-line staff experience in decision making	5.52	10
Is continually adaptive	5.26	10
Strategic Complexity	5.51	8 ¹⁵
Goal Complexity	5.35	8 ¹⁶
Practices inclusive decision making	5.01	8
Freedom in management style	4.71	8
Ease of Approvals	4.48	8
Employees have freedom to make decisions	4.80	6
Includes employees early in decision making	4.73	6
Focus on getting things done, instead of following formal procedures ¹⁷	3.69	3
Focus on context-appropriate practices, instead of insisting on proven practices	4.03	2

Table 10: Adaptive Capacity (Characteristics that enable continuous adaptation)

Survey Question	Average Score	# orgs employed
Employees work across projects	6.10	11
Able to take advantage of new opportunities	5.64	10
Shares information	5.49	9
Organization is de-coupled ¹⁸	5.19	7
Employees can be used flexibly	5.16	7
Employees have space and time for experimentation	4.64	6
Tolerates mistakes	4.87	5
Speed of cooperation within organization	4.07	4
Speed of information sharing within organization	3.88	4
Ease of firing	3.53	2
Ease of hiring	3.57	1

¹⁵ Number of organizations that considered over half of listed strategies to be important.

¹⁶ Number of organizations that considered over half of listed goals to be important.

¹⁷ While theory suggests that focus on formal procedure may not help organizations be adaptive – the focus on formal procedure in fragile state context was related to minimizing corruption, and therefore may need to be interpreted differently.

¹⁸ This finding may be impacted by organization size (organizations need to be big enough to have different parts that operate differently.)

Development organizations employed more MOCA practices than humanitarian assistance organizations

Organization type was correlated with the number of learning and adaptation practices an organization employed. Size may be a co-variable in this finding, but this could not be confirmed by the research.

Table 2 demonstrates that humanitarian assistance organizations employed fewer MOCA practices than capacity building organization and “other” organizations – which together represent development focused organizations. The notable exception to this rule was one humanitarian assistance organization that was considerably smaller than the other humanitarian assistance organizations. The interview findings align with the survey data on this point, highlighting the differences between capacity building and humanitarian assistance organizations in their relationships with beneficiaries, their funding structures, and their internal working cultures. Each of these factors could impact practices on the MOCA scale.

Table 11: MOCA Practices and Organization Type

Org Code	Total # practices employed (of 42)	# of strat/ goals identified as important (of 15)	Type of Org ¹⁹	Size of Org (in Haiti) ²⁰
H4	36	14	Other	Small
H3	36	12	Humanitarian Assistance	Small
T1	33	12	Capacity Building	Medium
S	31	13	Other	Medium
P	29	10	Capacity Building	Small
H1	28	12	Other	Small
T2	26	10	Capacity Building	Medium
E	26	6	Capacity Building	Small
O	25	10	Capacity Building	Small
M	21	7	Humanitarian Assistance	Medium
H2	20	5	Humanitarian Assistance	Medium
C	19	3	Humanitarian Assistance	Medium

¹⁹ Type categories represent an organization’s dominant activity – recognizing that many humanitarian assistance organizations do some capacity building and vice versa.

²⁰ Size has been estimated based on available information and conversations in the field. Not all numbers have been confirmed with the organizations.

Table 11 also highlights the strong correlation that was found between the number of MOCA practices employed, and the number of strategies and goals that employees identified to be important to the organization.

Different types of organizations also tended to employ different MOCA practices. The tables below highlight the differences between capacity building organizations and humanitarian assistance organizations. These two groups have been highlighted because they are the types of organizations that have been included in the interviews. The colours indicate the organization type with the highest (green), the middle (orange), and the lowest (red) average scores. While the data has been organized by *difference* between capacity building organizations and humanitarian assistance organizations, it is interesting to note that development organizations in the “other” category tend to score best overall.

Table 12: Practices on which capacity building organizations score at least 0.5 higher than humanitarian assistance organizations (7 point scale)

	CB	HA	Other	Difference (CB-HA)
Ease of firing	3.59	2.65	4.62	0.94
Practices continual improvement	6.04	5.20	6.39	0.84
Open to outside ideas	6.19	5.40	6.44	0.79
Leadership emphasizes knowledge sharing	5.87	5.08	6.07	0.78
Open to employee contribution	6.17	5.45	6.64	0.71
Employees have freedom to make decisions	4.95	4.35	5.14	0.60
Lessons shared formally	4.70	4.12	5.31	0.58
Considers front-line staff experience in decision making	5.64	5.14	5.84	0.50

Table 13: Practices on which capacity building organizations score at least 0.1 lower than humanitarian assistance organizations (7 point scale)

	CB	HA	Other	Difference (CB – HA)
Employees have contact with clients	5.87	6.18	6.21	-0.31
Employees aware of objectives	5.10	5.41	6.07	-0.31
Rewards innovation	4.21	4.45	4.90	-0.24
Tolerates mistakes	4.95	5.14	4.38	-0.19
Organization is de-coupled	5.20	5.38	4.93	-0.18
Lessons shared informally	5.35	5.50	4.71	-0.15
Employees aware of how they contribute	5.28	5.40	6.33	-0.12
Employees aware of vision	4.83	4.94	6.19	-0.11

Answering the Research Question: What are the enablers and barriers to learning and adaptation in Haiti?

Learning is complex. The way in which *individuals* gather and process information, and turn it into knowledge is, in itself, complex. The way in which *groups of individuals* organize themselves to collectively learn, is exponentially more complex. There were a number of ways that I could have organized this data to try to capture this complexity. I have elected to present findings at different levels within an integrated system: the project-level, the organizational level, and the sector level. Individuals, and organizations exhibit different behaviours at each of these levels, and also face different enablers and barriers. The limitation of this approach is that it is challenging to capture the issues that occur at the interface between different levels. Additionally, there are some enablers and barriers that apply at multiple levels, and while I have tried to reduce repetition where possible, some repetition was necessary.

Individuals employed by three organizations were interviewed in this research: two development organizations that focus on capacity building as their main tactic (referred to as “capacity building” organizations); and one humanitarian assistance organization. As a result, the interview data does *not* reflect the reality of the “other” development organizations that were included in the survey.

Project Level Enablers

Interviewees agreed that an organization’s ability to be context-sensitive and to learn and adapt at the project-level is largely based in two organizational assets: the cultural-competency and quality of project staff, and the working relationships with beneficiaries.²¹ The research also found that most learning at the project-level is informal, and that project staff feel that they have the authority to be flexible and to adapt as needed – both of which were considered enablers.

Quality and competencies of project staff

There were a number of reasons why interviewees felt the cultural competency and quality of project staff, matters. They felt that it is important for project staff be able to communicate effectively with beneficiaries. This means speaking the language (in Haiti: Creole, but French at a minimum),

²¹ Capacity building organizations tend to call beneficiaries “partners” to reflect the way in which they work together. Here I have used the term “beneficiaries” throughout the document to simplify the language, while recognizing that this does not accurately reflect the language used by most interviewees from capacity building organizations.

understanding cultural nuances and customs, and being able to build relationships of professional confidence over time. For many interviewees, this suggested a preference for local project staff where at all possible. The following quotes are representative of common interviewee responses:

What we need is to understand the Haitian culture.... To understand the culture you must also understand the language - Creole, French. ...You need to have competencies and knowledge in certain areas, but in addition you must understand Haitians: How they communicate, how they do things, how they react to x or y, difficulties, how they act, too. It's important. With that - if you understand all that, you can talk to them more easily and are better able to help them with their organizational structure and strengthening. – CB1

What can help an organization to adapt? I think that ... the knowledge of the context well before the implementation of the project is an important factor. I think also the recruitment of local qualified human resources is another factor that can help with adaptability. – CB2

The ability of staff to meaningfully communicate with beneficiaries was found to be especially important because relationships proved to be the primary means of accessing information about context. Day-to-day contextual information was gathered through networks of individuals and partners. A number of interviewees specifically commented that the *quality* of the relationships had a significant impact on the *quality* of the information a project staff member might be able to access.

If you've created a good relationship with people they will give you the information. If you have a professional relationship they will give you a part of the information. There are many many filters on the information they will give you. ...They see us as a foreign organization and what we don't know doesn't concern them. They operate on a need to know basis. And we don't need to know. – CB2

I, for myself, am very curious. It's also part of my job. I need to know what's happening around me. Collecting that information is very important. It's a lot of discussion. It's very informal. - HA1

The willingness and ability of the project staff to be committed, flexible and creative was also highlighted as a critical contributor to organizational effectiveness, as reflected in the following quotes.

I think it depends a lot on the personalities and their own personal availability and commitment to the project and being able to say, "okay I won't go to the beach this weekend and I'll be traveling... Trying to find a solution to that problem." I think it's also about the commitment of the people working in the office, which is not something very easy to document. But I would say it's a big part of it. – CB2

Something else apart from flexibility I would say creativity. Because we plan and then it doesn't work and then we have to plan again and then it doesn't work and then we have to plan again and again and then something works. So it's always being able to reinvent and try to find new ways of doing stuff. – CB2

In addition to *quality* of the project staff, interviewees commented that it is also important for staff to stay around long enough to build and maintain these relationships (i.e. be in Haiti for more than 1-2 years at a time).

Working Relationships with Beneficiaries

Interviewees from both types of organizations emphasized the importance of relationships with beneficiaries. The market orientation findings from the MOCA survey suggest that most organizations are strong in this area. Practices like client research, and the degree to which operations were based on client needs, were the most commonly employed MOCA practices, while “employees have contact with clients” and “works closely with partner organizations” were also employed by a large majority of organizations in the survey (Appendix A).

In general, capacity building organizations appeared to leverage beneficiary relationships for learning more effectively than the humanitarian assistance organization. Interviewees from the capacity building organizations saw relationships with partners/beneficiaries as a central mechanism for project-level learning and adaptation and felt that these relationships were being well leveraged. Both of the capacity building organizations included in the interviews worked with beneficiary organizations to plan projects, and had formal mechanisms for beneficiary feedback. One organization had learning days where they would “take the problems identified by participants, hear solutions from them, and take that internally and meet to look at how the problem can be solved technically” (CB1). The other capacity building organization had included their major beneficiary as a voting member on the project governance committee, with responsibility for evaluating the project, and with a direct relationship with the funder.

Humanitarian assistance organizations face greater challenges in meaningfully reaching out to beneficiaries directly. While survey respondents from humanitarian assistance organizations were more likely to have direct contact with clients, interviewees in the humanitarian assistance organization indicated that obtaining meaningful feedback from beneficiaries was difficult. Some efforts had been undertaken to strengthen “accountability to beneficiaries,” but that this was not yet an effective feedback mechanism for the organization.

Informal Personal Knowledge

Aside from formalized dialogue sessions with partners, learning and adaptation was found to be largely informal at the project level. Interviewees often spoke of trying something one way, hitting roadblocks, and then needing to try something else. Understandably, interviewees had a hard time answering

questions about *how* learning happens at this level, largely because this type of learning is not necessarily conscious – and in fact, one interviewee quoted below did not even consider it “learning.” It seems to be more intuitive: the natural process by which individuals were trying to achieve a specific result in a complex environment. We can refer to this as the “just do it” attitude. This is similar to what the literature calls “tacit” learning. This type of thinking is evident in the following quotes that reflect the attitudes of many interviewees.

There isn't necessarily a formal mechanism for capturing learning, but if something didn't work, we don't do it again. – CB1

We didn't necessarily go to CIDA to say what wasn't working, but we as individuals we learned not to reproduce that. Our team that stayed the same knows the things that we shouldn't reproduce.... So this is personal learning, more than corporate. –CB2

I don't think we learn a lot because it's all on a day-to-day basis. Everyone is just doing their work. We share information with each other - things that we're doing, things that could have gone better, and things that went well. And we hope that we pick up on that: “You went to that community and you tried this and it didn't go well - so maybe when I go there I'll try something different.” – HA1

Authority for project staff to adapt

While there were a number of barriers that limit the extent to which project staff adapt, authority to do so was not one of them. Interviewees from both capacity building and humanitarian assistance organizations felt that they have the permission to adapt as needed to be effective in Haiti. Whether or not this flexibility is exercised seem to depend more on organizational culture and individual choice, as is reflected in the following quotes that provide a good representation of sentiments across all three organizations interviewed.

Of course, if I want to spend 25 million dollars on health, I have to put together a proposal with what I want to do, and it has to be convincing, but I have found that I am very lucky all the way up the line to the very top with the people I'm working with. If there is anything that I see as an opportunity, I have never experienced that they've said no - of course I have to be convincing. – HA1

Each program manager...has a different capacity to accept risk and to accept the flexibility... Because I have colleagues that are known for approving expenditures for buying a pen. ...I am the opposite of this. I think we do have a lot of flexibility. I think all international organizations have a lot of flexibility and a lot of the time the real barrier is individuals who don't feel comfortable with risk. –CB2

It is relatively easy to make changes to projects, but you can't do it alone. You need to work with funders to get agreement on any changes. – CB1

A few interviewees did qualify this level of flexibility, acknowledging that there is plenty of flexibility at the operational level, but that flexibility is somewhat limited at the strategic level within a project cycle. This may be true both technically and practically. One funder specifically identified the scope defined in the memorandum to the Minister as the parameters within which flexibility can exist. A project manager commented that once you establish your baseline measurements you generally want to stay within those parameters so that you are able to compare at the end of the project.

Project Level Barriers

The data revealed four major barriers to learning and adaptation at the project level: challenges hiring the right people; lack of time and space for staff to reflect; project-focused structures and cultures; and lack of information about what is and is not working. Interviewees did not discuss the other MOCA practices that were uncommon in the survey (tolerate mistakes, invest in professional development, reward innovation), and therefore barriers related to these practices could not be determined.

Challenges with hiring

Employing high quality, competent staff was identified as critical to effectiveness, and yet many organizations had a hard time hiring the right people. Overall, ease of hiring and firing were the two least commonly employed MOCA practices (Appendix A). Interviewees from the humanitarian assistance organization reinforced the survey findings, by suggesting that hiring the right people was a significant challenge for them – both in terms of recruitment and being able to navigate lengthy internal hiring processes. While interviewees from the capacity building organizations did not address hiring and firing directly, both organizations appeared to have recruited and retained strong, qualified Haitian staff (as suggested by the individuals interviewed and the length of time they had been with the organization). However, even these organizations indicated that hiring the right staff is difficult in their survey responses.

In addition to the hiring challenges that were identified by a number of foreign staff, one Haitian staff made an observation that I include here as a unique, but important perspective:

There is a prejudice that we come with; NGOs come with prejudice. They think that there are many competencies that don't exist in Haiti - we need to have people come here to improve the competencies of Haitians. I know that there are lots of challenges in finding qualified, trained staff who are capable of having good management of funds... but still we need to have an openness that permits Haitians to have the capacity to do these things. —CB2

Lack of time and space for staff to reflect

The most common barrier identified by interviewees was not having the time, space and support to reflect and to learn. This finding was most common with interviewees from the humanitarian organization, although at least one interviewee from each of the two capacity building organizations also mentioned that time and space for learning was critical and could be a challenge.

Interviewees described an interplay of factors at the project level that resulted in project staff not having the time, space or ability to learn and adapt. These factors were the project-focused structures and cultures, and lack of information.

Project-focused structures and cultures

Most aid organizations manage a number of time-bound projects with specific deliverables and budgets across 1-3 year timelines. This structure appears to create unrealistic expectations that made project implementation overly hectic, leaving little time or space for reflection, as is captured by the following representative quotes.

We are all too caught up in our day-to-day work and operation because of the high intensity of our work here. Nothing ever goes as planned, so that intensity is high. You're already quite happy here if you've managed to achieve certain things on a daily basis. So I think that although there isn't a lack of willingness, but a lack of energy to allocate time to the learning elements. To be able to collect data on possible ways to change things. You really need a specialist who is dedicated to that on a full-time basis. – HA1

If you want to be adaptive and creative, you need to have the space to do that. And I think the only way you create that space is to have better planning. ... Programs that are supposed to be implemented in 3 years might take 4 years in reality. So already you don't have space to be creative. – HA1

Projects here have been slowed down because we have two opposing factions and we have to navigate between the two and stay neutral. It's not easy.... the complexity of relationships here mean we have to navigate quietly and strategically. It's possible but it slows things down... So sometimes if we think of the rhythm in Canada – things happen much faster – but here you have to take the time and make sure that things are done right because there is so much to consider. – CB2

According to a number of interviewees, when the structures and cultures of the organization do not actively create the space for beneficiary-focused learning, it can be easy to fall into a pattern of doing only what is required to meet the project management demands. This is further expanded on in the following sections that explore organization-level barriers.

In the humanitarian assistance organization, the management structure and culture were very bureaucratic, which presented challenges around information flow and timeliness of decision-making – both important to learning and adaptation.

We like to pretend in French organizations that we're better off because we're very structured and we have all these schemes and everything is detailed. It's like the army. But at the end of the day there is such a huge problem in the communication - you're losing information at every level. It's a huge problem. There is so much information that is lost at each level that the people at the bottom of the food chain don't get access to information that could help them and the other way around. - HA1

Lack of information

If the information is inadequate or is missing, we're driving in the fog. How do you feel driving in the fog with no headlights and no compass? It's very risky. -HA1

Interviewees had mixed responses when asked if they had the information they needed in order to know what *was*, and what *was not* working in their projects. Participants from one capacity building organization felt that they did know what was and was not working. Their mini-evaluation sessions with partners every 3-6 months, combined with external evaluations, and third party reports provided them with all the information they needed. Interviewees from the other capacity building organization were more ambivalent. They felt that informal information from observing and interacting with beneficiaries was helpful, and hitting or missing major project targets helped them track what was and was not working. However, a number of interviewees from this organization indicated that collecting more formal information about what was and was not working was extremely difficult in the context, preventing them from having more concrete feedback loops. Finally, interviewees from the humanitarian assistance organization consistently indicated that they did not have the information they needed to know what was or was not working. While learning advisors suggested that this is improving with better monitoring and evaluation frameworks, they recognized that it is not yet a strong system. One of the interviewees from the humanitarian assistance organization identified a major project where the organization had invested in data collection to monitor program effectiveness, but this was not the norm.

What was clear across organizations was that very few interviewees had hard data, or formal evidence to support their intuitive sense of what was and what was not working at the project level.

There seemed to be a number of reasons for this. First, this type of information collection and use is not an expectation at the project level, from either funders or aid organizations. As a result, project managers are rarely trained or supported to do it. While project managers often have training in results based management and how to complete reports for donors, they have limited knowledge or skills about how to collect or use information that might help them make better choices in the field. This is further indicated by the fact that none of the project-level staff interviewed talked about using monitoring and evaluation data (or results based management indicators) for learning or decision-making in the field. Most of the reflections on these dynamics came from learning and knowledge advisors who work with project managers on these issues:

I don't think we have [good information on what is and isn't working]. We get lots of opinions, but are they tested? Did we do operational research? Do we know what the barriers are...? Haiti is a simple example: we had five thousand water filters to hand out, we handed out three thousand, and I go to two meetings and people say to me, "Those are breaking." So I said to the delegate, "What do we know about that? Is it ten that have broken, fifty, one hundred?" – HA1

The people are measuring things, but they are not mindful or skilled enough to say, "Okay we can move away from this indicator we were thinking of three years ago during the planning stage, and now we can add something." So that's the way we are helping them. So that's why I say that we see results being achieved. We are learning on how to measure those changes in a better way. – HA1

It depends on what people think they need to know. When I look at our indicators... things like number of jobs created, change in regulation... we never have enough information. It is always very difficult, and in states like Haiti that information is not available.... If that is the way you want to manage, than I think it is very frustrating. ...[You need] a system to ask questions to the right people and then to make an informed decision with that [information] as a proxy. In that sense, yes, I can have the information I need to work on the program. I would use annual or bi-annual meetings with a group of stakeholders and say: "this is where I think we are. Do you agree? Tell me where you think we are and where you think we need to go next. And how does that fit in the big picture of the project?" – CB2

The other challenge with collecting tangible evidence was that it is not always clear to interviewees how one might rigorously collect information to support project-level decisions for the type of work that many organizations are engaged in – especially around capacity building and policy change. This reflects the complex nature of the problems that many of these organizations are trying to solve.

It's not easy to say you have all the information to make good decisions. Information isn't formal here. There are many flows of information. Even if we follow a formal process to get information about context, or to contextualize our work here to make certain decisions, sometimes you have to deviate. You might want to try to be objective about some information but you end up sidetracked. There is misinformation that takes you from the other side. You have to go find multiple types of information to validate the situation. – CB1

The monitoring and evaluation plan [for this project] is totally weird... what I really want to get out of the project is a policy change on the government side and have them in turn, inform global policy in our field. That's not something you're going to get in a project cycle... So the only thing you can really put is, "we want you to have a sign-off on this document by x person." It's kind of a weird indicator - you can't really post that on the Internet - who is going to understand why that is important? When in reality, it will help a whole ton of people indirectly. – HA2

[In order to understand project progress], I have to evaluate your knowledge. Ok, but I cannot make you pass an exam. You are a partner... Because we're doing capacity building - we're doing training. If you are talking about money, about figures, it is much easier to quantify. But we can't just quantify the knowledge/competencies of people, we have to qualify it. So sometimes this is harder. – CB2

While day-to-day learning and adaptation did not appear to be informed by rigorous data collection at the project level, a few interviewees from different organizations indicated that they do leverage lessons from major project evaluations to inform their practice on 1-3 year cycles.

Organization-level Enablers

When I refer to organization-level learning, I am referring to the way in which organizations collect, aggregate and use information from the project level or elsewhere, to improve the organization's ability to effectively serve beneficiaries. That could be through delivering better projects in the future, changing their internal processes, or engaging differently with other organizations. This aligns with the double-loop learning defined in the literature review. Through the interviews, there were four things that seemed to enable learning at the organization-level: corporate learning functions; monitoring and evaluation frameworks; and informal information sharing and learning opportunities.

Corporate learning functions

All of the organizations interviewed had invested in a variation of a corporate learning function, employing advisors with some responsibility for knowledge management or learning.²² The advisors that were interviewed had different mandates and conducted different activities – largely a reflection of the very different size of their organizations. The following quotes show the variations in mandates across the different learning functions interviewed:

²² Interviews were conducted with the knowledge management / learning function of two out of three of the organizations included in the interviews. The third organization had a headquarters staff person in charge of evaluations and monitoring, which likely plays this role to some extent. Unfortunately an interview was not conducted.

The way I look at knowledge management.... First, is just to help define what it is so that people speak the same language because you talk to different people they have different understandings. Most people think it's either document production or things like that, and there is no value added there... So my work is trying to define methodologies, tools, do training with our partners overseas, with our staff, to help them get toward some kind of common framework... – CB2

Our unit's mandate is to provide advisory support, to the planning, the design, conceptualization of our programming, the quality, the monitoring, quality assurance, accountability, and then the last piece is around learnings. So ensuring that we are becoming, to the best of our abilities, a learning organization that is able to draw on lessons and best practices from particular projects and apply those to our broader strategic planning, or our programming.... – HA1

The activities of these learning functions varied, and included: producing and publishing case studies; hosting learning webinars and events; providing monitoring and evaluation support; and influencing project planning to varying extents. In some instances learning advisors also played a role in developing mental models – or policy documents – to be used by implementers in the organization. While one organization had advisors that were specific to thematic programming areas (health, disaster risk reduction, etc.), the smaller organization had identified two crosscutting priority areas in which to invest learning resources.

Both learning groups were relatively new – having been created in the past 10 years – and both expressed being in a state of change, as they continue to evolve their role in projects and the organization more generally.

Monitoring and evaluation

Learning advisors spoke enthusiastically about the tremendous potential that performance measurement frameworks (part of a broader monitoring and evaluation framework) and other donor accountability tools, hold for enabling learning and adaptation. However, none of the learning advisors interviewed appeared to consistently use monitoring data to make organizational operational or strategic decisions. As noted in the project-level section, monitoring data was not referenced as a learning tool by field staff, either. This may simply reflect the fact that these tools have recently become more rigorous, and that organizations are taking time to be able to fully leverage them for learning. One interviewee in the humanitarian assistance organization suggested this, as is indicated by the following quote:

The accountability feedback loop with our donors is becoming much more rigorous.... now we're having to rationalize our approach based on a logic model that shows the logic of the intervention. We're having to come up with a performance management framework that shows how we will demonstrate success not just that there's been an output, but at real impact level, even in

emergencies. So that's a shift. That does add a level of accountability at least back to our donor. – HA1

Interviewees from two different organizations talked about using evaluations for learning at the organizational level. The humanitarian assistance organization had recently implemented a system by which the senior management team is required to follow up on recommendations made in program evaluations. Another interviewee talked about using lessons from an evaluation to inform a project plan that was responding to a new disaster. Evaluation data was also used to develop a meta-evaluation by one interviewee, who then built the findings into a policy framework for the organization.

Informal sharing and learning opportunities

While informal learning appeared to be less prevalent and important at the organization level, two interviewees referred to retreats and conferences with organization staff, or organization staff and beneficiaries that were used to discuss double-loop learning questions. One interviewee found the process used by their organization to be highly worthwhile – an opportunity to jointly reflect on the bigger picture of what is working and not working. Another interviewee felt that the process had limited value to their organization, due to limited staff engagement and poor leadership.

Organization-level Barriers

While corporate learning functions and other enablers, represent important efforts by aid organizations to incorporate learning at the organization level, there are a number of barriers that make this task exceedingly difficult. This research found that some of these barriers include: barriers to using monitoring and evaluation data for learning; a focus on accountability to funders; project-based silos; cultural barriers to learning; and lack of feedback loops.

Barriers to using monitoring and evaluation data for learning

As discussed under enablers, monitoring and evaluation frameworks present a huge opportunity for learning at the organizational level. Being able to track what is working and not working across multiple projects could theoretically provide greater insight than the same information from one project alone. However, there were barriers that made this type of learning difficult. Capturing quality data was itself a challenge (as was discussed at the project level). Advisors also found it challenging to secure buy-in from field-level staff to consistently collect formal monitoring data in a way that would be useful at the organizational level.

Part of this challenge may be the degree of influence that learning advisors have within their organizations. Advisors in the humanitarian assistance organization found their influence to be highly dependent on the relationships they were able to build with individual project managers. If project managers were not interested in collecting monitoring data, hearing about past lessons, or taking advice, they simply did not have to. Similarly, one interviewee mentioned that the knowledge management function within the capacity building organization was also reliant on the connections and credibility of the individual staff person assigned to the file.

Getting buy-in may be made more challenging by the lack of clear vision and shared understanding of the role, importance, and strategic potential of learning and adaptation. Interviewees identified the fact that learning and adaptation was rarely strategic or deliberate, which suggests that it is likely also not communicated as a strategic priority for the organization.

"You're assuming that strategies are necessarily deliberate? Because my first thing would be that most organizations are not deliberate at whatever they do. They're reactive."- CB2

... I don't think that 6 years ago we could have been talking about that much evidence of an organization that had any interest in becoming an organization that learns or improves through learning.... [while it's getting better,] I don't think it's yet at a point where we're doing it systematically or strategically. – HA1

So I think learning is probably understood to be individual based, I don't know that organizational learning is understood to be systematic or that it can be systematized and be better improved through certain decisions, structures, or process. – HA1

There are additional challenges associated with making use of evaluation data. One interviewee commented on the fact that there is a perception that asking for sufficient funds to conduct useful evaluations contributes to overhead and is not well perceived. However, he told the story of how he had recently lobbied for, and secured, new evaluation funding, which included money to convene a learning conference as part of the evaluation process.

Once evaluation funding is adequate, it can still be challenging to coordinate data in a way that ensures comparability, or that enables organization-level learning from multiple projects. The following quote demonstrates how learning investments requires both funding, and organizational commitment to be successful at the organizational level.

It's hard even for information management - data analysis - if it's not a directive of senior management to have a programmatic approach where you can compare across project results, then it becomes very difficult. So if you don't have standardized indicators across projects then you're

comparing apples to oranges. So the decision to have comparable results would be with our senior management and then they haven't felt the need for that. – HA1

One of the reasons that this level of commitment may be difficult to achieve, is that organizations are primarily driven by a need to sustain themselves, which means they are most focused on meeting funder requirements as is further explored below.

Focus on accountability to the funder

There's no applause for learning. That's a donor problem. There's that lack of donor response to learning. – BG1

This research found that organizational behaviour is driven primarily by the need to sustain funding. The idea that funding drives organizations' behaviour is not new. However, it is reinforced by this research, and it is an important starting point. The survey asked respondents to rate fifteen organizational strategies and goals on their level of importance to the organization. In addition to providing information about operational complexity, the results of these questions shed light on the incentives and pressures that shape organizational behaviour. The most important strategy or goal for all organizations was "increase financial sustainability of the organization." The highest-ranking strategy or goal that focused on beneficiaries was fifth on the list. Full results are available in Appendix A.

Top five organizational strategies/goals by importance across 12 organizations

1. Increase financial sustainability of the organization
2. Logistics: Managing materials and moving products or services
3. Operating efficiently
4. Increase the total amount of money coming into the organization
5. Enhance the quality of existing programs, services, or products.

These results re-enforce that accessing funding, and ensuring the sustainability of the organization is the most important goal for aid organizations. While this may not be surprising, it is important for us to consider the implications that this has on organizational behaviour.

Funders appear to affect the learning and adaptation behaviour of aid organizations by creating a strong focus on accountability. The majority of organizational effort that went into measuring progress and reflecting on results was within the context of project or program evaluation. Evaluations were largely focused on ensuring accountability of how funds were spent, and verifying information provided to the funders. They were generally not aimed at organizational learning or helping organizations become more effective at delivering development results, even if some learning is drawn from evaluations. This affects

the type of information that is collected as well as the way that information is collected. The following quotes are representative of comments heard across multiple organizations, although not all interviewees reflected on these dynamics.

Partners have incentive to highlight success and that is why we have external evaluations.... Evaluations determine if project reports are accurate and complete. They look at results and audits and come up with recommendations. Evaluations often take place at the end of a project, however monitoring is ongoing... My focus in monitoring is on maintaining scope, deadlines and ensuring that the project falls within the agreement. Eventually this will include monitoring against the project work plan. – Funder²³

I see that, more often, organizations develop function controls rather than systems that track achievement of results and evaluation of the results. For me, it's something that's becoming more and more negative and people justify it because our funders have decided that is how it needs to be... People need to put more emphasis on achieving the results rather than the way in which you achieve results and manage projects. – CB2

The problem with the reports is that, the culture is that it's a requirement: "you give me your money, this [report] is your receipt." We need to move away from that culture where the donor is the #1 reason you need a report.... I say we need to re-rank this. #1 is the project team - us as an institution. We need to know what's happening with our projects before the donor. – HA1

One interviewee suggested that donors are focused on accountability, based on their own set of feedback loops and incentive systems, which are quite removed from the outcomes that the whole system is supposed to be working towards: improved results for beneficiaries.

At the [major donor organization], disbursement is the only number anyone cares about. It's really sad. Donors - that's all they care about. It's weird because the [organization] does pride itself on "learning" - finding the lessons learned, hosting conferences, sharing lessons, etc... But what they are measured against is really perverse. – HA2

Project-based silos and cycles

Interviewees from two of the three organizations interviewed identified project-based silos as a barrier to organizational learning and adaptation. For both of these organizations, the work in Haiti represented one of many projects that the organization was undertaking, and both found it challenging to create opportunities for cross-project learning. This dynamic once again reflects a challenge of project-based funding. Within one of the capacity building organizations that was generally high-performing in its learning behaviours, one interviewee commented that:

²³ Quote formulated based on written notes from an interview that could not be recorded.

We're so into our departmental level - we're so into our own program that, I have to admit... I don't even really know what's happening in the other programs. I mean I know if it's the end of a program, the beginning of a program, the thematic they're working on, but I mean I have very little knowledge of what exactly they're working on. So it's very difficult to make the connections and for example to share the knowledge... if I'm working on something, maybe it could be used by someone else but I don't really know. And I have to admit we don't really take the time to disseminate that much. We're so much into our own little boxes. – CB2

Project structures and cycles do not actively create space to ask double-loop learning questions. Similar to the project-level, interviewees identified challenge around creating time and space to reflect on the big questions that impact the effectiveness of the organization. One way in which this type of learning can happen at the organization level, is when project staff and headquarters staff who cross project boundaries, connect to share experiences and ask reflect on the bigger questions together. This type of space for organization-wide, double loop learning did not seem to be present in any of the organizations interviewed. The following quotes support the fact that there does not seem to be much opportunity for cross-project discussion and learning, however these are not necessarily representative.

We don't really get a chance. It's always the same thing. It's ambitious, we're into our daily stuff so do we have enough time to reflect on what we're doing... We're trying to carve out some time when we're doing work planning for the year or stuff like that. We're trying to think about or even preparing the reports when we're trying to evaluate what we've been doing and if it's working. But do we spend enough time on asking those questions? I don't think so. – CB2

When I think about some projects here - construction for example. Some of my colleagues - the ones who were here on the ground will all tell you that the shelter program was the worst, the biggest disaster ever, here in Haiti. If you go to Ottawa they will tell you that the shelter program was a huge success. And that's huge. And that's in the same organization. – HA1

Cultural barriers to learning

One interviewee from the humanitarian assistance organization identified a number of cultural challenges that might get in the way of a learning mindset for northern NGOs doing work in Haiti. While the quotes below were from a single employee, an additional key informant echoed many of the same issues. It should be noted that the humanitarian assistance organization included in the interviews scored lowest overall of all 12 organization on the MOCA scale. This included worst in class on the questions: “Employees can express their opinions and make suggestions about new ways for carrying out tasks,” and “We continually assess the quality of our programs and services, and look for ways to improve them.” These findings suggest that this particular humanitarian assistance organization may face specific cultural challenges that may not be generalizable to the rest of the sector. The interviewee

felt that the organization lacked the ability to reflect on its actions, which was attributed partially to the organization arriving in Haiti with too much money, and an arrogance that comes with saving lives:

You don't even have the time to stop - you're already moving onto something else. And you're dealing with a disaster - coming back to the humanitarian sector - it's a different approach because you don't have to think critically about whether you're really doing something the best way, efficiently. We're saving lives! Who can blame us - we're busy saving lives. – HA1

The same interviewee reflected on institutional racism as a barrier to learning:

Two years after the earthquake there was a consensus in Haiti... that organizations failed in their mandates after the earthquake. And an op-ed came out in the Globe and Mail and we were waiting to read: "We have failed, but we will learn from that." Not only was there nothing related to [learning] - but there was massive institutional racism. "Well - it's Haiti. Of course in Haiti it's not going to work." And that, I find very difficult to digest. I think it's a great cop-out that we're giving ourselves. We're giving away our responsibility. Maybe this happens in other fragile states too. There is an exercise that we don't do because of that. – HA1

Organizations lack feedback loops

But, why would we change? You change because you're forced to change. I don't think we're forced to change. – HA1

Organizational incentives can be difficult to reflect on because they are not always obvious. A few interviewees were able to speak to organizational incentives and drivers, but it was not surprising that many did not. To address this challenge, I draw on interviews with a number of key informants from outside the organizations studied, all of whom work closely with aid organizations in Haiti.

Learning and adaptation feedback loops (i.e. consequences for the organization that happen as a result of their actions) that might drive organizations to improve services to beneficiaries were weak. Accessing funding was not directly connected to performance for any of the organizations interviewed. For organizations that attract and use public donations (including the humanitarian assistance organization included in the interviews), this seems particularly true:

Are we an adaptive organization? ... I think there's a real challenge around nonprofits in the humanitarian sector in terms of what drives not just accountability but what drives learning. What drivers are there for us to become more effective or more efficient at what we do? – HA1

One of the things I find fascinating about the sector - don't know if it's the development sector or just the humanitarian sector - but there is a very poor capacity for learning from our lessons. To look back and see if we've made a mistake. Is that because we're always looking for the next disaster? And everything is emergency specific? Or is it because we have a problem with accountability - especially with private money. I mean, we had one project that was CIDA funded, but we're not set up to do that type of exercise because at the end of the day no one is really watching. And it's us, and it's so many organizations, because I've been talking with lots of people and it always comes back to this. – HA1

While the public (those giving donations), and the media (as the public's investigative agency) might theoretically play some roll in holding organizations accountable, they do not appear to drive meaningful learning. These observations were made by interviewees from the humanitarian assistance organization and key informants.

Compared to a typical business model, we're not susceptible to the same drivers and push-pull factors of effectiveness and efficiency. The Canadian public gives to charity and what they receive back is the feeling that they've contributed to something, and basically their appetite is for those pictures and numbers and not necessarily more in-depth information. So it's a pretty poor accountability feedback loop. – HA1

Our big feedback loop is the media, probably. And I do think it's important to listen to the media. A lot of time they do tell you the right things - and a lot of times they don't. ... They raise a flag and then you have to go look at what is there. That's really the only feedback loop. That's what's pushing the [major funders], that's what is pushing the US government. USAID is only reacting to congress, which is only reacting to what their constituents are saying. – HA2

...The rental subsidy idea it came from the need to efficiently address the displacement situation with a tool that would reach a maximum number of recipients.... So with the pressure of the media - a lot depending on the media – and that [pressure] trickling down to the donors. - BG

The two capacity building organizations interviewed reflected a partial exception to this dynamic. They exhibited a strong accountability to their beneficiaries – mostly by choice – and felt that they were extremely responsive to them. This feedback loop, however, has a greater impact at the project level than it does at the organization level.

Sector-level Enablers

Because the MOCA framework and interview questions focused on the project and organizational level, there is limited data about sector-level learning. However, a number of interviewees commented on sector-level dynamics that enable learning, and they have been captured here as an important part of the learning picture. The major sector level enablers were informal networks and information sharing and individual contributions to sector-level learning.

Informal networks and information sharing

When interviewees talked about learning at the sector level, they tended to talk about information sharing opportunities, specifically the “sector clusters” set up in Haiti. These tended to be monthly meetings between experts working in the same sectors (e.g. housing, water and sanitation, disaster risk

management, health, etc.) where one or more organizations would present the results of a particular initiative, share lessons and answer questions. These cluster meetings are opportunities for individuals working in the sector to meet and get to know one another and share experiences. Similarly, there were a number of informal “drink” nights – where largely foreign staff from different aid organizations met socially to establish informal networks and swap stories.

While a few interviewees mentioned these clusters as an example of sector-level learning, no one identified any direct connection between these information-sharing opportunities and any changes or actions taken at the organizational level. A few interviewees specifically identified the fact that information sharing alone does not have significant impact on organizational behaviour. The one exception was a key informant who talked about a tight-knit housing cluster, convened directly after the earthquake who shared valuable information as the sector sought out viable housing options.

Information was also shared, to some extent, in hard copy. Two of the organizations interviewed mentioned making use of outside studies from other organizations to inform program policy and project planning. One organization interviewed publishes evaluations on a public website for use by others.

Individual contributions to sector level learning

Sector-level learning appears to be largely dependent on organizations, and individuals acting in ways that are not incentivized by the aid system, sometimes taking on personal and organizational risk in the process. These disincentives are further explored under Sector-level Barriers.

As an example, one of the capacity building organization had consciously decided not to respond to funding envelopes, but instead, to seek funding based on what they learn about local needs. In this way, the organization took on the risk of being more selective about funding, but was able to distance themselves from the trap of working on funder-driven priorities that do not necessarily reflect their best knowledge of the context. Another organization found a way to drive a politically sensitive project that might not otherwise have gained traction, using their reputation and positioning to allow them to take on the organizational risk associated with the project.

More often, organizations as a whole are not well positioned to take these risks. Instead, it is individuals – either inside, or outside of organizations – that can introduce ideas and approaches that push whole sectors forward. These stories were not common, but seemed to reflect the best of what interviewees and key informants think is possible in the sector:

... There are always a couple people who are out in front. Those tend not to be people who are linked to an organization, almost by definition. If you are that much of a visionary - organizations can't hold onto you or they don't want to hold onto you because you're a little bit of a liability. Almost by definition the people who are really pushing those ideas at the very beginning are not the institutional ones. That's what I've seen - people not organizations. – HA2

Sometimes, it's just based on individuals. You have individuals who really care and you have individuals who are here to advance their career. ...I've seen a few people who are really committed to the situation and trying to do something different. And those seem to be the ones who pushed a lot of the change. – BG1

Being able to affect this type of change appears to require a very specific skillset. After probing, one interviewee identified the mechanisms by which they have observed this type of sector-influence taking place:

All these people are strategic - you start building up your networks in all the different camps. You get strategic about working within the government and find some people who are sympathetic... and find people who are sympathetic in the donor community and find people who are sympathetic on the ground and academics and that sort of thing. And when you get all those actors - enough of a network together – you can push it forward. You're forcing the conversation to happen at the right time with the right people in the room. – HA2

Sector-level Barriers

This research found a number of dynamics within the aid system that can actively *discourage* sector-level learning. While interviewees rarely recognized or commented directly on the fact that their organization faces disincentives to sector-level learning and adaptation, the stories that they told often hinted at these dynamics, which included: challenges applying sector-level knowledge; the media; risk aversion and the negative consequences of failure; and other barriers.

Challenges applying sector-level knowledge

Organizations can be put in a tough place when they have to choose between learning and applying their best knowledge, and meeting disbursement targets or other operational goals. There appeared to be no incentive for organizations to modify their behaviours based on sector-level knowledge, especially in instances where they see a trade-off between access to funding and learning from past mistakes in the sector. This dynamic was well-illustrated by one key informant who talked about the way that the rental subsidy model is being applied in the Philippines:

I think that there could be stronger links between the research community, organizations, and donors to really hold people accountable. Not necessarily for the tool as it was rolled out, but for addressing the deficiencies. And again I go back to this issue with the Philippines where I find it

absolutely preposterous that, with knowing that there are so many issues with [rental subsidies] here that you would just go and implement it somewhere else. I just find this a very poor reflection of the system as it exists today as one that's really driven by a business mentality rather than a social change, social justice, humanitarian issue. – BG

A similar dynamic was reflected by a program manager who talked about having measured the impact of business loans on improving the effectiveness of rental subsidies. Even though the organization *knew* that the addition of business loans made the program significantly more effective, the Haitian government asked them to provide only rental subsidies so that they would be able to focus all available funds on emptying the camps – a significant political win for the government. In accordance with aid effectiveness principles, the organization followed the government's lead, providing only rental subsidies despite their knowledge that it was less effective.

The Media

The media appears to have an important influence at the sector level, although it does not seem well suited to encouraging nuanced adaptation or learning. Two interviewees implied that if a particular solution gets enough “bad press,” it could have an impact on the degree to which funders will fund the solution, and therefore, the extent to which organizations are interested in using the solution. In Haiti, this appears to have been the case for rental subsidies. This influence can change practices (i.e. there may be fewer rental subsidies) but it does not necessarily drive learning. In fact, the way in which media operates appears to make it difficult for any organization to adapt or iterate solutions to be more effective if it has been painted as controversial. This dynamic is expanded on in the next section.

Risk aversion and the negative consequences of failure

Sector-level learning is made difficult by the way in which the media and donors respond to failure. This research found that in some cases, potential negative consequences – harm to reputational capital through bad media coverage, or loss of funding – led organizations to behave in ways that negatively impact learning. Most of the stories below were drawn from humanitarian assistance organizations, however a key informant from a capacity building organization spoke of a similar dynamic that impacted her work, suggesting these disincentives may exist across the sector even if they were not always evident from the interviews conducted with capacity building organizations in this study.

Organizations are hesitant to share information, especially around what is *not* working. In one instance, a capacity building interviewee was extremely hesitant to share an evaluation report with me because it identified some challenges that a project faced in a previous phase. The organization ended up sharing

the evaluation after some discussion and assurance of confidentiality. In the case of one organization, this extended to the point where the organization was hesitant to even *measure* what was or was not working when the opportunity was presented to them. A key informant from a capacity building organization not included in the study provided a story of how her organization discouraged her from conducting an impact assessment:

... This survey was potentially harmful to the organization because it could show that we had no impact or a negative impact. It could totally show that. We kind of found a middle ground – we agreed that we wouldn't talk to anyone too much – the funders, the partners – before we had the results. That was difficult because we needed other people's cooperation.... but I think it was an important safeguard anyway for the organization.... So the results might not get published if they are not good for the organization. – BG2 (about a capacity building organization)

Building on this dynamic, there was a general sense that organizations tend to share successes when they get together at cluster meetings, and they tend to ignore failures. This fear of owning failure may be heightened in highly politicized contexts, like Haiti. One key informant felt that organizations would require protection from funders and donors to be able to be candid with each other.

How could they coordinate better? That's a very good question. I suppose to be released from donor and media scrutiny to be able to have that space where you could say "yes, there are things that didn't work and we need to come up with a reflection to see what happened and why and not only how could we have done it better but what are some of the red flags or warnings for anyone else who wants to implement this in another country." But it's just that it's such a sensitive thing and no one really wants to be pinned up as the poster child for failing Haiti's population and it's a very very politicized response, in terms of the global aid situation. – BG1

Two different key informants spoke of situations in which fear of negative consequences led to organizations actively seeking positive external evaluations, or actively discouraging negative external feedback.

Oh yeah. This is something that I think it's a big obstacle to organizational learning is the fact that donors give them money to do an external evaluation.... It can be an external company but that company is always going to be contracted by the organization so if they come up with stuff... even at the relationship level, you know: "I hire you, I've given you a job, you're not going to try to piss me off." - BG1

... I was told when we started not to be too hard, to learn to be positive. ...No matter what, it's a battle. Anytime you're telling people something that they don't want to hear. And they always give you a chance to change it. They give it back to you and they say "well, this sounds like your opinion... you sure you don't want to soften that." But I always do a survey, even if they don't ask me to, so that I have the data. – BG3

These sector-level dynamics ultimately affect learning at the organizational level. In some instances they may go as far as to discourage staff from expressing ideas that may be controversial, even if they represent important knowledge or learning. The following quotes demonstrate this dynamic according to one interviewee:

There is one woman in particular ... she was the only one who saw [the problem] - or rather, ...she was the only who was senior enough and had the balls enough to say something and start pushing it, and know that she wasn't going to get fired like the rest of us. – HA2

This is never something that the World Bank could do. No NGO could really normally do it. We're respected enough of an organization, and we're not too political ...we can navigate this ground a little bit. ... In 2012, these were not things that were being discussed - and everyone knew that we should be discussing it if we wanted to be realistic, but everyone was too afraid to bring it up. – HA2

In addition to the impact it has on individuals, it also affects the types of projects that organizations will pursue, or try to persuade funders to fund. The following quotes are from the reflections of one interviewee on this topic:

I think, internally our own self-interest in being sustainable for ourselves and employees, all these people who make up this big engine ... I think it plays out in decisions that we make as an organization, our level of risk in where we might work, where we might push [our funder] to work. – HA1

There's a lot of pressure and ask for innovation, but at the same time you see a lot of groups following the line because that's what gets funded. ... I feel a fear around going too off conformity, going too off the track, because you don't want to be seen as an outlier. You want to be seen as excelling, but you don't necessarily want to be seen as an outlier. – HA1

Overall these dynamics create an environment that is dangerous for learning, because trying something new becomes risky, as is reflected by two different interviewees from the humanitarian assistance organization interviewed:

These are things that haven't been tried before. Very innovative, very risky for our reputation because the media complains so much. They send someone in for 2-3 days and they need to come back from the camps with a story and these guys don't have time to understand why we do certain things. So every time we do something new it's a risk because we don't know if it's going to work or not. – HA1

Results, pressure, funding, being measured on what you can do, having a success. If you look at over the last forty years and all of the lessons learned and all of the things we keep repeating, the mistakes we keep making. ... Is it reasonable to expect that they're going to adapt in an environment that requires more and more conformity to exist, for the organization to sustain itself? – HA1

Overall, these pieces of information paint a concerning picture of the barriers that the aid sector faces to learning. This research suggests that there are instances in which media and funder-related dynamics have led organizations to: avoid measuring impact; not share lessons from failures; actively discourage negative feedback during evaluations and external assessments; discourage controversial ideas; and view new initiatives as “risky.” This research could not determine whether these negative consequences were all real or if some of them were perceived, but their threat appears to have had real impact on organizational behaviour.

Other Barriers

Interviewees raised a few other dynamics that can pose barriers to sector-level learning. One interviewee reflected on the fact that organizations largely work within their own set of incentives and systems – focused at the project level, and mostly focused on gaining and sustaining funding – and that it is not within any one organization’s mandate to pay attention to the bigger picture. In other words: sector-level learning and adapting is not anyone’s job.

Two interviewees from different organizations identified the challenge posed by the long feedback loops that often exist within international development contexts. The impacts of aid organizations’ actions can be delayed 3, 10, or 20 years, making the learning feedback loop longer and more difficult to track. Additionally, the way that the sector is organized (e.g. development organizations as separate from humanitarian assistance organizations) creates silos that makes sector-level learning even more challenging across these timelines. Interviewees mentioned this specifically in reference to the fact that actions during the disaster response phase can often have huge implications three to five years later (e.g. location of camps can change the social geography and infrastructure needs of a city forever). When the impacts of these actions are truly felt – when this “learning” is taking place – the individuals who made the disaster-situation decisions have long moved onto the next crisis. This reflection is not new – this is a well-known challenge in disaster and development contexts – and yet, the implications that this dynamic has on the ability of the sector to get better and smarter over time remains important.

CHAPTER 6: Analysis and Discussion

This chapter will highlight the most important implications and contributions of the findings. The first part will consider what these findings tell us about the MOCA framework itself; the second part will look at how MOCA was (and was not) employed by organizations in Haiti and what that tells us about the state of organizational learning. The latter part of this chapter will look at the implications of the enablers and barriers that impact positive learning and adaptation practices for aid organization in Haiti.

Many of the findings of this research echo reflections on the aid system and how individuals act within this system, from Berg (2000), Ramalingam (2005), Pasteur (2004) and others. However, the MOCA survey results contribute new quantitative data and the theoretical framework brings a new perspective to some of what we already know, while highlighting some new findings. Together the survey and interview findings provide a useful snapshot of the behaviours of international aid organizations at a point-in-time in Haiti.

Interpreting the MOCA framework

The market orientation and organizational learning literatures, from which many of the MOCA practices were drawn, use weighted frameworks that suggest equal attribution of each practice to performance (or effectiveness). This contradicts how my theoretical framework, and my findings, suggest we should view organizational learning and adaptation.

Non-linearity suggests that small changes in the system can have disproportionate impacts on the result. In other words a very high or very low score on a single MOCA practice could have a *disproportionately* big impact on the ability of the organization to learn and adapt. If we understand organizations to be complex, adaptive systems, it is therefore important to recognize that the MOCA framework is not a checklist. It cannot be understood as a series of behaviours that cumulatively *create* organizational learning, adaptation, or effectiveness. Instead, the MOCA framework needs to be understood as a compilation of organizational practices, behaviours and values that are both *contributors to* and *indicators of* a positive learning and adaptation environment. It is the complex interaction between these factors that create conditions under which organizations *tend* to be more effective.

Given this understanding of the organizational reality, the framework will never be able to provide a recipe for what organizations should do to ensure learning, adaptation, or effectiveness. However, the

MOCA framework can serve as a menu of practices that have been shown to have some connection to performance. This could be a useful starting point for organizations to design a learning and adaptation environment that will best support their unique organization to become more effective.

Contributions of adaptive capacity and complexity absorption to the MOCA framework

While market orientation and organizational learning had previously been applied in the context of aid organizations, adaptive capacity and complexity absorption had not. This section reflects on the extent to which these constructs were helpful in better understanding how aid organization learn and adapt in Haiti, and whether they are useful contributions to the framework.

Complexity absorption

Based on the insights gleaned from the complexity absorption parts of the survey results and the added depth this concept brought to the interviews, complexity absorption seems to be a useful tool for understanding organizational learning, adaptation and effectiveness. As described in the literature review, complexity absorption accounts for the extent to which organizations enable complex interactions *inside* the organization, to be able to deal with complex environments *outside* of the organization.²⁴ This is especially applicable at the organizational strategy level. Even though the research did not find any organizations that are intentionally applying this thinking in their operations, having complexity absorption as part of the MOCA framework highlights some ways in which organizations are employing practices that are consistent with this theory, and highlights other ways in which organizations could leverage these strategies to potentially be more effective in complex environments.

Consider the following example. If an organization is trying to achieve a specific outcome – reducing maternal deaths, for example – complexity absorption might suggest a more resilient strategy for achieving this outcome. This research found that organizations tend to focus on a single project, with a specific objective, intended to achieve an outcome (e.g. increasing the number of doctors in rural areas, will lead to fewer maternal deaths). Complexity absorption suggests that organizations might be better off pursuing multiple objectives at once in an effort to achieve a single outcome (e.g. increasing the number of doctors, conducting education campaigns, and paying mothers to give birth in hospitals). The

²⁴ In the MOCA survey, this part of the literature was represented by questions about who is involved in decision-making, the degree of formalization in processes and management styles, and the number of strategies and goals that an organization prioritizes.

theory suggests that by trying *multiple* approaches it is more likely that *something* will work, or that the multiple approaches could interact in complex and unpredictable ways, creating an environment in which the outcome is more likely to be achieved.

Based on the interviews, it seems that organizations rarely have the option to build multiple approaches into their programs. For example, one organization was focused on setting up a taxation system in a region of Haiti. The project was admittedly high risk – either the tax system would work, and the project would be successful, or the system would fail and so would the project. Complexity absorption thinking might suggest that the organization also undertake simultaneous projects that have their own objectives, but increase the likelihood of a tax system being successful – maybe a democracy education and promotion campaign in the area, or a local economic development initiative that builds consensus and good will among the business community. Of course, for many organizations it is a stretch to secure funding for one major initiative, let alone a portfolio of initiatives geared at the same outcome. It might therefore require a broader shift in thinking across funders and the sector at large for this type of strategy to be implemented.

Interestingly, organizations do seem to incorporate complexity absorption in their pursuit of funding. With the exception of one organization that was focused on a single funder, organizations appear to diversify funding sources as a survival mechanism. One interviewee reported her organization going into a completely different field after the earthquake to leverage the funding that was available, while keeping the long-term vision of the organization in mind. In the context of project work, however, where the outcome is to achieve results for beneficiaries, I found that the external pressures that seem to drive resilient behaviours around funding are not present. This suggests that if organizations are going to realize the benefits of these complexity-informed, resilience generating behaviours, they will need to do so intentionally. Complexity absorption theory provides a useful starting place for organizations to think about how they might build greater resilience into the way they go about project work.

Adaptive capacity

Like complexity absorption, adaptive capacity is a useful and *necessary* addition to our models of organizational learning, adaptation and effectiveness. It focuses on the structures and relationships inside the organization and specifically introduces the ideas of **multiplexity**, **redundancy** and **loose coupling**, theorizing that these three dynamics help an organization be better able to adapt to changes in the external environment. Multiplexity – “the number and diversity of relations between actors in organizations or networks” (Staber & Sydow, 2002, p.414) – is a helpful concept, but it is largely reflected

by practices already found within the organizational learning literature. The major, new contribution of adaptive capacity is the notion of **redundancy**. The organizations in this study appeared to have very little **redundancy** in resources. The data showed that projects tended to be over-ambitious, putting staff in a position to try to deliver projects on unrealistic timelines, giving them little time to reflect or learn. Additionally, the nature of project funding meant that resources were hired on a project-by-project basis, with clear responsibilities and deliverables within the context of the project, but limited connection to long-term effectiveness. This combination led to organizations having very limited “slack resources” with which to try new things or be able to adjust priorities within or across projects.

This lack of redundancy is particularly interesting to examine in the context of the accountability focus that was ubiquitous across organizations. It is easy to understand that a funder would want to see resources fully deployed on a project to feel comfortable that they are getting good value for their money. However, the adaptive capacity theory suggests that in complex environments, organizations may actually be *more* effective (i.e. bring *more* value for money) when they have some slack, provided it is used wisely. This type of thinking forces us to challenge our notions of accountability and organizational effectiveness, and argues that efficiency is actually achieved *through* redundancy – both in terms of time off, as well as slack resources to be able to move people around to different projects and enable experimentation.

Adaptive capacity also introduces the concept of **loose coupling** – the relative autonomy of one part of an organization to adapt independently of the whole. This may be especially important for larger organizations with different “parts” that are big enough to adapt on their own. For smaller organizations, the concept of loose coupling may point to a related, but different challenge. Smaller organizations may be able to adapt quickly, but their resources only allow them to explore one direction at a time. Theoretically, the benefit of a loosely coupled, large organization is that it could explore multiple solutions or approaches simultaneously, being able to test what works and what does not, without risking the health of the whole organization. To an extent, all organizations interviewed applied this concept in so far as they had decentralized their decision making to have major decisions made by managers in Haiti – allowing the project to be relatively autonomous, and loosely coupled with the other projects run by the bigger aid organization.

The benefits or risks associated with size of organization continues to be a question in this study, as well as for other authors looking at learning in aid organizations. It is tempting to conclude that smaller organizations must be better learners because they tend to do better on a number of practices that are

associated with strong learning outcomes - including speed of collaboration and shared vision. This was certainly true in my survey data, and others have found similar results (Ramalingam, 2005, p.36).

However, loose coupling suggests that there may be advantages for organizations that are big enough to be able to experiment as they evolve their way towards more effective solutions – provided they have the coordinating mechanisms to adequately leverage these disparate parts.

It should be noted that the decentralization of decision-making, redundancy of resources, and disconnection of functions can seem counter-intuitive to much of what the fragile state literature discusses as important around coordination and policy coherence. Adaptive capacity points to the fact that flexibility and control are not mutually exclusive, and that finding the threshold of just enough, but not too much coordination is key.

At the sector level, we have a number of aid organizations that are not well connected. It seems that decentralization is taken to a relative extreme without necessarily using the diversity of approaches, redundancy of resource, or the disconnection of different organizations strategically. While this may be understandable, especially in disaster situations – this leads to an aid sector with more chaos than control. One interviewee recounted the experience of showing up in a Haitian town to build a hospital only to find out that the Japanese had already begun construction.

Within organizations, the interview data suggests that we tend to lean the other direction – we place a significant focus on control, with limited redundancy, which means we end up with less diversity, experimentation, and chaos than might be ideal for working with complex problems. While it is not always clear how this balance is best operationalized in organizations or sectors, adaptive capacity provides the theoretical basis to get us asking the right questions.

Overall, both complexity absorption and adaptive capacity strengthen existing ideas found in the market orientation and organizational learning literatures, and introduce new concepts that resonate with the experiences of many interviewees in the study, and add new dimensions to the existing mental models.

How MOCA was employed by organizations in Haiti

This second part of the chapter will analyze and discuss the following findings, which illustrate the extent to which organizations in Haiti employed MOCA practices, and some of the important trends in the survey data.

Summary of Findings:

- Organizations employed between 45% and 86% of MOCA practices.
- Organizations varied significantly on operational complexity: ranging from 20% to 93% of goals and strategies deemed to be important.
- Market orientation and organizational learning practices were more commonly employed than adaptive capacity and complexity absorption practices.
- Humanitarian assistance organizations consistently employed fewer MOCA practices than development organizations (capacity building and “other”).

The variation in the extent to which MOCA practices were employed by organizations is encouraging. While the lower scores demonstrate that some organizations are still a long way from recognizing the benefits of high performance learning, it suggests that it is possible for organizations to employ positive learning behaviours within the existing aid system. In other words – some organizations were able to employ these practices, so others should also be able to do so as well. At the beginning of this research I was curious about whether organizational agency or system dynamics have the greatest impact on behaviour. This research supports the notion that both are very important: While the system level dynamics turned out to shape individual and organizational behaviour in important ways, the variation in scores between organizations operating within this *same* system, justifies an emphasis on the agency of these actors.

At the highest level, my findings show that organizations were generally successful at employing market orientation and organizational learning practices in Haiti, which is consistent with what others have found. Studies by authors like Modi (2012) and Mahmoud & Yusif (2012) show that many aid organizations have been successful at employing these practices in other contexts.²⁵ The strong scores on market orientation and organizational learning indicators across organizations – specifically those indicators related to learning attitudes – could suggest that the significant work on learning in the aid sector over the past 10 to 15 years has had some positive impact. At the very least, the awareness and positive attitudes towards learning, as demonstrated by indicators like “leadership values learning” (employed by 10 of 12 organizations) and “leadership emphasizes knowledge sharing” (employed by 11 of 12 organizations) suggest that attitudes are supportive of learning work.

Organizations employed few practices from complexity absorption and adaptive capacity. There are a number of possible reasons for this dichotomy between the better-established literatures and the

²⁵ We cannot usefully compare this data to other studies due to inconsistency in measurement tools, which makes it difficult to determine if organizations are showing progress overtime.

complexity-informed literatures. It is possible that these results simply reflect the fact that market orientation and organizational learning are well-developed literatures that have been discussed in the development context for many years, while complexity theory is a relatively new concept that is early in its application in the development field. Another possibility is that adaptive capacity and complexity absorption are more difficult to employ. While many of the market orientation and organizational learning practices can be achieved by tweaking existing processes and approaches – some of the adaptive capacity and complexity absorption practices require more significant strategic-level shifts. Or perhaps, some adaptive capacity and complexity absorption practices present specific challenges in fragile state contexts. For example, when asked to rate their organization on a spectrum between “focus on getting things done” and “focus on following formal procedures,” organizations tended to focus on formal procedures. Complexity absorption theory would interpret this high degree of formalization as having a negative impact on effectiveness, because it would limit the ability of individuals to adapt to changing contexts as needed. However, in the interviews, formal procedures were identified as being absolutely critical to organizational effectiveness in Haiti to guard against corruption and rent-seeking behaviours. It may be that, in some instances, formalization is actually the *result* of context-appropriate adaptation, and not necessarily a barrier.

Essentially, the findings suggest that aid organizations in Haiti are employing some important and helpful learning and adaptation behaviours – specifically those that relate to collecting information and valuing learning. However, organizations are not yet “complexity-enabled” – they are not consistently employing complexity-based learning and adaptation practices. This is especially problematic as we move into a paradigm in which the role of aid organizations is less about implementing solutions in a linear, top-down way, and more about supporting the development of solutions to complex problems. Complexity-informed learning and adaptation practices could help organizations be more effective as enablers of change in complex, rapidly changing environments.

In addition to the trends in which *practices* were employed, the findings also show trends in which *organizations* tend to employ them. More specifically, humanitarian assistance organizations tended to employ fewer MOCA practices than development-focused organizations (both capacity building and “other”). There are a number of possible explanations for *why* this correlation might exist. One possibility is that different types of organizations tend to be of different sizes, and size could impact

learning behaviours.²⁶ However, size does not seem to be a plausible explanation for the practices on which the greatest difference was observed. Another possible explanation is that the relationships that different types of organizations have with their beneficiaries shapes learning behaviours. Humanitarian assistance organizations tend to focus on implementation, while capacity building organizations are better characterized as enablers. These different modalities shape behaviours. For example, the necessarily iterative nature of capacity building work might explain why capacity building organizations were more likely to “practice continual improvement.” To further complicate the analysis, humanitarian assistance organizations tend to attract more public donations than capacity building organizations – specifically in post-disaster situations. For at least one of the humanitarian assistance organizations in this study, this meant limited oversight on how the money was spent. It is difficult to determine how lack of donor accountability might impact MOCA practices. It likely impacts how monitoring and evaluation activities are prioritized, but the extent to which this dynamic impacts learning attitudes across the organization is unknown.

All of these factors likely contribute to the difference in MOCA scores between humanitarian assistance and development organizations. However, organizational culture seems to be the most viable explanation for many of the practices on which the greatest difference was recorded, including:

- Openness to outside ideas;
- Leadership emphasizes knowledge sharing;
- Openness to employee contributions;
- Employees have freedom to make decisions; and
- Considers front-line staff experience in decision-making.

Interviewees themselves hypothesized that the military background of many humanitarian assistance organizations, and a culture that emphasizes logistics and operations could contribute to a culture in which learning is more difficult. The findings of the 2002 ALNAP Annual Review, which looked at barriers to learning in the humanitarian sector, is in line with this cultural theory. It identified the potential emotional implication of learning in this context: “where accepting responsibility for a mistake also means taking responsibility for failing to save human lives” (Krohwinkel-Karlsson, 2007, p.16).

While it is difficult to pinpoint *why* the type of organization matters to learning, knowing that there is a difference between types of organizations, is helpful. It may inform the design of future studies to either

²⁶ Humanitarian assistance organizations tended to be bigger than development organizations, which might explain the difference in MOCA scores.

look at one type of organization or to account for the differences between organizations in research design.

Practically, it is worth considering whether the difference in learning capacity between organization types could impact how effective they are in complex environments. This thesis is not enough to conclude that humanitarian assistance organizations are *necessarily* worse learners than capacity building, or other development organizations. If anything, this thesis shows that a tremendous amount can depend on the choices made by the organization, and the agency of individuals within organizations. However, the consistency with which humanitarian assistance organizations were found to score lower than development organization on MOCA practices makes it worth exploring the potential implications of humanitarian assistance organizations being worse learner/adaptors.

Implications of project-level enablers and barriers

The most interesting parts of the project level findings are that learning is largely informal and tacit (held by individuals), and that project staff generally think this is sufficient for them to be effective. The following section explores the implications of these findings, starting with the implications this has for human resource management in aid organizations, and then exploring the implications for aid organization learning and effectiveness more broadly.

Summary of Findings

- The factors that enabled learning and adaptation at the project level where: Quality and competencies of project staff; Working relationships with beneficiaries; Informal learning and adaptation; Flexibility of project staff to adapt.
- The barriers to learning and adaptation at the project level where: Challenges with hiring; Lack of time and space for staff to reflect; Project-focused structures and cultures; Lack of information.

In a number of ways, the findings indicate that people are important to learning and adaptation at the project level. Through their willingness and ability to communicate, to build trusting relationships, to collect information through networks, to take initiative and risks, to internalize and act on new information, to be committed, creative and flexible – the people who make up aid organizations have a huge impact on the organization’s day-to-day effectiveness. For organizations, this means that human resource management is also very important to effectiveness.

The findings suggest at least three ways in which HR policies and practices directly impact the ability of organizations to learn and adapt. The first is recruitment. Interviewees emphasized that the ability of individuals to have meaningful relationships with beneficiaries contributes to learning and effectiveness more directly. This reinforces the fact that language and cultural competencies should be incorporated into recruitment requirements. The survey data showed how challenging this is; the ability to hire and fire were the two *lowest scoring* MOCA practices in the survey, and yet finding the right people appears to have one of the biggest possible positive impacts. The second way in which HR impacts learning, is through the types of employment that is offered (contract or permanent), and contract length. Not only do short contract windows make staff less effective due to lack of networks and relationships, but when employees leave, the organization quickly loses any tacit knowledge that that individual may have gained through their work. Because so much project-level knowledge is stored in the heads and intuitions of staff – organizations need to consider what they are losing when staff cycle through short-term contracts. While project cycles make long-term employment more difficult, I spoke informally with two key informants who were employed by organizations that had found a way have permanent field staff positions, with the intention of keeping them as organizational assets over the long-term. Finally, the fact that most project-level knowledge is predominantly tacit might suggest the need for organizations to become more strategic in how they manage people – their tacit knowledge resources. While knowledge management strategies generally assume that tacit knowledge needs to be translated to explicit knowledge for it to be usefully applied by the organization, the challenges of making tacit knowledge explicit warrants an exploration of alternate approaches. For example, there may be an argument for better managing tacit knowledge by moving people around inside organizations. Imagine a library of applied knowledge resources that could be leveraged by seconding staff members with specific experiences to projects for periods of time. This research adds to past work that highlights the strategic importance of human resources in aid organizations (People in Aid, 2013).²⁷

The emphasis on tacit knowledge at the project level has implications for the quality of organizational learning. Informal, day-to-day learning is clearly important to project success, and likely needs to be better supported. However, formalized measurement of outcomes – data that tells us what is and is not working – plays an important role in learning and adaptation as well, and this is largely missing at the project level. The next paragraphs will look first at how to better leverage informal knowledge, and then at how more formal data could play a role.

²⁷ It should be noted that HR is a strategic priority for at least a few of the organizations in the study.

Project staff have good reasons for placing high value on the informal knowledge that they collect and use in their day-to-day work. This tacit knowledge is based in a specific context; it is about shifting power relationships, navigating buy-in, and determining the acceptability of solutions to key people. This information is critical to getting anything done. While some of this information is captured formally in reports, most of it is ever changing, highly specific and difficult to transfer. This tacit knowledge is held in the brains and intuition of individual staff doing the work – as was reflected by the “just do it” learning referred to in the findings. In fragile state contexts that are fast moving, where impact is hard to measure, and where the definition of success can be highly political – this type of informal learning seems exceptionally well fit-for-purpose.

If this type of learning is so critical, we should consider the ways in which tacit, project-level knowledge can be better leveraged. The fact that staff do not have time and space to reflect and learn highlights an important opportunity. Pasteur (2004) argues that time for reflection allows individuals and groups to more effectively turn information into knowledge. While the information will stay tacit (internalized and difficult to capture), it will become more useful. One of the things that organizations can do is intentionally create space and opportunities for field staff to reflect on their personal experiences to maximize their ability to use what they know. Similarly, organizations can enable group reflection to further leverage tacit knowledge held by individuals. The “learning sessions” employed by one organization – in which they hosted regular day-long retreats with their partners – is an example of how organizations can use reflection and dialogue to make better use of individual and collective tacit knowledge. The process serves as an experiential feedback loop to guide the project direction, while simultaneously aligning and updating the understanding and behaviours of everyone involved.

The emphasis on informally held knowledge, brings new importance to the MOCA framework, because adaptive capacity and complexity absorption both account for ways of managing tacit knowledge as an *alternative* to trying to make tacit knowledge explicit. Loose coupling, strategic complexity, and redundancy are all structural concepts that enables interaction and creates the environment in which learning and adaptation can happen, that are *consistent* with the informal reality that seems to make up much of the existing learning behaviour going on inside aid organizations. As Staber and Sydow suggest, “multiplexity creates a capacity for the evolution of a ‘shared organizational mind’, because information can spread throughout the system and can be accessed from a variety of points of view” (2002, p.414).

Even if informal knowledge dominates the project level, the fact that project managers did not generally have any objective evidence to support their day-to-day work suggests that there is untapped potential

for more systematic, formalized knowledge generation. There are a number of reasons that explicit knowledge – observable, measurable fact – is important. First, the number and diversity of projects underway at any given time represents huge potential for systematic, explicit knowledge generation and it is a waste not to take advantage of the opportunity. Second, while informal knowledge is important, it is limited in the scope of its application. It is very difficult to use tacit knowledge to objectively compare different approaches or answer bigger questions about what effective aid looks like. Concrete measurements and data make extrapolation easier. Third, there is a limit to what we can “know” through informal information. The work of Daniel Kahneman and others on heuristics proves to us that, overall we are incredibly poor intuitive statisticians, and that having objective measurements to inform human intelligence is critical to obtaining an accurate reflection of reality. Monitoring our impact in formal ways could provide the check and balance feedback needed to help individuals make better day-to-day decisions, and organization make better long-term investments.

Discovering the mechanisms by which organizations can integrate more formal measurement tools into the project level is a challenge. The findings reflect that it is not easy, either logistically, or in terms of buy-in with project managers, to do this work. The next section reflects on the challenges associated with leveraging accountability-based monitoring and evaluation systems for learning.

Implications of organization-level enablers and barriers

Of all the challenges associated with learning and adaptation for aid organizations, organization level barriers might be the most complex and difficult to overcome. This section will explore the implications of these challenges in four parts: monitoring and evaluation; informal learning and breaking silos; the corporate learning function; and the lack of learning feedback loops.

Summary of Findings

- The factors that enabled learning and adaptation at the organization level where: Corporate learning functions; Monitoring and Evaluation; Informal sharing and learning opportunities.
- The barriers to learning and adaptation at the organization level where: Barriers to using monitoring and evaluation data for learning; Focus on accountability to the funder; Project-based silos and cycles; Cultural barriers to learning; Organizations lack of feedback loops.

Monitoring and evaluation systems appear to be the best vehicle for the more *formal* part of knowledge generation at the organization level. The findings show that corporate-level advisors place heavy emphasis on these systems, but they were almost never mentioned by project-level staff – either front-line staff or field managers – when discussing learning. This disconnect suggests that it is worth better understanding the challenges and barriers to being able to use monitoring and evaluation as learning tools. As was partially described at the project-level, the findings showed five major barriers:

- 1) It is challenging to collect useful monitoring data on complex social problems;
- 2) Project staff often do not have the time, space or skill to collect useful monitoring data;
- 3) Project staff have little incentive to do this work, and learning advisors have little influence beyond their personal relationships with project staff to entice them to invest time in data collection;
- 4) The lack of organization-wide vision and strategic priority on using monitoring data for learning makes it hard to get buy-in;
- 5) It is difficult (both technically and politically) to achieve consistency of indicators, which makes it difficult to compare data across projects.

While one could imagine strategies for addressing each of these challenges separately, the overlying culture that depicts monitoring and evaluation as a funder-driven activity makes any progress even more difficult. It seems logical that if project staff do not see the value of monitoring activities to their work, they are likely to do the minimum to meet funder requirements. This often means depending heavily on endline assessments and external evaluations. However, even the limited data that was collected for funders did not seem to be consistently applied for learning purposes in the project context. The learning advisor model may serve to further reinforce this disconnect, as it suggests that learning is someone else's job – something that someone pesters you about while you are busy with your core responsibilities (e.g. saving lives, building capacity, etc).

This raises the possibility of working with project staff to change the way they see monitoring – to demonstrate concrete value of monitoring efforts within the project context. Given the challenges, it may be helpful to formalize knowledge generation in ways that are highly targeted – starting small and scaling up. Wherever possible, these efforts should support project-level decisions making, and come with funding and organizational-level support. Additional data collection will likely not be a priority for project managers who feel that they are able to manage their projects without this type of data, and do not have the time, space and knowledge to do this well. Overtime, there may be some monitoring and evaluation approaches that are better integrated with project management, which could make them easier to implement at the project level. For example, outcome mapping is a monitoring process that is

based in an ongoing conversation with partners, and could potentially integrate more easily with project management and day-to-day decision-making, than results based management or other frameworks.

Monitoring and evaluation provides the opportunity to strengthen formal knowledge development. In parallel to these efforts, there seems to be significant potential to improve the use of *informal* knowledge through better connections across project silos in aid organizations. While the findings showed occasional efforts to bring people together in retreats and conference settings, only one of the organizations interviewed indicated structures that intentionally create this day-to-day flow of information.

Establishing structures, processes and cultures that support consistent information flow is a necessary part of complexity-informed learning practices. Part of this flow, is creating opportunities for the organization to grapple with the evolving meaning of information – or how we collectively conceptualize what we know. This process of reflection allows for tacit information to be better leveraged and is the basis of the “shared organizational mind.” This whole systems philosophy of learning and adaptation requires a bit of faith – it is not as visible as databases full of “lessons learned” or big investments in learning conferences. It is meetings, and listening, and the messiness of trying to understand how different experiences make sense within an emerging picture of a shared vision, and common reality. It requires that we value the knowledge and understanding that is built up in the minds and intuitions of individuals within organizations – even if it is difficult to capture on paper. Enabling this type of learning – this nurturing of the shared organizational mind, requires a different set of skills than those needed by traditional knowledge managers. As Pasteur points out:

The implications of this type of learning for an organization are thus less to do with knowledge management systems and processes, and more concerned with developing new tools for dialogue and holistic analysis, and attitudes and skills for working collaboratively (2004, p.6).

The findings from this research suggest that it is in mixing two elements – strong data on what is working and not working across multiple projects, along with strong dialogue to continually update a shared understanding of the work – that could present real opportunity for organizations to leverage learning for effectiveness.

If we understand both explicit (or formal) and tacit (or informal) knowledge to be important, it provides an interesting lens through which to consider the role of the corporate learning advisor. The fact that all of the organizations interviewed had invested in some form of organization-level learning advisor indicates a consistent interest in learning. This is positive. However, regardless of intention, the learning

functions observed within the course of this research were implemented within significant system constraints, which made the results of their work feel somewhat superficial – a shadow of the promises made by the knowledge management and learning literatures.

The role of learning advisors has shifted over the years, and seems to be facing a bit of an identity crisis. According to one interviewee, the traditional knowledge manager role was focused on document creation and passing around lessons learned.²⁸ Organizations were trying to convert tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge through case studies, webinars, and other information sharing strategies, but these strategies alone seem to have limited impact. One interviewee even commenting that he felt these contributed limited “value add.” From conversations with learning advisors in two of the three organizations interviewed, it seems the scope and purpose of the new learning advisor is still in the process of being defined. This analysis has identified a number of potential roles for these advisors that range from a focus on explicit knowledge generation (monitoring and evaluation focus), to facilitating better cross sharing and discussion of tacit knowledge (the development of a shared organizational mind). Whatever the scope of corporate learning advisors, this research suggests the importance of embedding learning as a strategic priority for everyone in the organization. Alone, learning advisors will have limited impact.

Building on the technical and procedural challenges associated with generating and leveraging knowledge in aid organizations, the findings also point to system pressures – incentive systems – that impact organization-level learning behaviour. The findings show that aid organizations lack selection pressure that would tie improvement to survival. This means that any effort to learn or adapt to make aid more effective is driven by internal initiative; it is not incentivized from the outside. As we model learning, we can therefore not assume that continuous improvement is a given for aid organizations. In other words, the natural evolution theory of organizational change is less applicable in this instance. Unlike in the corporate sector, performance is not maximized as a natural by-product of operations. In fact, the findings showed the opposite – that aid organizations seem to be able to continue to exist and attract funds even if they are not able to concretely demonstrate results.

This lack of survival imperative is problematic because it makes learning a *nice-to-do investment*. It is understandable when individuals and organizations focus first on what *must* get done before they focus on the *nice-to-dos*, and this reality is reflected by the priority that organizations place on project

²⁸ This is supported by the knowledge management conference on indicators (Mansfield, et al., 2013)

implementation and accountability to donors over investment in getting better at serving beneficiaries. If we want aid organizations to learn, adapt, and become more effective, we therefore need to look to other mechanisms to encourage these behaviours. Options include changing the system to find levers that push organizations to become more effective, *or* support the individuals and organizations that are investing in learning, despite the lack of incentive for them to do so. Below I will briefly explore both of these options.

The most obvious system lever is the funders. Theoretically, funders could leverage their influence over organizations to better drive learning behaviour. However, it would likely be very difficult for funders to force genuine learning through administrative requirements. The funder feedback loop is notorious for driving “box-checking” behaviours, which is not likely to be helpful. Additionally, greater consequences for failing to achieve results could increase risk averseness and further disincentivize open learning environments. Instead, funders may be better positioned to play a role in creating space for organizations to drive their own learning. For example, funders may be able to encourage organizations to better leverage evaluation processes for learning by supporting different formats for evaluations.

Beneficiaries might be the ideal system lever, however this research only found one instance in which beneficiaries provided feedback about organization-level operations. The power differential between beneficiaries and aid organizations might make a beneficiary feedback loop difficult to meaningfully operationalize.

Innovative work on mechanisms like social impact bonds and cash on delivery aid try to address this system-based challenge by attaching organizational survival to achieving results. By flipping the primary organizational driver from donor accountability to achieving objective results, these new funding systems allow organizations to focus on learning and adaptation. This is an exciting possibility, however their current application is limited to a few areas in which it is relatively easy to track results objectively – and for which there is clear financial return that warrants public investment. Further work in this area could reveal other ways to bend the system to prioritize learning.

An important finding of this research is that the mechanism by which the system constrains learning is *not* necessarily by limiting authority to make changes to projects. In fact, all interviewees felt they were allowed to make any changes that were needed within their project, to make it more effective. The constraints were much more directly related to time, the priority placed on learning functions, and the extent to which individuals were willing to go above and beyond what was required of them to seek more effective solutions. The alternative to changing system drivers is to continue the slow and difficult

process of changing behaviour within the system. This research found that aid staff were generally interested in getting better and smarter at what they do, and so targeted and consistent efforts by aid organizations to advance the learning agenda has potential to continue making slow progress.

Implications of sector-level enablers and barriers

Sector-level learning matters because most of the problems that aid organizations are trying to address are complex, social problems that cannot be addressed by one organization alone. As one interviewee reflected:

It's not something that one organization could ever do – it's such a complex issue ...there is no one organization that could answer the problem. You have to work together, but there is no incentive to work together. So it really takes these individuals being willing to work across institutions. – HA2

To a large extent, the dynamics at the sector level reflect the dynamics at the organization level, with the added complication of greater public scrutiny and competition for funding. This section explores the implications of these findings.

Summary of Findings

- The factors that enabled learning and adaptation at the sector level where: Informal networks and information sharing; the media; and Individual contributions.
- The barriers to learning and adaptation at the sector level where: Challenges applying sector-level knowledge; Risk aversion and the negative consequences of failure; and other barriers.

Just like at the organization level, there is a recognition that sector-level learning is important, which is reflected by the investment in learning clusters, and other information sharing opportunities in Haiti. Even though the direct impact of clusters on organizational behaviour is questionable, they represent an opportunity for tacit knowledge sharing and establishing cross-organizational connections that increase the multiplexity of the sector overall. Similarly, the commitment to publish evaluations online – made by one organization – demonstrates an effort to open up information flows and support sector-level learning. However, in these examples of information sharing and exchange, it is unclear to what extent organizations are open about what did *not* work. The one cluster meeting that I attended was an opportunity for an organization to discuss a major project success. The limited number of publically available evaluations that I reviewed were largely positive, and focused on what was *achieved* over the course of the project. If these opportunities for exchange are used primarily to promote successes, it

might actually discourage learning by perpetuating a sector culture that discourages failure and further entrenches the risk averseness that was evident in the findings.

The findings around risk averseness suggest that there are real disincentives for organization and individuals to actively pursue learning activities, like measuring and tracking progress, and identifying and learning from failure. While these are largely sector-level dynamics, they have an impact at the organization-level learning as well. If an organization does not want to admit failure publicly, it is probably less open to admitting failure within the organizational ranks as well.

The sector level presents the opportunity for organizations to collaborate strategically to leverage the diversity of projects that exist across organizations as parallel experiments. If five organizations are each implementing rental subsidies slightly differently, there is an opportunity to measure the results of each and draw conclusions about the most effective approach. This type of analysis is difficult for one organization to do alone – certainly in a timely manner. It was unclear to what extent clusters were able to realize the benefits of this type of approach, but if it was happening, it was not mentioned by interviewees. Of course, the practicalities of such an undertaking are daunting. Organizations in this study found it nearly impossible to coordinate data collection across multiple projects in the *same* organization for useful comparison. The implementation of such a system across projects in *different* organizations would require even greater organizational commitment and shared belief in the collective benefit.

It is also important to note that, even when clear learning is generated and publicized at the sector level – for example, in the case of rental subsidies – interviewees indicated that there is no external mechanism to hold organizations accountable for applying these lessons. This lack of accountability for applying what we know ultimately has a negative impact on beneficiaries. It also suggests that when we study organizational learning, we need to go beyond assessing an organization's capacity to identify lessons, and account for the extent to which it can *hold itself accountable* for applying these lessons in its own work. With no obvious way to *require* organizations to make these changes, it seems that this translation of sector-level lessons into practices can only be done through conscious choices made by individuals within organizations.

At the organization level there is a *lack of incentive* for learning behaviour; at the sector level there are real *disincentives*. These disincentives make sector learning even more dependent on individuals acting against the pressures, and taking risks to move the sector forward. The fact that we can observe

examples of sector-level learning happening may mean that the system alone does not dictate outcomes; individual agency has an important role to play in the extent to which learning is prioritized.

This disconnect between system forces and individual behaviour raises interesting questions about what drives learning behaviours: under what conditions do individuals go above and beyond to make aid more effective for their beneficiaries, despite the forces that push them not to? Within the structural dynamics that disincentivized learning, can organizations create learning cultures that counteract these forces?

As was discussed at the organizational level, there might be some ways in which these disincentives can be minimized (e.g. through shifting funder relationships, providing incentives for cooperation, etc.) but this seems unlikely to have a significant impact. Instead, organizations may need to find ways to leverage culture and structures to protect themselves from the disincentives in the system, and enable individuals to engage in learning, anyway.

Impact of fragility on learning and adaptation practices

Everything that happens here is a caricature. You see all the flaws of everything - blown out of proportion. More money, more organizations, bigger need, smaller space, weaker state - everything. – HA1

This research did not explicitly seek to determine whether fragile contexts require different learning approaches, however the findings of this research do suggest some insights that might begin to answer this question.

First, it is important to note that, when asked, Interviewees did not feel that the “fragile state” nature of Haiti changed how the organization needed to operate. Interviewees generally noted that because each country context is unique – including each fragile state – each country requires a similar, context-based approach. The following quotes are representative of the general sentiment of interviewees on the subject.

... My first thought would be each context is different. And at the same time because each context is different, each context needs to be approached similarly. I don't think there's a fundamental difference in working in Haiti now or working in Cambodia. – CB2

You need program objectives, develop your program, see what supports you need in order to be able to implement your program. In order to do what you want to do, you need to figure out what people you need, what capabilities you need, build the profiles, and then tell the people what they need to do. Then give them a manual to tell them how they can do what they need to do. Of course

this can look different in different situations, but in principle this is not rocket science how to run an organization. It's not because this is a humanitarian organization that the management principles would be different. – HA1

However, interviewees did identify a number of dynamics that they felt were unique, or especially important, in Haiti, many of which are directly related to definitions of state fragility. Interviewees identified the hyper-politicized nature of Haiti; the attitude towards outsiders; the importance of cultural norms in relationship building; a history of dependency that carries over into relationships today; the potential for corruption; the lack of clarity on legal issues; and the challenging geography, as factors that are specific to Haiti that impact how they need to operate.

While none of these dynamics alone necessarily mean that the learning environment in Haiti is different than it would be in other places, some of these dynamics directly relate to the barriers found at the project, organization, and sector levels.

For example, the importance of cultural norms and building relationships in Haiti impacts what it takes to be effective at the project level. The highly politicized nature of Haiti (and likely other fragile states), introduces additional fear of perceived failure, and barriers to suggesting politically controversial ideas. While interviewees did not feel that learning and adaptation was different in fragile states when asked directly, their reflections and comments about the particularities of working in Haiti may suggest otherwise.

CHAPTER 7: Recommendations and Conclusions

This section will summarize the major findings and contributions of this research and connect it to the broader vision of aid effectiveness. It also provides recommendations for consideration by organizations seeking to become better learner/adaptors.

Summary

This thesis set out to capture a snapshot of how international aid organizations learn and adapt in Haiti at a particular moment in time. It used a survey and interviews to understand the extent to which aid organizations employ a set of practices, drawn from four learning literatures that show a positive correlation with effectiveness (the MOCA framework). The MOCA scale that was used in the survey was

not validated as part of this research, but draws heavily on three survey tools that have been previously validated in the literature. Through this research I discovered more about what enables learning for these organizations, and the barriers that make learning and adaptation more difficult.

At the highest level, this study found that aid organizations in Haiti are best at collecting information and developing knowledge about their beneficiaries (market orientation). They are reasonably able to question and reflect on that knowledge (organizational learning). Generally, they are poor at organizing their people and their work in a way that balances structure and chaos to maximize effectiveness, and poor at strategically using their experiences to iteratively learn and improve (adaptive capacity and complexity absorption).

Capacity building, and other development-focused organizations were better learner/adaptors than humanitarian assistance organizations overall. However organizations showed significant variation in practices within each of these categories suggesting that all organizations have space, and agency, to improve.

This research found that the major barriers to learning and adaptation were largely based in system dynamics and structural barriers, while the enablers were largely based in individual agency and human dynamics.

Enablers included informal learning at the project level, enabled by staff's relationships. Individuals also drove organization and sector-level initiatives that actively advanced effectiveness of aid interventions. Corporate learning functions were found to enable learning, but had varied ability to influence operations. Sector-level cluster meetings were found to enable information sharing, but have undetermined impact on other elements of learning and adaptation.

Major barriers to learning and adaptation included HR – difficulty hiring the right people (staff that can drive learning and effectiveness), and firing the wrong people. Staff lacked time, space and support for reflection, which they saw as related to project-focused structures and cultures, and lack of evidence on what is and is not working. Importantly, staff felt they *did* have the necessary authority to make changes to projects. Organizations were focused on project delivery and accountability, and lacked external pressure to become more effective. Furthermore, organizations faced disincentives to contribute to sector-level learning; barriers included the need to focus on areas of funder interest, to demonstrate success, and to protect reputational capital in the eyes of media and public.

This project was based in a theoretical framework that recognized both natural evolution and social dynamics as important influencers of organizational change. These findings suggest that, while both forces are real and need to be considered, social dynamics seem to have a greater impact on how aid organizations change – how they learn and adapt. Because the aid organizations in this study were not driven to change by selection pressure that would lead to natural evolution (i.e. nothing in the system penalized them for ineffectiveness), the aid organizations in this study were largely reliant on social dynamics to spur change. Interestingly, there seem to be many instances where social dynamics have been effective at pushing towards better learning and adaptation practices. However the continued non-compulsory nature of this work makes progress slow and difficult.

Contribution

There are three areas in which this research provides helpful contributions to the existing literature, and to our understanding of aid effectiveness. First, these findings provide new data – both quantitative and qualitative insights – into the operational realities of aid organizations operating in fragile state environments. As we continue to focus on how aid can be effective in fragile contexts, it is helpful to be grounded in data about how work is carried out. While a number of the findings of this study had already been observed, this research confirmed that many of the barriers and enablers that have been previously discussed, remain true for aid organization in Haiti in 2014.

Second, this research developed and tested a new framework of learning and adaptation practices that bring together disparate parts of the literature to build a more comprehensive picture of how we should think about organizational learning and adaptation in aid organizations. The MOCA framework is better aligned with the new “complexity-informed” paradigm that is emerging in international development, in which aid organizations are increasingly expected to play a catalytic role in supporting local actors to evolve context-appropriate solutions. The interview findings suggest that complexity absorption and adaptive capacity are useful in seeing and understand realities faced by aid organizations, including structural and strategic barriers and enablers that impact effectiveness. The MOCA framework could be further tested, modified, and built upon in the future.

Third, this research raises questions about the impact of fragility – or highly complexity operating environments – on how aid organizations need to operate to be effective. While interviewees did not attribute how they work to Haiti’s fragility, the findings show both micro (e.g. the importance of individual interactions) and macro (e.g. heightened risk aversion), which seem amplified due to

conditions associated with fragility. If learning and adaptation are even more important in volatile conditions, but the conditions associated with fragility make learning more difficult, it may be worth investing additional efforts in understanding how aid organizations can become better learner/adaptors in fragile conditions.

Finally, this research helps to raise a flag of concern around the fact that humanitarian assistance organizations, as a category, lag behind other development organizations in their learning and adaptation practices. While we cannot conclude why this is the case, this finding has implications for how humanitarian assistance organizations think about their own effectiveness, and how funders think about selecting organizations to support the evolution of solutions to complex problems and fragile states.

Overall, these findings show that the aid system does not drive organizations to learn, to adapt, or to become more effective. Currently, we rely on individuals and organizations making the conscious choice to pursue learning strategies for little reason other than because it is the right thing to do, and often in the face of significant challenges – both practical and political. To improve the capacity of the sector to learn and adapt towards greater aid effectiveness, we essentially have two options. We can fundamentally change the aid system to create conditions in which natural evolution can exist. Where there is selection pressure that drives aid organizations to learn and adapt towards effectiveness – an avenue currently being explored through social impact bonds and cash on delivery aid. Or, we can accept that learning will need to continue to be driven by social dynamics, and support the inspired individuals and organizations that are actively shouldering the responsibility of continually improving their ability to serve beneficiaries.

With so many aid initiatives taking place around the globe, there is no need to choose. It is essential that we continue to pursue both options – finding the system hacks that make the pursuit of effectiveness a *must do* for aid organizations, while changing the culture of the aid system to encourage the learning behaviours – of both individuals and organizations – that ultimately make aid more effective.

Regardless of how we get there – whether by changing the system or by individual initiatives, or both – international aid organizations will need to be strong learner/adaptors if they are going to play a constructive role in supporting system-level aid effectiveness. The New Deal for Fragile States calls on a diversity of actors to take part in the work of peacebuilding and statebuilding, using a number of national-level tools and processes to support collaboration and joint learning. If international aid

organizations are going to be a credible actor at the system-level, they will need to demonstrate competence and commitment to learning in their projects, and within their own organizations.

Donais highlights the paradox of achieving local ownership of statebuilding and peacebuilding efforts, through international pressure like the pressure exerted through the New Deal processes and structures (2009). He recognizes that local ownership is essential, and that international engagement likely needs to be part of the solution, but that appropriate international engagement will require a ‘delicate balancing act.’ This research helps question whether or not international aid organizations can play a constructive role in achieving Donais’ delicate balancing act.

International aid organizations are not natural learner/adaptors, and they are at high risk of acting in their own best interest. These system-driven characteristics make international aid organizations risky partners in peacebuilding and statebuilding work that requires, amongst other things, high levels of trust. Without long-standing, hard-earned credibility at the local level, the participation of international aid organizations may actually erode local ownership and drive cynicism.

However, this research re-emphasizes the importance of the local, the informal, and the slow-growing, trust-based relationships that are essential to the work of many international aid organizations in Haiti. At their best, aid organizations have long-standing relationships with local players, as well as knowledge of the national and international aid effectiveness dialogue. If aid organizations can excel at learning and adapting *with* their local partners, some NGOs may in fact, be well positioned to help find Donais’ delicate balance between local ownership and international initiatives like the New Deal. If they are to be successful at this work of supporting local partners in the slow process of evolving national-level solutions, they will need to be exceptional learner/adaptors themselves. For that, most of the organizations in this study have significant work to do.

Recommendations for Organizations

“We can design our institutions and societies to be better or worse evolvers.”

(Ramalingam, 2013, p.234)

This research provides a snapshot of organizations in their *current state*, as they try to be effective in Haiti – their current learning and adaptation capabilities, and the enablers and barriers that they face. The theories that inform the MOCA framework present a potential *future state*: a vision for what organizational learning behaviours could look like. This section will start from the current reality and

identify areas of possible investment that could help aid organizations advance their ability to be strong learners/adaptors. It is worth re-emphasizing that meaningful, effective, learning and adaptation cannot be achieved as a checklist – instead the capability needs to be evolved in the context of a specific organization – much like the development solutions these organizations seek to implement. As organizations iteratively explore their unique approach, they can do a number of things to create an environment in which learning and adaptation are more likely to emerge.

1. Whole Organization Commitment

Recognizing that one or two individuals in an organization cannot meaningfully achieve organizational learning and adaptation, the following three recommendations emphasize the importance of a whole organizational commitment to learning and adaptation.

1.1 Recognize that learning will need to be internally driven

This research suggests that there are not likely to be any external drivers that will force organizations to become more effective. It will need to come from inside. This requires consistent, renewed commitment by organizations to find ways of encouraging desired behaviours through structures, processes and cultures.

1.2 Make learning an organizational priority

Because there are no external drivers that incentivize learning, it may be more challenging for organizations to make learning and adaptation a priority. Even so, this organizational commitment is essential to making any progress. Because organizational learning is *extremely difficult* for aid organizations, progress will only be made if it is seen as a priority. Simply put, initiatives that are likely to have an impact (e.g. leveraging structures and strategies for learning; providing staff more time for reflection; designing HR policies for learning) require a conscious shift towards thinking about learning as an organizational strategy. This will only be achieved with the buy-in of the organization, and appropriate priority.

1.2 Take an organizational systems view

Making learning a priority is especially important because the most significant changes that aid organizations need to make, are at the organizational level. This research suggested that aid organizations already collect information and value learning. They are not yet able to design structures or strategies to improve their ability to learn and adapt. Aid organizations need to move beyond sharing best practices and documenting lessons learned, and start thinking about how they can leverage structure and strategy to develop learning approaches that consider the whole organizational system. Examples of organization-level learning strategies might include:

- **Facilitate informal flows of information and ideas.** Set up work structures that cross projects. Move staff around projects to build their knowledge and capacity. Convene staff regularly to advance collective thinking around the big questions that guide organizations' work.
- **Incorporate a learning and adaptation lens into your business development strategy.** By using a learning lens, business development could help organizations identify and pursue projects to intentionally learn that which will help them become more effective.
- **Consider learning or research partnerships.** The diversity of projects being undertaken simultaneously in similar contexts by multiple organizations provides an opportunity to invest in useful, applied learning. This could be amplified through research-focused partnerships. Sector-level initiatives like the New Deal may present opportunities for international aid organizations to engage more formally in sector-level learning that could help drive organizational learning and adaptation.

2. Identify Opportunities for Incremental Improvement

While a whole organization approach will likely be necessary for organizations to see long-term sustained benefits from a learning and adaptation strategy, this approach does not necessarily mean making massive capital investments. The following two recommendations suggest an incremental approach to leverage what is already being done and manage change strategically.

2.1 Make the best possible use of existing learning assets and projects

Many organizations already have requirements that lead them to invest in different learning elements. It may be helpful for organizations to consider the ways in which existing evaluations, monitoring and reporting requirements and cross-project meetings could be better leveraged to drive broader learning. This approach could provide some “quick wins” that help the whole organization see the benefit of a learning approach. If organizations keep asking themselves: *“how can we leverage what we are already doing to make us better and smarter at what we do,”* they may discover numerous ways that small incremental investments could result in significant advancements in their learning and adaptation capacity.

2.2 Invest in monitoring and evaluation approaches that bring value at the project-level

This research found that one of the barriers to organizational learning is getting the buy-in of project staff who are busy and do not always see the value in monitoring data. If organizations focus on monitoring approaches that support project-level decision-making, and are truly useful to project staff, they may find it easier to secure this critical buy-in. The specific approach might look different for organizations engaged in different types of work.

3. Focus on Social Dynamics

This research suggests that there are few pressures that would cause aid organizations to naturally evolve towards greater effectiveness. This suggests that, largely, organizations depend on inspired,

engaged, intelligent individuals to drive learning, adaptation and effectiveness – both at the project level and the organization level. As such, aid organizations are well-served by focusing on social dynamics – and specifically creating the conditions in which individuals and groups can exhibit the learning and adaptation behaviours that will make the organization more effective.

3.1 Focus on Human Resources

This research shows that, especially at the project level, individuals' cultural competencies matter. Organizations can focus on hiring people who are able to build the relationships that will help their organization be adaptive, and who have the skills and judgment needed to use both informal and formal information in decisions making.

Organizations can also consider how HR policies (e.g. contract types, lengths, compensation), impact the extent to which staff engage in learning and adaptation behaviours.

3.2 Facilitate individual and group reflection

Staff identified time and space as a major barrier to learning. Organizations may find that learning is improved simply by creating the time and space (the redundancy of resources) for project staff to consider the future of their project based on their own experiences.

Similarly, organizations may want to invest in the organizational routines and processes that facilitate groups to share these experiences and create meaning together. This is the basis of developing “mental models,” or shared conceptualizations of the work. For some organizations, these mental models may help maintain alignment as a team learns and adapts within a context that is continuously changing.

3.2 Protect and reward individuals who exhibit learning behaviours

Organizations are highly dependent on individuals going out of their way to improve the practice of aid. Organizations can help by protecting and rewarding individuals who experiment, measure results, adapt, and drive a learning agenda. If organizations can create conditions in which learning behaviours are valued – where these behaviours are seen to be less of a personal risk – they may be able to encourage more learning effort from the individuals whose actions create the emergent reality of the organization. Without their individual actions, *organizational* learning cannot happen.

Perhaps most importantly, organizations need to take a learning approach to learning. There is no prescription for the perfect learning and adaptation approach. Rather, learning itself requires continuous adaptation and improvement. As learning and adaptation continues to gain a higher profile in the aid industry, organizations may be able to garner some reputational benefit from investing in learning and adaptation initiatives. As organizations implement learning strategies, they may benefit from being able to articulate how an intentional learning and adaptation strategy makes them a more effective aid organization.

Future research

The broad nature of this study has provided ample opportunity to identify areas of future research. In order to advance the ability of aid organizations to leverage learning and adaptation towards greater aid effectiveness, it would be helpful to have more knowledge in the following areas.

First, it would be helpful to better understand knowledge translation, especially within a complexity-based theoretical framework. In what ways can aid organizations best translate project-level knowledge to be applied in other places and times? How can we balance the need for context-specificity with the opportunity to learn from what has already been done? The dual need to be context-sensitive, and to build on best existing knowledge seems to require more art than science and could be supported with additional research. In relation to this challenge, it might be helpful to look more closely at how new processes – innovations in social technology – like Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) might be operationalized by development and humanitarian assistance organizations in fragile states. Does PDIA improve learning, adaptation and effectiveness in fragile contexts?

There are two other challenges facing aid organizations that are about balance: that art of finding the middle ground, or maybe even the edge of chaos. The first is finding the balance between multiplexity (interactional complexity) and efficiency in a project-based environment. How can organizations maximize day-to-day office efficiencies (i.e. not spend all day in meetings), while also ensuring the interaction and alignment across the organization that will support learning? This research provided evidence that organizations are generally too far in one direction – they tend to work in project silos and spend limited time sharing information or reflecting together on their shared direction. The theory suggests that more interaction would improve learning, but loose coupling remains important so that projects can continue to adapt based on their own contexts. Additional research into how to find this balance and what – practically— this could look like would be helpful.

The other balancing game is around formalization. It was clear that many organizations in Haiti felt a strong drive to formalize internal financial processes to manage the risks associated with moving money around in Haiti. It would be helpful to better understand when high degrees of formality are more effective, and how can this be mixed with complexity-based approaches that suggest a benefit of greater openness and flexibility.

The third area for further research would be to better understand the different learning dynamics between humanitarian assistance and development organizations. Do humanitarian assistance and

development organizations have the same learning needs? In what ways should their learning approaches be the same or different? Do they require different approaches to learning to maximize their effectiveness at their different types of work?

Fourth, it would be helpful to understand how different HR approaches might impact effectiveness. Do HR approaches (e.g. longer-term contracts, more professional development, career-management approaches, and intentional development of local resources) help capitalize on the importance of relationships that was emphasized in this research, to make aid organizations more effective in fragile states? While some work has been done in this area, there is more to understand – specifically in how it can be usefully applied by aid organizations.

Fifth, it is likely worth investigating the system-based disincentives to sector-level learning in more detail. It was unclear in this research the extent to which those disincentives were real or perceived. There was some evidence to suggest that the risk to individuals in engaging in learning behaviours depended on the culture of the organization – it may be that some organizations are more susceptible to system based pressures like reputational risk in the eyes of the media and the public. Additional research could help clarify to what extent these system-based disincentives are real and how severe the consequences really are.

Finally, it might be particularly enlightening to learn from aid organizations that are working within different aid-funding systems (e.g. social impact bonds, cash on delivery aid). The premise of these alternate funding systems is to change the incentive system for organizations; essentially creating natural evolution pressure that should drive learning and adaptation. It would be very interesting to determine if individuals and organizations working in these systems exhibit different learning behaviours. How? What can that tell us about how other organizations might be able to become more effective?

Conclusion

Learning represents potential: potential for individuals to get wiser; for organizations to get better at what they do; and for whole sectors to become more effective. Based on this study, the aid sector has a long way to go before it maximizes its potential for learning. It continues to face a number of significant difficulties in embedding learning in aid work. The addition of complexity-informed approaches to how we think about learning and adaptation could bring aid organizations to a new level of continuous

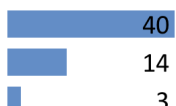
improvement, more effectively converting good intentions into the development outcomes that are so needed by people around the world. But recognizing this potential will require considerable, sustained commitment from aid organizations for which learning is not an imperative, in a system that drives a narrow focus on the next project.

Even under these conditions, individuals have demonstrated that their own, intrinsic drive to get better – whether that is driven by a desire to serve others, or simply to be good at what they do – can be a powerful force for organizational learning. To the extent that aid organizations are able to empower and nurture this intrinsic drive, and minimize forces that extinguish it, they may be able to create the conditions in which increasingly effective aid can evolve.

Finding a way to bring learning and adaptation to the centre of how aid is organized and delivered will be essential for aid effectiveness in the coming years. If international aid organizations are able to be strong learner/adaptors, they may be able to play an important role in the broader aid effectiveness dialogue in fragile states. If not, the structural dynamics that push international aid organizations to act in their own best interest could make their involvement counterproductive to the locally owned statebuilding and peacebuilding solutions that are so badly needed.

Appendix A: Full MOCA Survey Findings

Employed by ALL organizations

Rank ²⁹	MOCA Practice	Survey Question	# orgs that employed ³⁰	Average agreement score ³¹	Response Count ³² (Agree / Neutral / Disagree)	Grade (NGO sector) ³³
1.	Conducts client research	Our organization conducts research on our clients' needs.	12	6.30	 45 10 2	A
2.	Operations based on client needs	Our operations are designed based on the information we have about our clients.	12	6.20	 43 14 0	A
3.	Open to employee contribution	Employees can express their opinions and make suggestions about new ways for carrying out tasks.	12	6.05	 39 12 3	A
4.	Considers effects of changing context on org	We consider the effects that changes in our operating environment may have on our organization.	12	6.04	 40 14 3	A

²⁹ Practices are sorted first by number of organizations that employed the practice, and then by extent to which the practice was employed overall (as measured by the average agreement score)

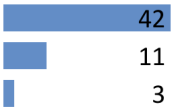
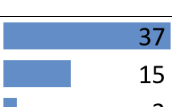
³⁰ An organization was deemed to have “employed” a practice if the average respondent was 5 or over.

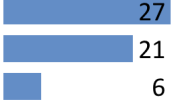
³¹ Average agreement score takes each organization’s average respondent score for that practice and averages the scores across all 12 organization to provide a weighted average score.

³² Scale 1-7 (strongly disagree to strongly agree). Top: 7 & 6; Mid: 5 & 4; Bottom: 3, 2 & 1

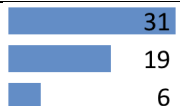
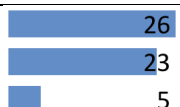
³³ Grading scale: A+ (6.5 – 7); A (6.0 – 6.4); B+ (5.8 – 5.9); B (5.6 – 5.7); C+ (5.4 – 5.5); C (5.2 – 5.3); D (5.0 – 5.1); F (<5).

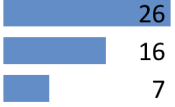
Employed by LARGE MAJORITY of organizations

Rank	MOCA Practice	Survey Question	# orgs that employed	Average agreement score	Response Count (Agree / Neutral / Disagree)	Grade (NGO sector)
5.	Employees work across projects	People in our organization often work on multiple tasks or projects at once.	11	6.10	 37 9 2	A
6.	Employees have contact with clients	Our employees have personal contact with clients.	11	6.06	 42 11 3	A
7.	Open to outside ideas	Ideas provided by external sources (advisors, clients, etc.) are considered to be useful for this organization.	11	5.99	 38 17 2	B+
8.	Employees committed to organization's goals	Employees are committed to the goals of this organization.	11	5.85	 37 15 3	B+
9.	Practices continual improvement	We continually assess the quality of our programs and services, and look for ways to improve them.	11	5.85	 36 16 2	B+
10.	Leadership emphasizes knowledge sharing	Senior leaders repeatedly emphasize the importance of knowledge sharing in this organization.	11	5.66	 32 20 4	B
11.	Leadership values learning	Managers agree that our organization's ability to learn is critical to our success.	10	5.93	 38 16 1	B+
12.	Works closely with partner organizations	Our organization works closely with partner organizations.	10	5.70	 34 14 7	B
13.	Able to take advantage of new opportunities	Our organization is able to take advantage of new opportunities as they arise.	10	5.64	 31 23 1	B
14.	Considers front-line staff experience in decision making	The experience of front-line staff is considered in the organization's decision-making process.	10	5.52	 28 23 3	C+

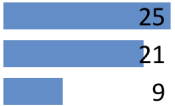
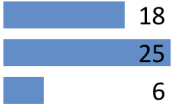
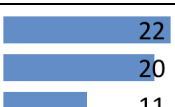
Rank	MOCA Practice	Survey Question	# orgs that employed	Average agreement score	Response Count (Agree / Neutral / Disagree)	Grade (NGO sector)
15.	Employees recognize changing context	Employees recognize that our operating environment is constantly shifting.	10	5.36	 27 21 6	C

Employed by SMALL MAJORITY of organizations

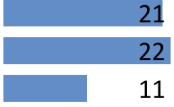
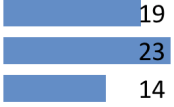
Rank	MOCA Practice	Survey Question	# orgs that employed	Average agreement score	Response Count (Agree / Neutral / Disagree)	Grade (NGO sector)
16.	Employees aware of how they contribute	Employees are aware of how they contribute to achieving the organization's objectives.	9	5.58	 35 17 4	B+
17.	Shares information	Information is shared in our organization.	9	5.49	 31 19 6	C+
18.	Employees aware of objectives	Employees are aware of this organization's short-term objectives.	8	5.44	 26 23 5	C+
19.	Captures lessons from unsuccessful initiatives	Unsuccessful initiatives are analyzed and the lessons are documented.	8	5.44	 29 21 6	C+
20.	Practices inclusive decision making	Major decisions are made with the input of a large number of people.	8	5.01	 24 25 7	D
21.	Lessons shared informally	Our organization shares lessons informally through conversations amongst staff.	7	5.24	 26 19 10	C
22.	Collaboration across organization	There is good collaboration between different parts of the organization.	7	5.20	 27 20 9	C

Rank	MOCA Practice	Survey Question	# orgs that employed	Average agreement score	Response Count (Agree / Neutral / Disagree)	Grade (NGO sector)
23.	Organization is de-coupled ³⁴	Different parts of our organization are able to change and adapt relatively independently of other parts of the organization.	7	5.19	 23 19 5	D
24.	Employees can be used flexibly	Job descriptions, projects, and working team in our organization are flexible and constantly shifting.	7	5.16	 26 16 7	D

Employed by MINORITY of organizations

Rank	MOCA Practice	Survey Question	# orgs that employed	Average agreement score	Response Count (Agree / Neutral / Disagree)	Grade (NGO sector)
25.	Employees aware of vision	Employees are aware of our organization's long-term vision.	6	5.21	 25 21 9	C
26.	Employees have freedom to make decisions	Individuals have significant freedom to make decisions related to their work and work objectives.	6	4.80	 18 25 6	F
27.	Includes employees early in decision making	When employees are involved in decision-making, they are involved early in the process.	6	4.73	 16 32 8	F
28.	Lessons shared formally	Our organization has formal mechanisms for sharing lessons between employees.	6	4.66	 20 19 17	F
29.	Employees have space and time for experimentation	Employees in our organization have time and space to experiment in their work.	6	4.64	 22 20 11	F

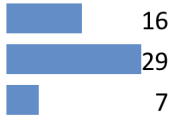
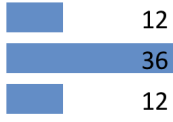
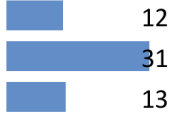
³⁴ This might end up being very size related (organizations need to be big enough to have different parts that operate differently.)

Rank	MOCA Practice	Survey Question	# orgs that employed	Average agreement score	Response Count (Agree / Neutral / Disagree)	Grade (NGO sector)
30.	Tolerates mistakes	Our organization tolerates mistakes.	5	4.87		F
31.	Invests in professional development	Employees often engage in professional development that brings new information into the organization.	4	4.57		F
32.	Rewards innovation	In this organization, innovative ideas that work are rewarded.	4	4.46		F

Employed by VERY FEW organizations

Rank	MOCA Practice	Survey Question	# orgs that employed	Average agreement score	Response Count (Agree / Neutral / Disagree)	Grade (NGO sector)
33.	Ease of firing	It is easy for our organization to lay off individuals who are not able to help the organization achieve its objectives.	2	3.53		F
34.	Ease of hiring	It is easy for our organization to hire the right people.	1	3.57		F

Negatively Framed Questions

MOCA Practice (positive framing)	Survey Question (negative framing)	# orgs that employed ³⁵	Average agreement score ³⁶	Response Count
Ease of approvals	[Approval processes are burdensome in our organization.]	8	4.48	
Speed of cooperation within organization	[Individuals within the organization are generally slow to respond to requests from other parts of the organization.]	4	4.07	
Speed of information sharing within organization	[When one group finds out something important about clients, it is slow to share the information with other parts of the organization.]	4	3.88	

³⁵ A practice was deemed “employed” when respondents from that organization, on average, “disagreed” with a negative statement, as demonstrated by an average score below 4.00 on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), with 4 being “neutral.”

³⁶ Agreement scores have been calculated from inversed scores (reversed on the 1-7 scale) to account for the negative framing of the question. This allows them to be more comparable to the other questions.

	MOCA Practice	Survey Question	# orgs that employed ³⁷	Average agreement score ³⁸	Response Count
Dynamism	Makes changes regularly	On a scale from 1 (“never”) to 7 (“very frequently”), how often does your organization: change strategic priorities; change programs and services; change operational strategies? ³⁹	10 ⁴⁰	4.63	11 28 9
	Is continually adaptive	1 = Our organization undergoes large transformations periodically to catch up to changes in our environment. 7 = Our organization adapts continuously to keep up with changes in our environment.	10	5.26	20 20 7
Degree of Formalization	Freedom in management style	1= Strong insistence on a uniform managerial style throughout the organization. 7= Managers’ operating styles are allowed to range freely from the very formal to the very informal.	8	4.71	14 24 11
	Focus on getting things done ⁴¹	1= Strong emphasis on getting employees to follow formal procedures. 7= Strong emphasis on getting things done even if this means disregarding formal procedures.	3	3.69	8 23 19
	Focus on context-appropriate practices	1= A strong emphasis on following proven practices despite changes in the operating environment. 7= A strong emphasis on adapting freely to changing circumstances without too much concern for past practice.	2	4.03	4 31 14

³⁷ Employ = anything over 4.5, except for “makes changes regularly.”

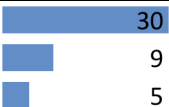
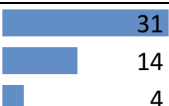
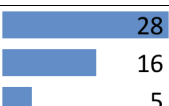
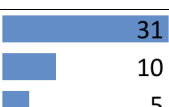
³⁸ Agreement scores have been calculated from inversed scores (reversed on the 1-7 scale) to account for the negative framing of the question. This allows them to be more comparable to the other questions.

³⁹ Graphic shows response counts averaged across three questions

⁴⁰ Employ = anything over 3.99

⁴¹ The results of this question likely indicate a false assumption in the MOCA framework. Interview results indicate that formal procedures are especially important in Haiti in order to protect against corruption.

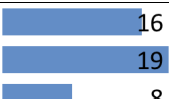
Operational Complexity (strategic complexity and goal complexity)

Rank ⁴²	Survey Question Indicate on a 7 point scale the importance that your organization places on each of the following activities/goals:	# orgs that identified practice as "important" ⁴³	Importance score ⁴⁴	Response Count
1.	Increase financial sustainability of the organization	12	6.26	
2.	Logistics: Managing materials and moving products or services	12	5.82	
3.	Operating efficiently	11	5.85	
4.	Increase the total amount of money coming into the organization	11	5.84	
5.	Enhance the quality of existing programs, services, or products.	11	5.81	
6.	Research on client needs	10	5.66	
7.	Enhance the reputation of the organization	9	5.82	
8.	Partnerships and networks	9	5.72	
9.	Be more innovative with products, programs or services	9	5.32	

⁴² Strategies and goals are ranked first by number of organizations that identified the strategy or goal as a priority, and second by the total "importance score" averaged across organizations.

⁴³ Important = average organizational score of 5 or over.

⁴⁴ Importance scores have been calculated by averaging the average respondent rating from each of the 12 organizations in the study.

Rank ⁴²	Survey Question Indicate on a 7 point scale the importance that your organization places on each of the following activities/goals:	# orgs that identified practice as “important” ⁴³	Importance score ⁴⁴	Response Count
10.	Development of new products, programs or services	8	5.27	
11.	Increase the number of clients served by the organization	8	5.08	
12.	Increase employee engagement	7	4.97	
13.	Increase the number of different programs, services or products offered	6	5.09	
14.	Innovation in marketing and outreach	5	4.73	
15.	Increase the number of staff	1	3.93	

Summary Questions and Total MOCA Scores

Org Code	Type of Organization	Total MOCA Score	Our organization is highly effective - it consistently meets the objectives that it sets for itself.	Our organization is aware of what is happening around it, and the context in which it works.	Our organization is highly adaptive - it continually makes changes to meet its objectives better.
S Avg	Other	233.57	5.80	6.40	5.40
H3 Avg	HA	233.01	6.67	6.67	6.67
H4 Avg	Other	228.81	5.50	6.50	5.75
H1 Avg	Other	223.10	6.67	7.00	7.00
P Avg	CB	222.87	5.33	6.00	6.00
T1 Avg	CB	221.82	5.57	6.29	6.43
O Avg	CB	210.80	5.33	6.33	6.00
T2 Avg	CB	208.90	4.25	4.50	6.25
E Avg	CB	202.88	4.00	5.50	5.50
H2 Avg	HA	195.84	4.60	5.40	5.00
M Avg	HA	192.46	5.80	6.20	5.20
C Avg	HA	188.00	4.80	4.60	4.40

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Introduction

1. In a few words, what would you say is the objective of your organization in Haiti?
2. What is your role within the organization?

Effectiveness

3. What does it take to run an effective organization in Haiti? What are the factors that enable your organization to be effective here?
4. Do you think that organizations need to operate differently in Haiti than in other countries to be effective? How so?
5. What are some of the barriers to being an effective organization in Haiti?

Organizational Adaptation

6. You mentioned the ability of your organization to be agile or adaptive. Tell me more about that that looks like for your organization.

OR

You didn't mention the need for your organization to be agile or adaptive. Would you say that is an important part of being effective in Haiti (e.g. being able to respond to new opportunities, changing strategies, finding new ways to achieve objectives)?

- What enables your organization to continually adapt to new situations/ opportunities/ challenges?
 - What makes it difficult for your organization to continually adapt?
 - Are there any organization culture constraints to being adaptive (e.g. management culture, approach to experimentation, consequences for failure)?
 - Are there any procedural constraints internal to your organization that impacts your ability to be adaptive (e.g. decision-making authority, approval processes, etc)?
 - Are there any constraints external to your organization to being agile or adaptive (e.g. funding agreements, donor priorities, etc)?
7. A big part of learning and being able to adapt as an organization is having access to the right information – both about the organization's activities, as well as about what's happening with clients and the general context.
 - Would you say your organization has the information it needs to be effective?
 - How does information (or lack of) impact your organization's ability to learn or adapt?
 8. Would you say that your organization is responsive to changes in clients' needs?
 - What enables you to be responsive?
 - What makes it difficult for you to be responsive?

9. Would you say that your organization is able to learn – or adapt to be more effective – based on past experiences?
- What enables you to learn?
 - What makes it difficult for you to learn or apply these learning?

Close Out

10. If you could change one thing about your organization to make it more agile or continuously adaptive, what would have the greatest impact?
11. Are there any questions that I didn't ask you, that I should have? / Is there anything else you think I should know?

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