



**RESEARCH REPORT**  
**"THE AGILE ORGANIZATION"**

*March 2021*

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## SAMENVATTING (NEDERLANDS)

De werkgroep Wendbaarheid van ngo-federatie heeft iPropeller gevraagd een onderzoeksrapport over de "wendbare organisatie" op te stellen. Het doel was om overeenstemming te bereiken over de betekenis van wendbaarheid en een raamwerk te ontwikkelen dat ngo's van uiteenlopende aard in staat stelt wendbare methoden te selecteren die aan hun specifieke behoeften voldoen.

Wendbaarheid wordt in het algemeen gedefinieerd als het vermogen om een doeltreffende respons op verandering te bieden. Zo'n respons is doeltreffend als de organisatie daardoor uiteindelijk een grotere impact voor haar stakeholders kan realiseren. Die impact wordt gecreëerd via processen. En om een proces goed te laten functioneren, zijn twee dingen nodig: het wegnemen van knelpunten die tot inefficiëntie leiden, en het anticiperen door goed risicobeheer op kwetsbaarheden voor plotselinge externe gebeurtenissen. Wendbare methoden zijn bedoeld om dergelijke inefficiënties en kwetsbaarheden te identificeren en weg te werken.

Op basis van inzichten uit de literatuur, gesprekken met leden van ngo-federatie en professionele ervaring elders, is een niet-exhaustieve set van 10 concrete methoden gedefinieerd om de wendbaarheid van een organisatie te verbeteren:

1. "Agility maturity assessment" is een vragenlijst die een kwalitatieve zelfevaluatie van de wendbaarheid van de organisatie in ruime zin mogelijk maakt. Dat kan nuttig zijn om het bewustzijn over wendbaarheid te vergroten en om structuur te geven aan gesprekken over de voortgang op de weg naar meer wendbaarheid.
2. "Strategische radar" is een systematisch proces om belangrijke langetermijnsignalen uit de externe omgeving op te vangen. Het helpt de organisatie om haar strategie tijdig aan te passen in antwoord op externe trends en gebeurtenissen.
3. "Korte-cyclus probleemoplossing" heeft betrekking op technieken zoals plan-do-check-act om een probleem bij de wortel aan te pakken en een duurzame oplossing te vinden. Zij dragen bij tot een snelle en doeltreffende reactie op een plotseling opduikend complex probleem.
4. "Zelforganiserende teams" zijn capabele teams die het mandaat hebben gekregen om zelf te bepalen hoe zij een bepaald probleem het best kunnen oplossen. Zij ontleen hun effect aan de focus, intensieve interactie en creativiteit in een veelzijdige groep met een enkelvoudige missie.
5. "Transversale koppelingen" zijn mechanismen om mensen en teams rechtstreeks te verbinden over de verticale silo's van een in omvang en reikwijdte gegroeide organisatie. Daardoor kan hun werk sneller gecoördineerd worden en kan kennis sneller gedeeld worden tussen uit elkaar liggende delen van de organisatie.
6. Bij "bestuur en besluitvorming" gaat het erom de taken en verantwoordelijkheden van de organen die zijn ingesteld om de organisatie te besturen en te controleren duidelijk te omschrijven. Zij kunnen besluitvorming van hoge kwaliteit versnellen ter ondersteuning van het succes van de organisatie op lange termijn.
7. "Dagelijkse wendbare praktijk" heeft betrekking op het ook elders gebruiken van praktijken uit een projectomgeving, d.w.z. in het stabiele deel van de organisatie. Ze gaan over het plannen van werk en het regelmatig en transparant bespreken van de voortgang met het team.

8. "Meten voor wendbaarheid" heeft betrekking op het transparant en frequent bespreken van objectives-and-key-results (OKR) om koerscorrectie mogelijk te maken. Het maakt gebruik van indicatoren die het gedrag van individuen en teams afstemt op het doel en de plannen van de organisatie.
9. "Flexibele resourcing" gaat over het gebruik maken van "slack" (= overtollige), veelzijdige (= multi-task) of externe resources. Het doel is toegang te voorzien tot extra capaciteit of vaardigheden voor situaties waarin de vraag plotseling sterk toeneemt.
10. "Veranderingsmanagement" verwijst naar concrete stappen om het invoeren te vergemakkelijken van nieuwe manieren van werken die nodig zijn om wendbaar te worden. De sleutel ligt bij het inspireren van teams en individuen zodat zij verandering omarmen.

De bovenstaande methoden zijn voldoende generiek om te kunnen worden ingezet bij ngo's van diverse aard. Bovendien kunnen ze selectief worden toegepast zonder dat een complete revisie van de organisatie nodig is.

Dit rapport kan zowel op een "terug naar de basis" als op een "selectieve" manier worden gebruikt. Bij de "terug naar de basis" aanpak doorloopt men systematisch elk van de volgende stappen: Wie zijn onze stakeholders? Welke impact willen we hebben? Via welke processen creëren we impact? En wat zijn de belangrijkste knelpunten en kwetsbaarheden in de processen? Uit die analyse zal blijken op welke gebieden een grotere wendbaarheid het meest wenselijk is. Zij zal ook wijzen op de hoofdoorzaken van het huidige gebrek aan wendbaarheid en dus op de meest geschikte methoden om de organisatie wendbaarder te maken daar waar het telt.

Bij de "selectieve" aanpak kiest men uit de tien generieke methoden deze die op een bepaald moment goed beantwoordt aan een specifieke nood van de organisatie.

Welke van de twee aanpakken het meest geschikt is, hangt af van een aantal factoren. Als de organisatie overweegt om een bottom-up transformatietraject te starten en vindt dat "meer wendbaar" een belangrijke drijfveer voor die transformatie is, dan lijkt de "terug naar de basis" aanpak geschikt. De "selectieve" aanpak lijkt geschikt wanneer de organisatie al vrij goed weet waar de schoen wringt en op zoek is naar een systematische methode die ze gedisciplineerd kan uitrollen.

## SUMMARY (ENGLISH)

The Agility working group of ngo-federatie requested iPropeller's support for a research report about "the agile organization". The purpose was to establish common ground about the meaning of agility and a framework that should enable diverse ngo's to select agile methods that meet their specific needs.

Agility is broadly defined as the ability to respond to change effectively. In the end, a response is effective if it enables the organization to better achieve the impact it seeks to have on its stakeholders. Such impact is created through processes. And for a process to function well, two things are needed: the removal of bottlenecks leading to inefficiency, and the anticipation of vulnerabilities to sudden external events through good risk management. Agile methods are meant to identify and overcome such inefficiencies and vulnerabilities.

On the basis of insights from the literature, conversations with members of ngo-federatie and professional experience elsewhere, a non-exhaustive suite of 10 concrete methods to improve an organization's agility have been defined:

1. "Agility maturity assessment" is a questionnaire that enables a qualitative self-assessment of the organization's agility broadly defined. It is useful to raise awareness of agility and to structure conversations about progress in becoming more agile.
2. "Strategic radar" is a systematic process to sense important long-term signals from the external environment in time. It helps the organization's readiness to adjust its strategy in response to external trends and events.
3. "Fast-cycle problem solving" relates to techniques such as plan-do-check-act to go to the root of a problem and deliver a sustainable solution. They help lead to a fast and effective response to a suddenly emerging complex problem.
4. "Self-organizing teams" are capable teams that have been mandated to choose how best to deliver a solution for a given problem. They derive their effect from focus, intensive interaction and creativity in a multi-skilled group with a clear singular mission.
5. "Transversal linkages" are mechanisms to connect people and teams directly across the vertical silos of an organization that has grown in size and scope. They speed up work coordination and knowledge sharing between distant parts of the organization.
6. "Governance and decision-making" is about clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of the bodies set up to direct and monitor the organization. They can accelerate high-quality decision-making in support of the long-term success of the organization.
7. "Daily agile practice" relates to the use of agile practices from a project environment also in the stable part of the organization. They are about planning work and reviewing progress with the full team in a transparent way on a frequent basis.
8. "Measuring for agility" relates to transparent and frequent discussion of Objectives and Key Results (OKR) so as to enable course correction. It uses indicators that align the behavior of individuals and teams with the organization's purpose and plans.
9. "Flexible resourcing" is about making use of slack (= excess), versatile (= multi-task) or contingent (= external) resources. The objective is to foresee access to extra capacity or skills for situations in which demand suddenly surges.

10. "Change management" refers to concrete steps one can make to facilitate the adoption by the organization of new ways of working required to be agile. Key is to engage and inspire teams and individuals who may be reluctant to embrace change.

The above methods are sufficiently generic to be applicable to a diverse range of ngo's. In addition, they can be applied selectively without requiring a complete overhaul of the organization.

This report can be used either in a "back to basics" way or in a "selective" way. In the "back to basics" approach one goes systematically through each of the following steps: Who are our stakeholders? What impact do we seek to have? Through which processes do we create impact? And what are the main bottlenecks and vulnerabilities in the processes? That analysis will identify the areas where a higher degree of agility would be the most desirable. It will also point to the root-causes of the current lack of agility and, hence, the most appropriate methods for making the organization more agile where it counts most.

In the "selective" approach one picks and chooses those methods out of the ten that appear appropriate for the organization at a particular point in time.

Which of the two approaches is the more suitable depends on a number of factors. If the organization is considering starting a bottom-up transformation journey and finds that "more agile" is an important driving force for that transformation, then the "back to basics" approach appears suitable. The "selective" approach appears suitable when the organization already knows pretty well where the shoe pinches most and is looking for a systematic method that it can roll out in a disciplined way.

## 1. THE CONTEXT, OBJECTIVES AND STRUCTURE OF THIS REPORT

In 2018 ngo-federatie launched the initiative *Toekomsttraject 2030* so as to clarify its future role and ensure the added value of its activities. Starting from overall trends in global solidarity and the expectations of external and internal stakeholders, ngo-federatie assessed the challenges the sector is facing, described a vision for the sector in 2030, and outlined the journey required to get there. That led to the establishment of nine "building-the-future sites" ("toekomstswerven") – among which Agility – to develop practical tools for use by the ngo's.

After some initial reflections the Agility working group concluded that it needed to establish a minimum of common ground about the meaning of agility. "Agility" is indeed a fashionable and elastic concept that has been described extensively in a variety of both scientific and practitioner journals. A wide range of consultants, thought leaders, training institutes, conference organizers, academics and media have joined the agility bandwagon. Furthermore, as the term agility has a positive connotation (who could be against a quality such as agility?), it is lavishly attached as a label to all kinds of initiatives and practices, thus leading to confusion and miscommunication.<sup>1</sup>

It is within this context that the Agility working group decided to issue a tender in November 2020 for an outside advisor to write a research report about "the agile organization" and thus help ngo-federatie establish a common ground about the meaning of agility. The company iPropeller was selected for this task. Its work started in the second half of January 2021 and resulted in the present document, which draws from three sources: desk research; interviews with seven ngo's (Join For Water, KIYO, Memisa, Oxfam, Rikolto, Trias, Viva Salud), of which two were studied in more depth as illustrative cases; and iPropeller's experience in this field.

In chapter 2 of this document we provide a summary of the various interpretations given to the concept of agility, and deduce from those a synthesis that is considered meaningful for ngo's. In chapter 3 we build on that synthesis to outline the logic of a decision tree that should enable any ngo to identify specific agile methods that are suited for particular challenges that it may face. In chapter 4 we zoom in on ten concrete yet broadly applicable methods to improve an organization's agility. In chapter 5 and 6 we bring the logic and methods to life through concrete examples from two case-studies (Memisa and Rikolto). Finally, in chapter 7 we conclude by indicating where to start, on the basis of this report, when a ngo wishes to become more agile.

Next to this full report, self-standing 1-page flyers have been made for each of the ten methods described in chapter 4. They visually summarize the core ideas.

This report has been written in English in view of being able to share it with people in ngo offices worldwide. We thank all contributors, in particular our interlocutors in the participating ngo's and at ngo-federatie.

## 2. BASIC CONCEPTS OF AGILITY

The concept of agility has its roots in software development. It was popularized in that community via the “Agile Manifesto” in 2001. In essence the agile approach aims at accelerating the development of software that meets the needs of its users by working with cross-functional, self-organizing teams and continually validating the intermediate results.<sup>2</sup>

Since then, agility has evolved into a mainstream management concept that has been adopted and adapted extensively across sectors by all types of organizations that seek flexibility in the face of rapid change.<sup>3</sup> Since change is pervasive and diverse, agility has become one of those concepts that we intuitively grasp but find hard to define specifically. People talking about agility may believe that they are talking about the same thing when they are actually not, as they tend to pick and choose elements to fit their needs and circumstances.

For example, some authors use the terms agility and flexibility as near-synonyms, while others make a fundamental distinction between the two.<sup>4</sup> The Oxford online dictionary offers the following definitions of terms that sometimes are used as equivalents:

- Agility: Ability to move quickly and easily.
- Responsiveness: The quality of reacting quickly and positively.
- Adaptability: The quality of being able to adjust to new conditions.
- Versatility: Ability to adapt to many different functions or activities.
- Flexibility: The quality of bending easily without breaking.
- Resilience: The capacity to recover quickly from difficulties.
- Robustness: The ability to withstand or overcome adverse conditions or rigorous testing.

Despite all those differences and nuances, there are some common high-level descriptions of agility that refer to qualities and benefits to which most organizations and individuals would aspire. Some of those descriptions relate primarily to an organization's strategy, while others relate primarily to an organization's design. "Responsiveness to change" is the overall tenet, e.g.:

- "The ability to remain flexible in the face of new developments."<sup>5</sup>
- "The capacity to continuously adjust and adapt strategic direction in a core business to create value for a company."<sup>6</sup>
- "The ability to create and respond to change. It is a way of dealing with, and ultimately succeeding in, an uncertain and turbulent environment."<sup>7</sup>
- "The organization's ability to change direction/focus in response to an emerging opportunity or threat in a timely way."<sup>8</sup>
- "Organizational responsiveness and adaptability in increasingly turbulent and dynamic competitive environments."<sup>9</sup>
- "Becoming proactive in sensing customers' needs and responding with speed and innovation to fulfil and surpass customer demands."<sup>10</sup>
- "An institution-wide capability to rapidly improve existing products for existing customers – operational agility – or creating new products and services reaching new customers – strategic agility."<sup>11</sup>
- "The ability to quickly respond to emerging market opportunities. Agility combines being able to change, learn continually and act quickly and with flexibility for both organizations and individuals."<sup>12</sup>

- "The alertness to the need for change, the ability to decide on a new course of action, and the ability to effectively reconfigure and mobilize the resources necessary for change."<sup>13</sup>
- "The capability to make timely, effective, sustained organizational change."<sup>14</sup>
- "The capacity of an organization to efficiently and effectively redeploy/redirect its resources to value creating and value protecting (and capturing) higher-yield activities as internal and external circumstances warrant."<sup>15</sup>

Fortunately, for the purpose of this report and its use by ngo's, we do not need an exact or restrictive definition of agility. Neither are we looking for a universal theory. What we need is a practical description of specific methods that help deliver the aforementioned benefits, and of the circumstances in which those methods can be applied successfully.

In that regard, a new synthesis appears to be emerging from the management literature and practice. It starts from two classical perspectives on agility: agility as a project management toolbox on the one hand, and agility as a frame of mind about coping with unexpected change in the environment on the other hand.

#### **a. Agility as a project management toolbox**

The first perspective looks at agility as a project management toolbox, whereby a project is to be understood as any initiative in which a team works toward delivering a specified output within a specified time period and budget. Such initiatives can range from the specific (for example: creating a new website) to the broad (for example, managing the change-over to a new organization design). The toolbox refers to methods to execute the project quickly and efficiently and to deliver an innovative output that maximally fulfills the needs and expectations of its ultimate users. Examples of agility methods are: backlogs, personas, scrums, workflows, sprints, war rooms, daily meetings, minimum viable product (MVP), velocity, autonomous teams, tribes, chapters, objectives and key results (OKR), etc.<sup>16</sup>

While those agile methods can bring clear benefits, they also carry some risks. Agile aims at flexibility and speed by supplementing the rigid "vertical silos" that tend to exist in traditional organizations with mission-oriented, cross-functional and autonomous teams with high decision-making power: communication is lateral instead of vertical, networks of people replace traditional managerial hierarchical lines, and spontaneous forms of interaction substitute for formal cooperation and coordination. That is all fine, but two risks emerge.<sup>17,18</sup>

The first risk is the lack of knowledge flows and alignment between autonomous teams: relevant information for the organization as a whole is increasingly dispersed across different teams; synergies between teams may be lost; parallel teams may deliver inconsistent, redundant or conflicting solutions; and the organization may expect certain outcomes that require collaboration across several teams. In other words, the "vertical silos" may vanish but an "archipelago of islands" may emerge. The second risk is the lack of attention to longer-term learning and innovation: the strong focus on teamwork and the time pressure to deliver may lead to a neglect of time for individual learning and organization-wide ideation.

#### **b. Agility as a frame of mind about coping with unexpected change in the environment**

The second perspective looks at agility mostly as a frame of mind that aims at maximally anticipating potential changes in the organization's environment and then responding flexibly

and favorably to those changes if/when they materialize. Those changes may be positive (i.e., leading to opportunities) or negative (i.e., constituting threats). Various consultants and academics have proposed general frameworks that indicate how to embed such a frame of mind in the functioning of an organization.

For example, one framework lists five requirements for the operating model of an organization to increase the level of enterprise agility:<sup>19</sup>

- Strategy: a shared purpose and vision embodied across the organization;
- Structure: a network of empowered teams;
- Process: rapid decision and learning cycles;
- People: a dynamic people model that ignites passion;
- Technology: next-generation enabling technology.

Another framework describes four levels of agility that are needed to be able to respond to change:<sup>20</sup>

- Strategic agility: continually update choices about where to play and how to win;
- Organizational agility: rapidly allocate resources to market opportunities;
- Leadership agility: learn rapidly, anticipate opportunity, learn always and adapt quickly;
- Individual agility: learn and grow as a leader or an employee.

It is hard to deny the benefits of successfully putting in place the above requirements. There is one major caveat, though: this description of agility more or less implies that the success of an organization depends on it being in a constant state of transformation. But change may be costly and achieving agility often involves sacrificing efficiency.<sup>21</sup> For example, "slack" (maintaining excess resources and capacity) enables a flexible response to a sudden increase in demand but has a cost. The same is true when outsourcing an activity to multiple suppliers and maintaining contractual flexibility. Likewise, a general-purpose machine can easily handle a variety of demands but is more expensive and/or less performing than a specialist machine. In other words, organizations should not seek to become agile no matter the cost. Knowing when and how much agility is needed and being able to deliver it cost effectively is a crucial managerial capability.

### c. A new synergy about agility

From those two classical perspectives of agility ("toolbox" and "frame of mind"), a new synthesis is emerging. It not only combines the strengths of the two perspectives but also seeks to overcome their limitations:

- Deploy focused teams to deliver well-designed solutions effectively, while maintaining the strength of the organization as a whole.
- Enable the organization to respond flexibly to sudden changes in its environment, while staying efficient and minimizing excess costs.

This synthesis aims at creating work processes that are both flexible *and* efficient. It aims at designing organizations with both a stable backbone *and* a dynamic response capability.<sup>22</sup> It aims at having leaders who are consistent *and* can pivot when needed.<sup>23</sup>

Figure 1 visualizes what the synthesis could mean in practice.<sup>24</sup> The horizontal axis of the framework recognizes two different types of work: well-defined work (e.g., preparing the annual financial report) and ambiguous work (e.g., designing a new marketing campaign); the vertical axis recognizes two different ways of doing work: serially (individual tasks in sequence) and collaboratively (interactive within a team). The framework then posits that work that consists of

well-defined tasks ("routine") is best organized serially, which corresponds with the cell on the bottom left, labelled "factory" mode. Conversely, work that is highly ambiguous ("creative") and requires ongoing interaction is best organized collaboratively, which corresponds with the cell on the top right, labelled "studio" mode.

**Figure 1. Two fitting modes of executing work**

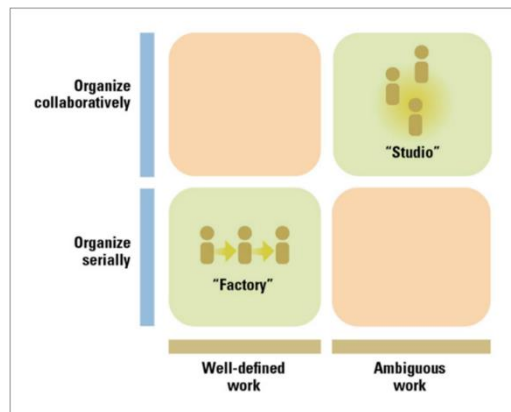


**Figure 2. Two unfitting modes of executing work**

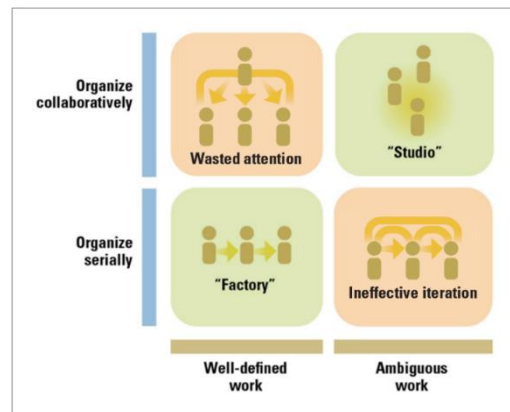
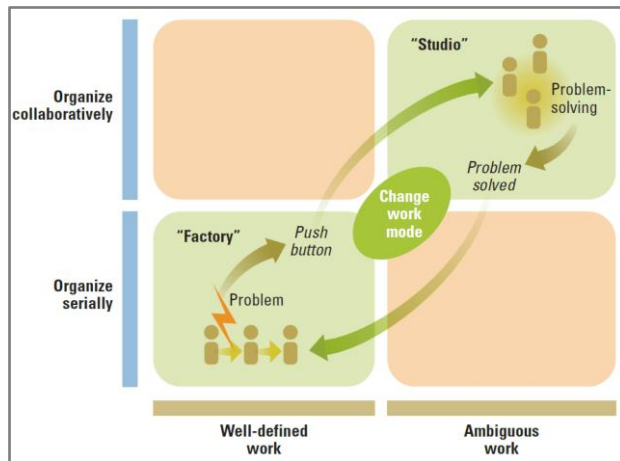


Figure 2 provides another clear message, related to the two other cells of the framework. The cell on the bottom right shows that handling highly ambiguous work serially tends to create slow and costly iterations. Conversely, the cell on the top left shows that handling well-defined work collaboratively tends to lead to pointless coordination or supervision and wasted attention.

Naturally the above scheme is a simplification, as real work in an organization is a constantly evolving mix of routine and creative activity. Routine work may have moments of surprise, and creative work after a while may need completion of some routine tasks. That brings us to the essence of agility at the operational level: the ability to cycle back and forth between well-defined factory-style tasks and the collaborative studio mode as needed (see Figure 3). If an organization masters that ability, it doesn't have to make a trade-off between efficiency and adaptability – it is both efficient and adaptable.

For example, assembly-line work is designed to be serial and efficient all the time, i.e., in factory mode. However, even if the line is maintained regularly, one of its machines may break down unexpectedly, thus halting the line. At that point, the assembly organization should be able to switch fluidly to studio mode: quickly mobilize a group of people from various disciplines to analyze the problem and devise a solution. Once that is done, the organization can switch back to factory mode. Of course, such cycling back and forth is best not left to on-the-spot improvisation. In as much as possible, the organization should anticipate what might go wrong, define the rules for activating the studio mode, and outline how the collaborative work will be executed.

**Figure 3. The ability to cycle back and forth between two modes**

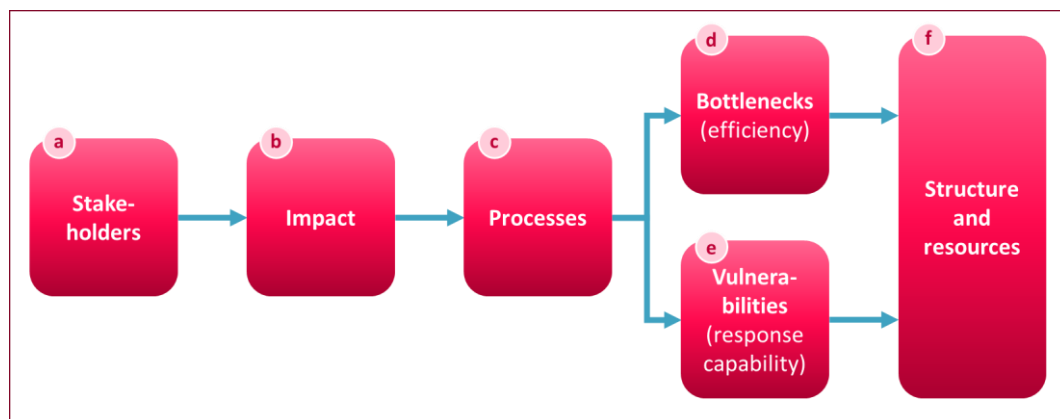


### 3. A FRAMEWORK FOR IDENTIFYING SUITABLE AGILE METHODS

In the previous chapter, we have outlined a concept of agility: the ability to cycle back and forth between factory mode and studio mode as needed to be both efficient and adaptable. It occupies the middle ground between a woolly all-inclusive notion of organizational responsiveness on the one hand, and a set of narrowly defined project management techniques on the other hand. The former is not very useful because virtually any practice that somehow brings benefits to the organization tends to be labelled agile. Neither is the latter because it assumes that giving people some practical training and then having them apply the techniques mechanistically suffices to become an agile organization.

In this chapter we outline a decision tree that should enable any ngo to identify specific agile methods that are suited for particular challenges that it may face. The tree revolves around the notions of stakeholders, impact, processes, structure and resources (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Logic of the decision tree



Since most ngo's are familiar with the notions of stakeholders, impact and processes, we describe steps a, b and c only briefly here. More details as well as templates and examples for all steps can be found in the annex.

#### a. Who are our stakeholders?

The raison d'être (purpose) of an organization is to achieve positive impact for its stakeholders. A ngo's stakeholders may include beneficiaries, staff (central and field, in-house and third-party, ...), donors, governments, other ngo's (sister ngo's, umbrella organizations, ad hoc partners, ...), networks, civil society participants, commercial partners, suppliers of services and goods, regulatory bodies (standards, accreditation, evaluation, ...), knowledge centers, volunteers, community associations, interest groups, the general public, the media, ...

#### b. What impact on stakeholders do we seek to have?

An organization has to define the impact it aims to have on each of those stakeholders. Impact refers to the expectations of a stakeholder vis-à-vis the ngo or the objectives that the ngo imposes on itself with regard to a stakeholder. These expectations and objectives can be of a long-term strategic (for example, the development of sanitary facilities in schools) or a short-term operational nature (for example, getting equipment to the scene of a disaster quickly).

### c. Through what processes do we create impact?

An organization needs to set up processes that ensure that it can actually bring about the desired impact. A process is a sequence of activities that ultimately produce the intended outcome. In the context of agility in ngo's, much of the literature focuses on logistical processes in humanitarian aid. However, other processes are also important, for example in strategic management, marketing and relationship management, HR management, program and project management, learning processes, performance measurement and financial management.

An organization should ensure that its processes are efficient and adaptable, i.e., continue to run well also in the event of sudden changes in its environment. In other words, it should be able to run a process in both "factory" and "studio" mode and switch smoothly between the two.

### d. What are the main bottlenecks in a process?

In the factory mode, activities are carried out according to a largely *established pattern* (e.g., maintaining stocks, reporting financial figures, running the annual campaign, etc.). The focus is on increasing *efficiency*, particularly the ratio of output to resources deployed. Increasing efficiency is usually done by eliminating *bottlenecks*, yet without compromising the stability and predictability of the process. Such bottlenecks can be of a varied nature:

- Activities that consume resources and time but, at closer inspection, do not or no longer add value, i.e., are or could be made redundant (e.g., approval activity);
- Needless iterations, for example re-work as a result of shortcomings in quality;
- Activities with poor productivity, i.e., a poor ratio of output/resources, possibly by lack of proper training, tools, automation, etc.;
- Dead time between activities, for example time spent waiting or queuing;
- Poor interfaces and hand-overs between successive activities, for example as a result of having split a single activity into two.

For each major inefficiency, one should dig deeper to find its so-called root-causes.

### e. What are the main vulnerabilities in a process?

In the studio mode, an special team takes the helm to perform an *ad hoc task* (e.g., crisis communication, emergency intervention, ...). The focus is on a rapid response to events with limited predictability (their exact timing or specific characteristics, ...). Improving *response capability* is usually done by identifying *vulnerabilities* in the process a priori (what is most likely to go wrong and has a high impact if it goes wrong) and setting up good risk management.

To identify potentially disruptive future events, one could think about the surprises that any stakeholder could spring onto the organization. Such surprises could be of a varied nature: financial (e.g., sudden withdrawal of a donor), regulatory (e.g., announcement of a new standard), technical (e.g., breakdown of critical equipment), commercial (e.g., bankruptcy of a supplier), organizational (e.g., a fatal accident), societal (e.g., allegations of abuse), etc.

One should focus on those events to which the organization is the most vulnerable, i.e., which represent the highest risk. Risk is defined as the likelihood of occurrence of the event multiplied by the severity of the consequences if the event does occur. Risks can be managed in various ways: Avoid (eliminate the risk completely by not doing certain things), Control (reduce the

likelihood or severity, for example through a playbook, a backup team, an emergency procedure, a crisis body, a SWAT team, ...), Transfer (shift to a third party such as an insurer or partner) or Accept (take the chance of the negative impact while continually monitoring).

#### f. How should our structure and resources be adapted?

"Structure and resources" is an umbrella term for five types of concrete changes that one can make to the design of an organization in view of achieving certain objectives. Those five types are: architecture (organizational chart, governance, ...), processes (ways of working, roles and responsibilities, performance indicators, ...), culture (values, behaviors, leadership, ...), people (skills, number, ...) and knowhow (systems, tools, ...). In the context of agility, we want to identify changes that enable the organization to remove or at least reduce bottlenecks (hence, improve efficiency) and vulnerabilities (hence, strengthen response capability).

The number of such potential design changes (and the underlying methods to implement them) is naturally enormous. Furthermore, each ngo has a specific starting position, challenges and priorities. Consequently, within the scope of this report, we can only highlight a limited number of methods. The table below summarizes the ten that we have selected because of their broad applicability. In the next chapter we will detail them. In the chapter after that we will illustrate their application in two case-studies.

| Method                                | What it does                                                                                                             | When to use it                                                                                               |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Agility maturity assessment</b>    | Make a qualitative self-assessment of the organization's agility broadly defined                                         | To raise awareness of agility and to structure conversations about progress in becoming more agile           |
| <b>Strategic radar</b>                | Put in place a systematic process to sense important long-term signals from the environment in time                      | To improve the organization's readiness to adjust its strategy in response to external triggers              |
| <b>Fast-cycle problem solving</b>     | Use techniques such as plan-do-check-act (PDCA) to go to the root of a problem and deliver a sustainable solution        | To institute fast and effective responses to a suddenly emerging complex problem                             |
| <b>Self-organizing teams</b>          | Mandate a capable team to choose how best to deliver a solution for a given problem                                      | To get focus, intensive interaction and creativity in a multi-skilled group with a clear singular mission    |
| <b>Transversal linkages</b>           | Institutionalize mechanisms (e.g., networks) to connect people and teams in different vertical silos of the organization | To speed up coordination between distant parts of the organization without passing up and down the hierarchy |
| <b>Governance and decision-making</b> | Define the roles and responsibilities of the bodies set up to direct and monitor the organization                        | To accelerate high-quality decision-making in support of the long-term success of the organization           |
| <b>Daily agile practice</b>           | Apply some agile practices used in a project environment also in other environments (department, etc.)                   | To plan work and review progress with the full team in a transparent way on a frequent basis                 |
| <b>Measuring for agility</b>          | Discuss transparent Objectives and Key Results (OKR) frequently to enable making course corrections                      | To set indicators that align the behavior of individuals and teams with the organization's purpose and plans |
| <b>Flexible resourcing</b>            | Make use of slack (= excess), versatile (= multi-task) or contingent (= external) resources                              | To foresee access to extra capacity or skills for situations in which demand suddenly surges                 |
| <b>Change management</b>              | Take concrete steps to facilitate the adoption by the organization of new ways of working required to be agile           | To engage and inspire teams and individuals who may be reluctant to embrace change in the organization       |

The decision tree is not to be looked at as a deterministic or normative model that unequivocally points to the single "correct" agility method that would be suitable for any particular situation. It is unrealistic to have such a model, since agility is a qualitative concept and each ngo has a distinctive context and identity. The decision tree is simply a tool in support of structured reflection, informed decision-making and clear communication.

## 4. DESCRIPTION OF SPECIFIC AGILE METHODS

In this chapter we detail ten concrete yet broadly applicable methods to improve an organization's agility. Each time we briefly answer three questions:

1. What is the method for? What does it help me do? What are the underlying assumptions? What is the "theory" behind it?
2. How does the method work and when is it most applicable? What are the conditions of success?
3. Where can I find more about the method?

Those ten are a non-exhaustive set that is applicable to a diverse range of ngo's. They can be applied separately from one other. They do not require a complete overhaul of the organization.

### a. Agility maturity assessment

#### *What is it?*

Various types of providers (often consulting firms) offer tools (often questionnaires) that enable an organization to assess its level of agility and monitor progress in its journey toward a more agile organization. Most of those tools define agility in the broad sense, covering both strategy, processes, structure, people and technology.

#### *How does it work and when to apply?*

The questionnaire typically invites participants to indicate on a "strongly disagree" – "strongly agree" scale where their organization stands on aspects that are considered relevant for agility. Examples of such statements are shown in Figure 5. The logic is similar to that of the more general assessment tool provided by EFQM.<sup>25</sup>

Figure 5. Typical maturity assessment questionnaire with example statements

|            |                                                                                                     | Strongly disagree | Disagree more than agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree more than disagree | Strongly agree |
|------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|
| Strategy   | Our organization has a shared vision and common purpose meaningful to all parts of the organization | O                 | O                        | O                          | O                        | O              |
| Processes  | Relations have been established with donors that allows to adjust workplans in a timely fashion     |                   |                          |                            |                          |                |
| Structure  | We have a flat organizational structure with truly cross-functional, end-to-end teams               |                   |                          |                            |                          |                |
| People     | Our organization's leaders trust and empower people rather than commanding and controlling them     |                   |                          |                            |                          |                |
| Technology | Our systems enable our organization to rapidly deploy solutions in a modular way                    |                   |                          |                            |                          |                |

Tools like these are surely helpful to initiate and structure a conversation within an organization but one should also be aware of their limitations. In many cases they are pseudo-scientific, as they start from a vague definition of agility, have no objective scale, rely on self-assessment, have weak evidence of a causal link between the score and performance, assume that "more is better" and largely ignore the organization's specific context. In most cases, these tools have been developed for commercial purposes, i.e., as a teaser for a "transformation" to "agile at scale".

### Where can I find more?

Many management consulting companies offer an agility maturity assessment tool, some of which are freely available.<sup>26</sup> By and large those can also be used in a ngo context. Mercy Corps has developed a specific assessment tool for a ngo context.<sup>27</sup>

## b. Strategic radar

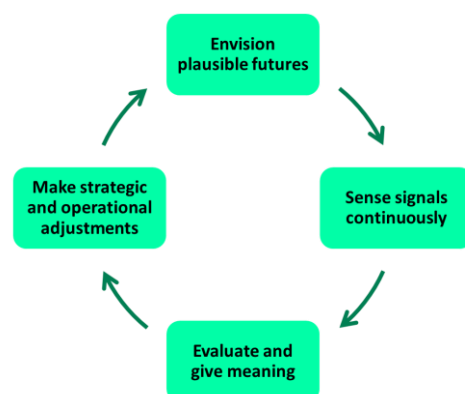
### What is it?

A strategic radar enables an organization, first, to register important signals from the external environment and, second, to trigger strategic and operational adjustments in response to these signals. The radar system is continuously fed by sensors that monitor known indicators and scans for unexpected signals. To know which indicators to use and where to scan, various methods are used, such as scenario planning and horizon scanning. The latter refers to an early warning system set up to detect weak signals (early signs of possible but not confirmed changes) and flex points (critical indicators of key changes in the environment).

### How does it work and when to apply?

A strategic radar is focused on the long-term maneuverability of the organization. By anticipating how the environment might *possibly* evolve, the organization is more ready to sense when and how the environment is *really* changing and is better prepared to trigger any needed adjustments to its strategy, i.e., be agile. To make that happen, the organization has to set up a systematic process: determine what should be monitored, identify internal and external sources, provide incentives to contribute, interpret the information, bring the intelligence to the attention of the right people, make decisions, and conduct periodic exercises to revise the approach as needed (see Figure 6). Memisa, for example, uses networks such as Be-Cause Health as a signal source. The biannual meetings of Rikolto's Board with the International Management Team always start with an analysis of potentially impactful trends.

Figure 6. Steps in managing a strategic radar



### Where can I find more?

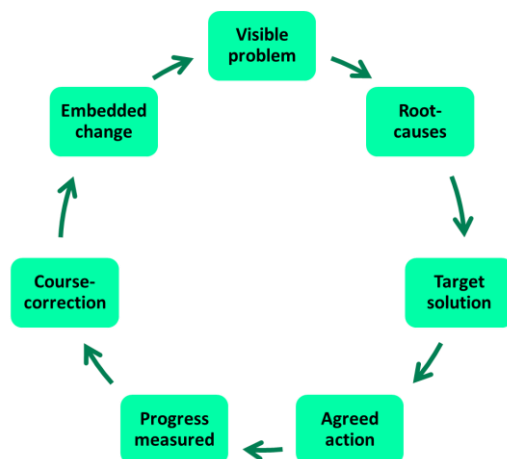
The abovementioned techniques are described in the academic and practitioner literature quite well. One source formulates it pointedly: "The future is not a far-off point but arrives in daily doses." <sup>28,29,30,31,32</sup>

### c. Fast-cycle problem solving

#### *What is it?*

We use the term "fast-cycle problem solving" to refer to a suite of techniques of diverse origins that fundamentally have the same objective: define the problem to be solved, identify a course of action to solve the problem, measure the results of the actions taken, adjust the course as needed, consolidate the improvement, and start the problem-solution-action-measurement-adjustment cycle all over again (see Figure 7). Examples are: plan-do-check-act (PDCA) and define-measure-analyze-improve-control (DMAIC), which can be linked to the total quality management, six sigma and lean movements. By extension, those techniques enable an organization to respond fast and effectively to the sudden emergence of a problem.

Figure 7. Steps in fast-cycle problem solving



#### *How does it work and when to apply?*

The techniques can be used to address problems both at the level of the organization as a whole (e.g., slow management decision-making), a team (e.g., continuous fire-fighting), a process (e.g., late closing of the accounting books) and a project (e.g., dissatisfied sponsors). Whatever the level, any effective problem-solving technique starts with a good understanding of the real problem and its root-causes, for which the Five Whys method and visualization as a fishbone (or Ishikawa) diagram can be used.<sup>33</sup> Wherever possible and meaningful, the nature and magnitude of the problem and root-causes should be quantified. Memisa, for example, uses a template (called "Fiche capitalisation d'action") that follows this logic and focuses on root-cause analysis to prevent jumping to answers and actions too fast.

If well applied, those techniques fit with and contribute to a culture of continuous improvement and organizational learning. The A3 Report, pioneered by Toyota, is a handy way to document the analysis and solution, encourage productive dialogue and help people learn from one another.<sup>34</sup>

#### *Where can I find more?*

The techniques mentioned above have been around for quite a while and are documented in a variety of sources. A good starting point is the Lean Enterprise Institute.<sup>35</sup>

## d. Self-organizing teams

### *What is it?*

A self-organizing team is a small semi-autonomous self-regulated group of people whose members determine, plan and manage their day-to-day activities under reduced supervision in the pursuit of a specific outcome that has been defined by the organization. In other words, the management of the organization requires the team to achieve a well-defined result ("what and why") and then gives the team the mandate to choose how best to accomplish its work ("how"). The team assumes end-to-end responsibility to achieve the stated objective.

The underlying assumption is that a group of willing and intelligent people with a good mix of relevant skills will be more motivated (feeling jointly accountable for the outcome), creative (finding novel solutions), agile (adapting the plan to changing conditions) and efficient (deciding on next steps and reconfiguring work quickly) than a team whose members are constantly directed by someone outside. Memisa, for example, has set up four self-organizing Task Forces for organization-wide initiatives, such as Gender. The ad-hoc teams that Rikolto sets up from time to time, such as the "COVID-response" teams, can be considered self-organizing.

### *How does it work and when to apply?*

Whenever a new job has to be done, the organization should first ask itself whether a dedicated team really needs setting up, i.e., whether resources need reconfiguring temporarily from across the stable organization.<sup>36</sup> If the job consists of well-defined tasks (= routine), it is best organized serially, i.e., in stable factory mode; only if the work is highly ambiguous (= creative) and requires ongoing interaction, is it best organized collaboratively, i.e., in studio mode (see chapter 2c of this report). Note that collegial teamwork can happen within a department or across departments without having recourse to dedicated self-organizing teams, for example by ensuring that information is handed over smoothly or tasks are well-synchronized. Figure 8 compares the nature of a self-organizing team with that of a stable organization unit.

**Figure 8. Comparison of a self-organizing team with a stable organization unit**

|                            | Stable organization units                          | Self-organizing team                                    |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Type of work</b>        | Routine – well-defined tasks executed serially     | Creative – ambiguous collaborative work                 |
| <b>Driving force</b>       | Reliably fulfilling the roles assigned to the unit | Flexibly delivering a solution for a specific challenge |
| <b>Members</b>             | Permanent staff of the units                       | Temporarily configured from various units               |
| <b>Cooperation</b>         | Via clear interfaces between people and units      | Through intensive interaction within the team           |
| <b>Role of boss</b>        | Daily supervision of "what" and "how"              | Define "what" + support stuck teams + build bridges     |
| <b>Role of team leader</b> | Boss = team leader                                 | Define "how" with the team + enable its members         |
| <b>Yardstick</b>           | Ongoing quality, productivity and motivation       | Outcome of singular mission                             |

An organization using self-organizing teams is not boss-less.<sup>37,38</sup> First, leadership is important *on top* of the team. The organization's leader has to define clear goals and ensure that all teams are aligned with those goals: autonomy without alignment usually leads to chaos.<sup>39</sup> In addition, the organization's leader has to help teams that got stuck back on the rails and, where needed, establish bridges between teams. Second, leadership is important *within* the team, even though their style may lean toward that of a so-called servant leader: they focus on the ability of the team members to succeed.<sup>40</sup>

### Where can I find more?

The literature on teamwork is vast. The glossary of the Agile Alliance provides one entry point.<sup>41</sup>

## e. Transversal linkages

### What is it?

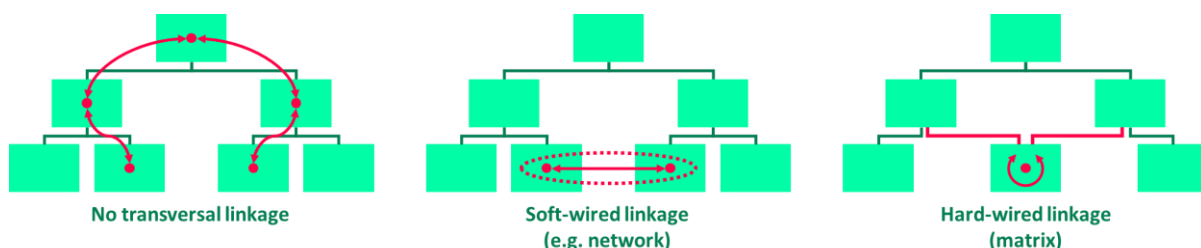
When an organization grows in size and scope, its management becomes more complex, which often requires the creation of sub-teams (e.g., by region) and the addition of hierarchical levels (e.g., head-office + region + country).<sup>42</sup> While such a structure has the benefit of assigning clear management responsibilities, it inevitably leads to the formation of vertical silos: people in different parts to the organization interact less well with each other to coordinate work, share knowledge, etc. That is why an organization should add transversal mechanisms that make it natural and easy for people across the verticals and at all levels below the top management team to link with each other directly. Not having to pass up and down the hierarchy enables a faster response to requests or needs from more distant parts of the organization.

Memisa, for example, has formal mechanisms that focus on experience sharing between the departments in Brussels (quarterly meetings), between offices in a country (regular workshops) and between countries. Rikolto has four commodity-centered Clusters (rice, cocoa, coffee and food smart cities) cutting transversally across the seven Regions that form the vertical backbone of its structure.

### How does it work and when to apply?

Transversal linkages can be achieved through soft-wiring or hard-wiring (see Figure 9). Soft-wiring relies on fairly light mechanisms, such as an ad-hoc multi-functional task force, an advisory council, a central coordination function, the annual planning cycle, a knowledge management system, an expert network or a community of practice. Hard-wiring refers to the installation of a matrix structure, where some managers have reporting lines to two bosses who each represent a different dimension (e.g., geography vs. support function). A matrix structure is complicated and should be used sparingly.<sup>43</sup> But soft-wiring should not be left to happenstance: when any such mechanism is chosen, it should be institutionalized, managed, measured and improved as needed.<sup>44</sup>

Figure 9. Transversal linkages through soft-wiring and hard-wiring



### Where can I find more?

The literature on organization design is vast.<sup>45</sup> A good starting point can be found in the book "Designing Your Organization: Using the STAR Model to Solve 5 Critical Design Challenges."<sup>46</sup>

## f. Governance and decision-making

### *What is it?*

Agility is much about empowerment of the teams and individuals who are close to the field. As mentioned earlier, however, empowerment without direction and boundaries may lead to lots of wasted effort or even chaos. That is where well-functioning governance bodies (general assembly, board of directors, board committees, advisory councils, management team, etc.) play a critical role. Within the context of agility, a governance body functions well if its interventions speed up rather than slow down the organization's activity. It can speed up things by contributing unique expertise, constructively challenging the organization's management, connecting with external networks, enlisting the support of critical stakeholders, etc. It may slow down things by being indecisive, meddlesome, otherworldly, etc.<sup>47</sup>

Figure 10 shows the roles governance bodies can play to safeguard the long-term sustainable success of the organization and serve the interests of its stakeholders: defining the organization's purpose; setting a strategy to deliver it, underpinned by the values and behaviors that shape its culture and the way it conducts its affairs; and ensuring that risks are properly managed and the required control and compliance mechanisms are in place.

**Figure 10. Contribution of governance bodies to the success of the organization**



### *How does it work and when to apply?*

The good functioning of a governance body depends on various factors including: the intrinsic quality and diversity of its members, clear roles and responsibilities vis-à-vis other bodies, and a fit-for-purpose meeting frequency. The distribution of formal roles and responsibilities should be documented in a so-called decision matrix describing the delegation of authority by one level of governance down to the next on matters such as making financial expenditures, recruiting people, establishing partnerships, making public statements, starting legal proceedings, setting up branches, etc. The by-laws of a body describe the rules regarding its own functioning (e.g., voting procedures, records of meetings, ...). Memisa, for example, has clarified the distribution of decision-making between its central departments, its country offices and the local partner organizations. Rikolto has separate Boards with distinct members for Rikolto International and Rikolto Belgium, which reflects its transformation into an international network organization.

### *Where can I find more?*

While made for commercial enterprises, corporate governance codes can be a good source of inspiration also for ngo's. Recent versions of corporate governance codes in several countries do pay due attention also to the interest of society at large.<sup>48</sup> The three-lines-of-defense concept is useful to think about effective control systems in an organization.<sup>49</sup>

## g. Daily agile practice

### *What is it?*

As mentioned in chapter 2, the agility concept has its roots in software development, where project management plays a crucial role. The concept was then adopted elsewhere, in particular to support self-organizing teams that are focused on delivering a solution for a specific challenge. But some agile practices can be used equally well in the course of ordinary (= non-project) activities performed by any department or team (see Figure 11).

### *How does it work and when to apply?*

There are at least three agile practices that can be applied anywhere, for example in a department of the organization. Take "sprint" first. Instead of working according to the fixed rhythm of the calendar and delivering all outputs at the end of the period, the department could plan its work according to the moments at which specific users of specific outputs would expect to receive it. Each such short period (typically a week or two) is called a sprint; the collection of selected outputs is called the sprint backlog. At the end of a sprint, immediate feedback can be asked from the user.

The "daily stand-up meeting" is a second practice. Instead of having fixed, lengthy, PowerPoint-driven, formal, sit-down department meetings, the department team could meet every morning for 15 minutes so as to bring everyone up to date on the information that is vital for coordinating the team's work. All team members stand up in circle and briefly report on yesterday's progress along the sprints, their plans for the coming day and any obstacles that stand in their way.

Third is the "big room". Instead of keeping important information hidden in individual notebooks or somewhere in a shared folder, all relevant information for the functioning of the department is visually depicted on the walls in a single room (physical or virtual) accessible to all. It can include the sprint backlog, actions, issues and metrics. It is typically also where the stand-up takes place.

**Figure 11. Differences between traditional and agile practices**

| Term                          | What it is about                                     | Traditional practice                            | Agile practice                                    | Benefits                                           |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Sprint</b>                 | <b>Rhythm at which outputs are delivered</b>         | Driven by the department's fixed calendar       | Driven by the needs of the various users          | Effectively organized work and better-served users |
| <b>Daily stand-up meeting</b> | <b>Ways in which progress is managed</b>             | Periodic formal sit-down reporting meetings     | Daily short interactive review meetings in circle | Quick adjustments to potential obstacles           |
| <b>Big room</b>               | <b>Ways in which relevant information is treated</b> | Spread across individuals and hidden from sight | Visually shared and updated in one single place   | Common understanding, memory and use               |

### *Where can I find more?*

Practical guidebooks about agile practices like the ones described above are available from many sources such as the Agile Alliance.<sup>50</sup>

## h. Measuring for agility

### *What is it?*

There is the famous saying "What you measure is what you get", meaning that people will behave according to the objectives they are given and evaluated upon. So, if an organization wants to be agile, it should set agility objectives. Certainly true but there is also this less well-known saying: "Perhaps what you measure is what you get. More likely, what you measure is all you'll get."<sup>51</sup> That saying reflects two realities. First, behavior can be influenced not only by objectives and the associated performance indicators but also by factors such as people's identification with the organization's purpose and values (do I understand, embrace and apply them?).<sup>52</sup> Second, setting the right performance indicators is crucial but tricky. For this, "Objectives and Key Results" (OKR) is a valuable concept (see Figure 12).

### *How does it work and when to apply?*

"Objectives" are short descriptions of what you want to achieve, and each objective includes a handful of "key results" (a specific output, achievement, etc.) that you anticipate will measure your progress toward that objective. Within the context of agility, good OKRs have two characteristics: frequent and transparent.<sup>53</sup>

First, goals should be discussed frequently (e.g., at the start of a sprint or even a daily stand-up meeting) so that progress can be reviewed, priorities can be adapted, resources can be re-allocated and feedback can be given. In other words, OKRs should be used to shape the work that needs to be done by an individual and/or a team.<sup>54</sup> Memisa, for example, has customized the open source, web-based DHIS2 platform in Congo and Burundi to gather specific data from its partners and enable faster and better decisions.

Second, goals should be transparent for everyone in the organization to see: people should know what colleagues in other teams are working on. It enables people to align their activities more effectively across silos. It can boost performance by introducing peer pressure, showing what level of performance is possible, and helping them locate colleagues in similar situations who can provide advice on how they can do better. Rikolto, for example, is evolving toward an indicators system that not only serves the basic need for accountability towards donors ("retrospective") but also gives managers an instrument to learn from experience, steer their affairs, sense signals of change, and respond in an agile way ("prospective").

**Figure 12. Differences between traditional and agile use of OKRs**

|              | Traditional practice                                            | Agile practice                                                      |
|--------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Frequency    | Objective setting and review is an annual or quarterly ritual   | Goals are discussed frequently as a function of progress            |
| Transparency | Indicators and performance are kept private at individual level | Goals and current performance are made public for all people to see |

### *Where can I find more?*

The literature on performance management is vast. Useful search terms include Balanced Scorecard, Key Performance Indicators, and Metrics.

## i. Flexible resourcing

### *What is it?*

People naturally fulfil a critical role in meeting the organization's purpose. But when it comes to agility, people may also be a constraining factor: the organization may not have the peak capacity or the specific skills required to respond smoothly to unexpected changes in its environment. Fortunately, there are ways to have a more flexible resource base (see Figure 13).

### *How does it work and when to apply?*

The most obvious way to have flexibility is to maintain excess resources and capacity, sometimes called "slack". Such redundancy of course carries an extra direct cost, which has to be weighed against the opportunity cost of being insufficiently responsive when it really counts.

Another obvious way is to have versatile instead of task-specific resources so that they can be re-assigned to tasks whenever there is a temporary shortage of capacity in a specific area. Also here is a trade-off: versatile resources tend to be less good in a specialist task than the specialist and/or more expensive. A variant of this approach is to give people a two-part role: a base role as a specialist and a variable role as a flexible resource. The re-assignment of people as a function of sudden changes can be decided in the daily stand-up meeting discussed before. Rikolto, for example has a Global Support Team, in which staff are pooled to provide support services to the Regions.

The third way is to rely on external resources via flexible arrangements such as: framework agreements with suppliers in which terms & conditions have been agreed beforehand so that resources are promptly available; use of a so-called contingent workforce platform offering vetted freelancers, independent contractors and consultants on-demand; etc. A more structural way to have access to critical specialist resources that are needed only occasionally is to establish partnerships and alliances with complementary organizations that are specialists in the area concerned. The trade-off is dependence on third parties and the risk of weakening the organization's institutional memory. Memisa, for example, is increasingly co-developing and co-managing projects with other ngo's (such as Artsen Zonder Vakantie / Médecins Sans Vacances) or outsourcing parts of a program (such as to Damiaanactie).

**Figure 13. Ways to have a flexible resource base**

|                                         | What is it                                      | The trade-off to be made                      |                                           |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
|                                         |                                                 | Potential disadvantage                        | Potential advantage                       |
| <b>Slack resources (excess)</b>         | Excess capacity to meet peak demand             | Extra direct cost                             | Lower opportunity cost                    |
| <b>Versatile resources (multi-task)</b> | Multi-task instead of task-specific resources   | Insufficient specialist input for the work    | Better capacity utilization               |
| <b>Contingent resources (external)</b>  | Use of external parties for skills and capacity | Dependence and loss of "institutional memory" | Flexibility with less long-term liability |

### *Where can I find more?*

This is a very broad subject. Additional information is to be found in the literature or professional associations focusing on HR, procurement and strategy management.

## j. Change management

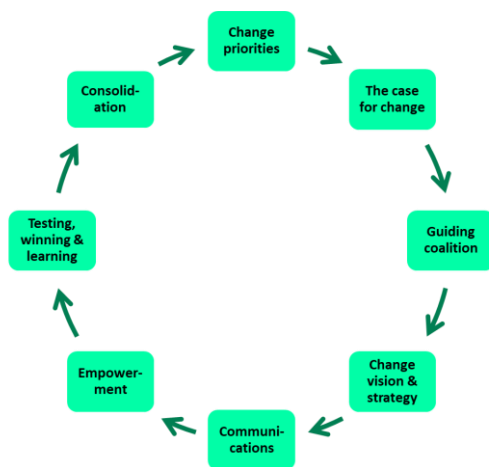
### *What is it?*

Becoming a more agile organization requires changes in the ways of working, as explained above. But change doesn't come automatically – it has to be brought about. Change management is about ensuring that an organization transitions successfully from its current state to its targeted new state and, as a consequence, performs better. Since organizational change only happens when individuals change, the goal of change management is to engage employees and inspire them to adopt a new way of working.

### *How does it work and when to apply?*

As is the case with fast-cycle problem solving, there is a suite of change management frameworks of diverse origins that fundamentally point to the same requirements for affecting change at the level of the organization (see Figure 14): decide which change has to happen first, build a case for change and a sense of urgency, form a powerful and committed coalition for change, clarify the vision of the desired change and the strategy to realize it, communicate the vision and behave accordingly, empower teams and people to take action, look for short-term wins and learn from those, consolidate the changes and institutionalize the new approaches, and start the change cycle all over again. At Memisa, for example, frequent country visits, continuous learning programs and internal webinars are used to explain why things have to change. Rikolto regularly uses internal and external facilitators to coach managers on the change path (e.g., on how to give feedback).

Figure 14. Stages in ensuring change management



For change at the individual level the Prosci ADKAR® model can be used. The acronym represents five tangible conditions for people to embrace lasting change: Awareness ("I understand why as an organization we need to change"), Desire ("I want to support the change because I see clearly what's in it for me"), Knowledge ("I can acquire the skills required to make the change"), Ability ("I am given the opportunity to practice the change in my daily work") and Reinforcement ("I am encouraged not to revert to old habits").

### *Where can I find more?*

For change at the organizational level Professor Kotter's "Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail" remains a classic.<sup>55</sup> Prosci's resources section provides plenty of other material.<sup>56</sup>

## 5. ILLUSTRATION WITH CASE-STUDY #1: MEMISA

In the previous two chapters we described an approach to become a more agile organization. That description was necessarily generic, given the broad meaning of the concept of agility and the wide diversity of ngo's. In this chapter we will bring that generic approach to life through concrete examples from Memisa. In the next we will do the same for Rikolto. The purpose of these case-studies is simply to illustrate – not to present role models to be copied as such.

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Memisa's mission is to improve the quality of care and access to care for all, with special attention to the most vulnerable populations. Memisa was founded in 1988 and started medical development cooperation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, initially to support missionaries' work.

Memisa's income has tripled in the last 15 years to about 15 M€ today. This has been achieved by working with new donors such as the World Bank, the Global Fund and the EU, sometimes co-funding DGD programs. This growth has significantly increased the complexity within the organization, for example in terms of the diversity of reporting obligations. Because private fundraising (roughly 1.5 M€/year) has not grown as much as institutional grants, Memisa has less latitude in deploying its programs. Memisa has had to professionalize, go for bigger-impact programs and focus its activities on a selected number of countries. Nowadays Memisa is active in five African countries, India and Belgium. Memisa works with local civil society organizations where possible. It also has local offices in DRC, Burundi and Guinea, with a total of about 100 field staff. Headquarters are based in Brussels with a team of about 25.

In this case-study we focus on changes that Memisa has implemented to cope with its increasingly complex environment and point out some agile practices in place or being implemented.

### *"Governance and decision-making": Balance between centralization and decentralization*

During its first 15 years of existence, Memisa was managed as one team and everyone was doing "a bit of everything" and got consulted on any topic. While growing, the ngo had to put a more formal structure in place and set up departments at the headquarters. These departments have evolved over the years into four now: Projects & Operations (9 FTE), Development & Funding (7), HR (5) and Administration & Finance (4). The Management Team includes the four department managers and the general director. All the staff work in Brussels.

From a management perspective Memisa seeks to establish a balance between leaving room to local initiative close to the field on the one hand and ensuring continuous direction and control by headquarters on the other hand. About 10 years ago the Kinshasa office had much more autonomy but this situation had to be reversed due to serious management problems. A proper balance is critical for staying agile.

For example, Memisa recently separated the HR from the Administration & Finance department so that it can play a more active role worldwide. For instance, it now reviews all employment contracts and provides advice to local partner organizations. Projects & Operations is another example. Technical expertise is provided in the field but decision-making, coordination and accountability are in Brussels. Every country/local office is supervised by a Project Manager

working at the headquarters. Project Managers have daily contacts with local staff and/or the local partner organization.

Given the size of operations in Congo, Memisa operates a “Représentation Nationale” in Kinshasa (about 15 FTE). The Congolese Management Team is led by an operations director and includes the managers of the Logistics, HR and Finance departments, as well as the national medical advisor. The latter oversees the “quality control” of Memisa’s direct and indirect medical operations and is also in contact with the authorities (e.g., Ministry of Health).

#### *“Self-organizing teams”: Task Forces for transversal initiatives*

At the headquarters Memisa has set up four Task Forces for organization-wide initiatives: Gender, Environment, Digitalization and Team Spirit. Each Task Force consists of one member of each of the four departments and one of them takes up the role of focal point. Regarding their work in the Task Forces, the focal points are accountable to the Management Team rather than their department manager. Task Forces organize their work autonomously and meet at least once per quarter. Based on the work of the Gender Task Force, for instance, each employee has attended a “body & rights” workshop. The same Task Force has recently contracted a consultant to help put in place gender-budgeting within the organization.

#### *“Transversal linkages”: Towards more cross-countries experience sharing*

Sharing experience and knowledge across the “vertical silos” of the organization is an important point of attention. For example, such sharing between the four departments in Brussels happens through a quarterly meeting of the entire office when each department presents a specific topic.

Knowledge sharing mechanisms exist also at national level. In Congo, for instance, programs are reviewed at provincial and inter-office workshops once a year (Congo has seven local offices). A national workshop is organized with external stakeholders such as the Ministry of Health and other ngo’s once every two years. The objective is to review program results, exchange information and integrate recommendations.

Cross-countries experience sharing was fairly formal a couple of years ago (e.g., through company-wide gatherings in Kinshasa). Recently, however, such experiences have been organized more opportunistically (e.g., a Congolese medical advisor visiting Memisa’s activities in India). Memisa wants to reinforce these practices – even if they represent a cost – and intends to organize regional workshops in which specific knowhow can be shared (e.g., mental health expertise in Guinea).

#### *“Strategic radar”: Close connections with projects and networks*

Local program coordinators write a “situation report” monthly. Part of the report focuses on the general context, safety and other matters, so that Brussels-based Project Managers can sense the local situation and share it with the rest of the organization when relevant. Project Managers also receive critical short-term information such as about floods and epidemics through their daily contacts with local offices and/or partners and the processes that have been put in place for that purpose.

Another important source of local intelligence is Memisa’s network with authorities (Ministries, Embassies, ...) and local civil society organizations. In Congo (seven local offices) Memisa has set-up a “Représentation Nationale” to maintain a constant dialogue with these actors. Memisa is also founding member of “Hub Santé” (a platform gathering Belgian actors working in

development cooperation in health in Congo) and is also member of the international “Forum des ONGs”.

Memisa is also active in several networks in Europe such as Be-Cause Health, a Belgian platform for the exchange and capitalization on multidisciplinary knowledge and scientific research related to international health. Another is Medicus Mundi International, a network of public interest organizations working in the field of international health cooperation and advocacy.

### *“Fast-cycle problem solving”: Understanding root-causes and sharing knowledge*

Inspired by the action research philosophy<sup>57</sup>, Memisa defined a methodology to tackle major (health) issues, promote continuous improvement and stimulate knowledge sharing. Memisa developed a template which has been fine-tuned over the years (“Fiche capitalisation d’action”) to help teams define the context/problem, identify relevant lessons learnt and past experiences, describe the strategy and the targeted changes, list the actions to be taken, describe the monitoring mechanisms, and estimate a budget. Once the actions are implemented, the new situation is reassessed in the same way. The focus is laid on root-cause analysis to prevent jumping to answers and actions too fast, and on challenging the way actions have been implemented (“Would you do it the same way again?”).

The Development & Funding Department has organized workshops so that teams take ownership of the template. A “case sharing” initiative has been set up in Congo, supported by a Congo-Belgium duo. Each local office has been asked to focus on one “action” which could be relevant for other offices or programs (e.g., ensuring continuous supply of drugs, involving community resources in local initiatives, ...). In 2014 a capitalization workshop was organized in Kikwit (RDC) where all the regional offices and partners shared their documented cases. Post-COVID the objective is to organize regional workshops in which new cases could be shared and debated.

This project-based methodology also helps Memisa’s staff to close an initiative when the underlying problem has been solved, as opposed to leaving things open-ended. After all, it is Memisa’s end-goal to make itself “redundant” by handing over to local organizations.

### *“Measuring for agility”: Customized monitoring and reporting tools*

Like any ngo working with the DGD, Memisa has to perform an annual self-assessment report for each program based on the performance scores (efficiency, common strategic framework, gender, ...). Memisa has detailed the A/B/C/D scores and lessons learnt to make them more practical and adapted to the health sector. By customizing the framework, Memisa has made it an internal tool enabling year-on-year and geographical comparisons. The Project Managers and local offices or local partners fill in the report, which are then reviewed/challenged by the Development & Funding department to identify possible reorientations. This department also does quality control through monthly calls with Project Managers/Coordinators and on-site missions at least once a year.

Memisa also follows short-term indicators, usually with internal tools. In Congo and Burundi, however, health authorities have deployed the “District Health Information Software 2” (DHIS2), an open source, web-based platform used as a health management information system. Local actors submit health data (via an app or even SMS) such as the number of consultations, the number of infected people by a virus or the number of post-surgery infections. The software includes built-in tools to support data analysis and management through charts, maps and dashboards. Memisa has customized the platform to gather specific data – typically monthly –

from its partners, such as the number of training sessions or the number of water pumps installed. This provides a better view on activities and enables faster and better decisions. Memisa must now decide whether it is ready to replace its internal tools with this platform, which would avoid double inputting and increase its partners' motivation to feed the database.

### *"Flexible resourcing": Partnering with other ngo's*

In the past decade, Memisa has increased its partnering with other (Belgian) ngo's. Some projects are co-developed and co-managed, such as the five-year DGD program in DRC, Burundi, Benin and Belgium with Artsen Zonder Vakantie / Médecins Sans Vacances. For other projects, Memisa outsources part of the program, as is the case in Guinea with Damiaanactie, which provides expertise regarding multi-resistant tuberculosis against payment and with ITM Antwerp for conducting research. Working with other ngo's and institutional actors can add value to a project but requires excellent communication and coordination at management and operational level (e.g., joint missions to ensure coherent interventions and messages).

For its support functions, Memisa contracts external experts as needed such as lawyers, financial advisors or academics. Memisa can also call on (voluntary) medical technical expertise thanks to its networks (e.g., Lumos/UZ Leuven giving recommendations before buying a RX machine).

### *"Change management": Continuous communications and learning*

In Memisa's early years, when a project manager came back from a mission, the entire (small) team was briefed about the experience. An increase in staff and working with "silos" has made internal communications less smooth and employees may feel less connected. To overcome these challenges, the management team consults staff frequently and is in close contact with the field programs. Country visits are frequent, for instance to define a new program or reorganize a team. It is important to bring people together to increase their sense of ownership of Memisa and doing and testing things together.

The management team also wants to better explain why things have to change. One way to achieve this is through training. Memisa has recently started a continuous learning program (only at headquarter level for now). Internal one-hour webinars are organized on specific topics such as decolonization or operations management. The objective is also to build a library and knowledge database.

Memisa is going through many changes and reflections. Several practices have already been implemented and more will come. However, continuous improvement is not only about adding: it also means abandoning practices which do not work or which are no longer relevant.

### *One other practice worth mentioning...*

Memisa is applying another agile practice that is not part of the ten generic practices that we had listed: it has set up a system for stimulating local initiatives and empowerment. Communities have the possibility to suggest micro-projects (<10 k€ for investments or seed funding) to improve health. They are encouraged to bring part of the initial resources required (money, materials, workforce, ...) and must take care of long-term self-financing. A specific template has been developed for presenting these initiatives (context, root-cause analysis, suggested actions, resources, reporting). The system has led to several successes, especially in the Congolese Province of Equateur where, for example, a community brought the materials for building a health center, or a community kitchen tackled malnutrition in children effectively.

## 6. ILLUSTRATION WITH CASE-STUDY #2: RIKOLTO

The current Rikolto is a merger of three Belgian development organizations that have their roots in the 1950-60s. Rikolto's mission is to work for "a sustainable income for farmers, and nutritious, affordable food for everyone". Rikolto runs programs in more than 15 countries worldwide through seven Regions including Belgium, which is on an equal footing with the others. Rikolto's annual income is currently 14 M€ (roughly half of it from DGD). It funds over 100 partner organizations a year and has about 200 employees worldwide, of which about 40 in Belgium.

Some five years ago, Rikolto started transforming itself from a Belgian ngo into an international network organization called Rikolto International to be better able to deal with the many challenges facing the food and agriculture sector. In the new structure the Regions have more autonomy and responsibilities closely to where the action is. In this case-study we don't attempt to describe that (ongoing) transformation in its entirety but focus on a number of changes that clearly enhanced Rikolto's agility, either by design or as a positive knock-on. We also highlight some agile methods used by Rikolto during that transformation.

### *"Flexible resourcing": Global Support Team*

Rikolto has a Global Support Team, in which staff from HR, Finance, Business Development, Fundraising, Communications, and Program Planning, Learning & Accountability (PLA) are pooled to provide support services to the Regions. It counts 12 members, of which 8 are currently based in Belgium. The Regions pay for the services through a budget that is assigned annually. Such a shared services center benefits from scale, hence specialization, efficiency and flexibility. The customer-supplier relationship pushes the Global Support Team to demonstrate its added value to all Regions, which might otherwise consider doing some support activities themselves. This set-up provides more flexibility than is the case when support functions are provided by fixed overhead departments at headquarters.

### *"Transversal linkages": Commodity Clusters*

The seven Regions, each headed by a Regional Director, currently form the vertical backbone of Rikolto's organization structure. At the same time, Rikolto has four commodity-centered Clusters (rice, cocoa, coffee and food smart cities) that cut transversally across the Regions. The Clusters take care of methodologies and approaches that are adapted to the specific characteristics of the commodity concerned. Those transversal linkages reduce the barriers to knowledge sharing between commodity specialists in different Regions. They can quickly call on their peers anywhere in the world to address day-to-day issues, as they are mandated to do so and know each other well from joint initiatives.

Each Cluster is headed by a Coordinator. Their role is to define a global Cluster vision, help Regions define their own strategy and targets, coordinate the work within the Cluster and support all staff. In the Cocoa Cluster, for instance, monthly meetings are organized with the 15 program/project managers worldwide. To improve participation, people can speak in their own language and get support with translation into English.

One further step in the functioning of Rikolto's organization is to shift the lead responsibility for defining its international programs from the Regions to the Clusters, thus assigning a more operational role to the Regions. This may eventually lead to the flipping of the backbone of the organization structure: the Clusters forming the new verticals and the Regions being the new transversals. Whichever backbone is chosen, transversality is crucial for being agile.

### *“Transversal linkages”: Peer Teams in the support functions*

Another example of a transversal linkage are the international Peer Teams that have been set up within several support functions: Fundraising & Communications, PLA, HR, Finance, ICT and Inclusive Business. For instance, the Fundraising & Communications Peer Team, which counts the three employees from the Global Support Team and the regional coordinators for that function, coordinate and distribute work among themselves with minimal guidance from the International Management Team. While Peer Teams share useful information and exchange best practices, they don't work (yet) on common projects: employees naturally continue to prioritize the work that is assigned to them by their regional supervisor.

### *“Governance and decision-making”: International bodies*

Rikolto's transformation into an international network organization is institutionalized also via its governance bodies. The Board of Directors of Rikolto International s.o.n. has ten board members, of whom only two are also members of the Board of Directors of Rikolto Belgium vzw. The Directors have been selected for their specific and diverse expertise (agriculture, food business, finance, ...) and networks.

Rikolto's International Management Team includes the Executive Director, the seven Regional Directors and the four Cluster Coordinators. It meets online every month. The presence of both the geographic and commodity dimensions strengthens the Team's collective sensitivity to relevant changes in the external environment.

The Regions can adapt their way of working to local circumstances. The Management Team in Latin America, for instance, counts four people spread over three countries and representing the three commodities produced in the continent. They meet online every two weeks.

### *“Strategic radar”: Governance bodies and networks*

The Board of Directors of Rikolto International meets with the International Management Team twice a year, usually for a full week. These meetings always start with an analysis of the context and trends that impact or could affect Rikolto's mission and its five-year programs. The analyses are fed by the work of internal experts and quality information gathered through the networks in which Rikolto participates, such as the Sustainable Rice Platform and the Agribusiness Market Ecosystem Alliance. Also during these meetings the Cluster Coordinators are challenged as they present the strategy for their commodity.

### *“Measuring for agility”: Fit-for-purpose performance indicators system*

Rikolto's current performance indicator system is fairly traditional. The system measures direct impact (e.g., number of farmers involved), maturity of local partners (e.g., decision-making processes), inclusiveness of the supply chains (e.g., price setting mechanisms) and the enabling environment (e.g., improvement of infrastructure). The measurement frequency depends on the Regions and programs. In the Cocoa Cluster, for instance, projects are evaluated twice a year: at year start to review performance of the previous year and adapt the project if needed, and at mid-year to assess progress and evaluate teamwork.

An initiative is being undertaken to expand the functionalities of the integrated organization-wide “Planning, Learning & Accountability” (PLA) system, which is based on Rikolto's Customer Relationship Management system (CRM; provider: Salesforce). The system aims to “provide a framework for systematic data collection, sense-making and documentation”. While in principle everyone has access to the system, so far it is used mainly by employees of the PLA support

function and the Global Support Team to collect data, monitor indicators and fulfil reporting duties towards donors.

The system is not used widely yet by program and project managers, who sometimes perceive it more as a burden than a support to assess project progress. Therefore, PLA is working on an attractive dashboard that establishes a good trade-off between a fit-for-purpose solution for project managers on the one hand (timely and accurate information enabling local agility), and standardization on the other hand (common indicators and visualization tools enabling trend analysis and consistency globally).

In defining indicators, Rikolto follows the guidelines of the Global Reporting Initiative and has also interviewed key stakeholders to identify indicators most relevant for them. The ambition is to have a system that not only serves the basic need for accountability towards donors (“retrospective”) but also gives managers an instrument to learn from experience, steer their affairs, sense signals of change, and respond in an agile way (“prospective”).

#### *“Self-organizing teams”: Mobilization for ad-hoc responses*

The ad-hoc teams that are set up from time to time can be considered “self-organizing”. Good examples are the “PLA transformation” or the “COVID-response” teams. Thanks to the international network and remote work tools already in place, the latter was up and running fast and could quickly share best practices among Regions about maintaining or adapting programs. In Uganda, for instance, markets were closed, so the team set up a project delivering fresh vegetables boxes to households.

#### *“Change management”: Explicit attention at organizational and individual level*

The transformation that Rikolto is going through requires constant and explicit attention to change management both at the organizational and individual level. At the organizational level, change management is about building a case for change and a sense of urgency, forming a coalition for change, and clarifying the vision and the strategy to realize it. For example, the Board and Directors nurtured their thinking process by visiting network-based ngo’s considered leading-edge (e.g., Solidaridad in The Netherlands). A bottom-up initiative was to define a vision on people and organization: a global survey enabled identification of what employees wanted to keep in terms of organization and culture and what they considered as desirable changes; the findings were then further developed with the Management Team and resulted in a 2-page vision document about Rikolto’s P&O ambitions and values. Once the overall Rikolto vision was defined and communicated, workshops were organized in the Regions to detail and tailor the implementation to their specific needs and sensitivities. For example, in one Region the focus was on giving autonomy, while in another on conflict management.

Change doesn’t come automatically. To that effect, Rikolto uses internal and external facilitators. For example, the HR Global Support Team facilitated the workshops mentioned above. More broadly, Rikolto hired two consultants for a year to help mainly on the design of the organization structure and on people management. In Latin America the Management Team hired a local consultant to help them implement and test specific methods (e.g., self-organizing teams) and coach them (e.g., on how to give feedback).

Structural changes inevitably come with shifts in power; support is needed to contain tensions and ease transitions. For example, the Executive Director addresses all staff members 2 or 3 times a year in a webinar to explain the what and why of the organizational changes.

Another permanent point of attention is dealing with change fatigue. While people may recognize the inevitability and benefits of change (a better-connected organization, more autonomy for teams, faster decisions and better learning), there is a limit to the change frequency that people can absorb and handle.

#### *One other practice worth mentioning...*

Rikolto is applying another agile practice that is not part of the ten generic practices that we had listed: it has set up an internal “Strategic & Innovation Fund” to support pilot initiatives within Regions and Clusters. This fund (roughly 200 k€ in size) is financed by part of its private fundraising actions, hence gives Rikolto more latitude in responding to change. It is meant to enhance partnerships or to perform scoping assessments for identifying opportunities in new countries. For example, Rikolto has been able to start a small project in Ivory Coast, which is the biggest worldwide cocoa producer. Local presence there is considered a must for any player that is active in this commodity. Based on the results and lessons learnt from the pilot project, more substantial projects will be started in Ivory Coast and other countries.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

This report started from the observation that "agility" has become a mainstream management concept with a highly positive connotation that has been adopted by all types of organizations that seek flexibility in the face of rapid change. Unfortunately, its widespread adoption is also leading to confusion about what agility actually means and how it can be applied in practice.

The purpose of this report was to propose a structured way of thinking about agility that any individual ngo could then adapt to its particular needs, taking into account its specific nature, priorities and circumstances. To that purpose, this report can be used either in a "back to basics" or in a "selective" way.

The "back to basics" approach relates to the framework and decision tree presented in chapter 3. Go systematically through each of the following steps: Who are our stakeholders? What impact do we seek to have? Through which processes do we create impact? And what are the main bottlenecks and vulnerabilities in the processes? That analysis will identify the areas where a higher degree of agility would be the most desirable. It will also point to the root-causes of the current lack of agility and, hence, the most appropriate methods for making your organization more agile where it counts most.

The "selective" approach relates to the ten concrete yet broadly applicable methods presented in chapter 4. Pick and choose the methods that appear appropriate for your organization at this particular point in time. Tailor the chosen method as required to your specific situation, possibly by delving more deeply in the mentioned sources. Note that the various methods can be applied separately from one another and in any sequence.

Which of the two approaches is the more suitable depends on a number of factors. If your organization is considering starting a bottom-up transformation journey and finds that "more agile" is an important driving force for that transformation, the "back to basics" approach appears suitable. Conversely, if your organization has already gone through a transformation journey but is concerned that it might become too self-complacent, a "back to basics" analysis could serve as a useful health-check and point to continuous improvement opportunities. The templates and examples in the annex of this report should be useful for such exercises.

The "selective" approach appears suitable when you already know pretty well where the shoe pinches most and are looking for a structured method that you can roll out in a disciplined way throughout your organization without getting into a complete overhaul of the organization first. In that case, experiment with the selected method and modify it as needed before rolling it out.

## ANNEX: MORE ON IDENTIFYING SUITABLE AGILE METHODS

In this annex we detail the logic of the decision tree we outlined in chapter 3. By answering the questions in the decision tree step by step, a ngo will be able to identify specific agile methods that are helpful for its particular situation. It will also be able to explain *why* it is adopting a specific method.

Each step is accompanied by templates and illustrated with concrete examples. The decision tree is not meant to be a cook-book but a framework for structuring conversations between managers; the templates should not be used as a straitjacket but a source of inspiration. It is better to go through the tree fairly rapidly and iterate as needed, rather than to go into full detail from the start. Always keep in mind the ultimate purpose: to be more agile where it counts in the ngo's real-world life.

### a. Who are our stakeholders?

#### *Short explanation of the concept of stakeholder*

An organization exists to achieve certain ends. As a consequence, it is important for that organization to understand who or what really counts. A stakeholder in an organization is defined as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives". In other words, stakeholders are those entities to whom the organization's managers should pay attention.<sup>58</sup> In order to apply that definition in practice, it helps to consider the following:

- Do not pay equal attention to all entities. Consider the following criteria to identify pertinent entities:
  - What is the entity's *power* to influence the organization? Can the entity get the organization to do something that the latter would not have otherwise done?
  - What is the *legitimacy* of the entity's relationship with the organization? Is there a general perception that the actions of the entity are desirable or appropriate in view of some social norms, values or beliefs?
  - What is the *urgency* of the entity's claim on the organization? To what degree do the entity's claims call for immediate attention?
- Do not limit yourself to entities who already are in a relationship with the organization today. Think also about *latent or potential* future stakeholders so as to better anticipate sudden changes in the environment, which is key for agility.
- Do not limit yourself to entities with which the organization has some sort of *transactional relationship* via a legal or implied contract (employee, volunteer, director, beneficiary, supplier, partner, donor, ...) or entities that set *binding boundaries* (legislator, regulator, ...). Also consider entities that have a "*moral*" claim on the organization or that *otherwise* have an ability to influence the organization's behavior, direction, process, or outcomes (founder, activist, international network member, community, media, ...).

#### *Template to identify stakeholders*

List entities from various categories that should be considered stakeholders. Assess their pertinence on three aspects qualitatively (High, Medium, Low). Indicate whether they are significant presently or latently (Yes, No).

| Category                   | Stakeholder | Pertinence |            |         | Time horizon |        |
|----------------------------|-------------|------------|------------|---------|--------------|--------|
|                            |             | Power      | Legitimacy | Urgency | Present      | Latent |
| Transactional relationship |             |            |            |         |              |        |
|                            |             |            |            |         |              |        |
|                            |             |            |            |         |              |        |
| Binding boundaries         |             |            |            |         |              |        |
|                            |             |            |            |         |              |        |
|                            |             |            |            |         |              |        |
| Moral claim                |             |            |            |         |              |        |
|                            |             |            |            |         |              |        |
|                            |             |            |            |         |              |        |
| Other                      |             |            |            |         |              |        |
|                            |             |            |            |         |              |        |
|                            |             |            |            |         |              |        |

### Example of stakeholder identification

Institutional donors and local partners are obvious examples of *present* stakeholders having a *transactional relationship* with the ngo. Both those stakeholders have high *power* and high *legitimacy*. The difference between the two may relate to *urgency*: high for local partners but normally only medium for institutional donors since programs tend to run for 5-10 years.

A ngo's constituency (founders, activists, ...) could be a *present* stakeholder having a *moral claim* on the ngo. While their *power* and *urgency* may be low, their *legitimacy* is high.

An example of a *latent* stakeholder with potentially medium *legitimacy* could be the diaspora in Belgium from a country where the ngo has an important activity. Business federations are another example of a *latent* stakeholder with potentially high *urgency* for a ngo that is engaging in activities similar to those of commercial enterprises (e.g., retailing, consulting, ...): any perception that the ngo is using its special status to compete unfairly needs clear attention.

## b. What impact on stakeholders do we seek to have?

### Short explanation of the concept of impact

Whereas the identification of stakeholders indicates *who* counts, the definition of impact indicates *what* counts for those stakeholders. Within the context of agility, we are not talking about impact in the visionary, aspirational sense (such as "expand children's opportunities to reach their full potential") but in the operational, measurable sense (such as "improve literacy rates of girls in developing countries"). Impact is about the expectations of a stakeholder vis-à-vis the organization, or the objectives that the organization imposes on itself with regard to a stakeholder. In order to apply that definition in practice, it helps to consider the following:

- Do not limit yourself to normal outcomes for which the organization has been set up in the first place and which a stakeholder naturally expects to be there (e.g., directors expecting timely, accurate and audited financial reports). Also consider unexpected and undesirable outcomes that could arise when something goes wrong (e.g., a case of fraud).
- Be sufficiently specific when describing the outcomes. Therefore, anticipate how the results from this step will be used in the next step "c. Through what processes do we create impact?": envisage what process(es) will lead to the outcome; if that is hard, it probably means that the outcome has been defined insufficiently specifically.

- Likewise, do not try to be exhaustive and do not get bogged down in less relevant details. Prioritize by envisaging how the results from this step will be used in the subsequent steps about bottlenecks and vulnerabilities:
  - Which expected outcomes are the most challenging or problematic today – or could be in the future – in terms of their quality and the efficiency with which they are generated?
  - Which are undesirable fall-outs from unexpected events to which the organization could be exposed? How high is the probability of those events occurring, and what is their effect if they do occur?

### Template to assess impact

List the stakeholders identified in the previous step. For each stakeholder describe the most critical objectives and outcomes.

| Stakeholder | Critical objectives and expected outcomes with regard to the stakeholder | Undesirable outcomes from things gone wrong unexpectedly |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
|             |                                                                          |                                                          |
|             |                                                                          |                                                          |
|             |                                                                          |                                                          |
|             |                                                                          |                                                          |
|             |                                                                          |                                                          |
|             |                                                                          |                                                          |

### Example of impact assessment

Local partners are a *stakeholder*. They *expect* many things from the ngo, such as the transfer of knowledge from similar projects in other countries. A *high-impact event* may be the sudden withdrawal of a business partner that was contributing to the project financially or materially.

The ngo's volunteers are another *stakeholder*. They may *expect* regular communications about the ngo's ongoing programs as well as reassurance that the ngo's DNA is being respected. An *undesirable development* may be the distancing of a significant part of the volunteer community from the ngo, for instance further to rumors or allegations of misuse of funds.

## c. Through what processes do we create impact?

### Short explanation of the concept of process

Once we know what counts for whom (= which impact for which stakeholder), we can describe the sequence of activities that ultimately produce the intended outcome, that is, the process. In order to make practical descriptions, it helps to consider the following:

- Keep in mind how the process description will be used afterwards: to identify important bottlenecks and vulnerabilities. Therefore, do not make a detailed process map that would be required for other purposes, such as automating a process, making job descriptions, etc. Techniques such as RACI<sup>59</sup> used for the latter (R = Responsible, A = Accountable, C = Consulted, I = Informed) may be overkill for this case.
- Try to visualize the process in terms of who (a department, a team, a committee, an individual, an external party, ...) does what, i.e., "walk the process". It may be helpful to work backwards, i.e., to start from the outcome that is delivered to the user. Be sure to

include activities or interfaces where you are experiencing recurrent issues of performance, quality or efficiency, or where you anticipate such issues to emerge in the near future. Likewise, include activities or interfaces that constitute potential points of failure.

- Do not try to detail highly creative processes (contrary to routine processes) into specific activities. If a creative process isn't working well, that is usually not linked to the sequence of activities but other factors such as governance, resources, etc.
- For the undesirable outcomes from unexpected events (for example, the eruption of a scandal, a strike in the local workforce, a fatal accident, ...), there is no point in describing the process; it is sufficient to indicate the process(es) to which such event may be related.
- Consider not only the core operational processes (interventions, campaigns, ...) but also the support processes such as financial management, people management, IT, etc.

### Template to describe the process

For each intended outcome linked to self-imposed objectives or stakeholder expectations, list the sequence of activities vertically. List the parties that could intervene in one or more activities horizontally. Mark with a cross which party or parties are responsible for executing any given activity. If needed for clarity, describe briefly the meaning of a cross.

| Activity | Intervening party |  |  |  |  |
|----------|-------------------|--|--|--|--|
|          |                   |  |  |  |  |
|          |                   |  |  |  |  |
|          |                   |  |  |  |  |
|          |                   |  |  |  |  |
|          |                   |  |  |  |  |
|          |                   |  |  |  |  |
|          |                   |  |  |  |  |

↓

|         |
|---------|
| Outcome |
|---------|

### Example of process description

One could consider "program delivery" as a process, with the following *sequence of activities*: define the program → finance the program → roll out the program → adapt the program → close the program. The *intervening parties* in the process may include the local partner, the donors, the ngo's programs department, the ngo's fundraising department and the ngo's finance & administration department.

For some activities such as "define the program", all intervening parties would probably play a role (for example, the local partner would define the need, and support the writing of the proposal). For other activities such as "roll out the program", not all parties would intervene (for example, the donors and the fundraising department wouldn't).

## d. What are the main bottlenecks in a process?

### Short explanation of bottleneck concept

When talking about bottlenecks, we look at the process in steady state, when it follows a regular pattern yet suffers from recurrent issues. Bottlenecks are the points in the process where things happen that have a negative effect on its intended outcome in terms of the quality of the

outcome or the time or resources to get to the outcome. In short, there is an efficiency issue (for example, in the procurement process, it may take too long a time to get correct purchase orders approved, leading to delays in the execution of a project). In order to identify bottlenecks and thus opportunities for efficiency improvement, it helps to consider the following:

- Look at various types of process inefficiencies, such as:
  - Activities that consume resources and time but, at closer inspection, do not or no longer add value, i.e., are or could be made redundant (e.g., approval activity);
  - Needless iterations, for example re-work as a result of shortcomings in quality;
  - Activities with poor productivity, i.e., a poor ratio of output/resources, possibly by lack of proper training, tools, automation, etc.;
  - Dead time between activities, for example time spent waiting or queuing;
  - Poor interfaces and hand-overs between successive activities, for example as a result of having split a single activity into two.
- For each major inefficiency, dig deeper to find its so-called root-causes. To do so, consider using techniques such as "5 Whys" or the Ishikawa fishbone diagram.<sup>60</sup>
- As appropriate, borrow concepts and techniques from "lean" thinking, which aims at eliminating waste from so-called value streams.<sup>61,62</sup> Lean is rooted in automotive manufacturing, from where it spread to business processes in general, just as agile is rooted in software development.

### Template to describe bottlenecks

For each relevant process, list the activities where important inefficiencies are suspected to take place. For each such activity, identify the type(s) of inefficiency and describe briefly their nature. Identify and describe briefly the root-cause(s) of the inefficiency.

| Activity | Type of inefficiency |            |              |           |            |       |
|----------|----------------------|------------|--------------|-----------|------------|-------|
|          | Redundancy           | Iterations | Productivity | Dead time | Interfaces | Other |
|          |                      |            |              |           |            |       |
|          |                      |            |              |           |            |       |
|          |                      |            |              |           |            |       |
|          |                      |            |              |           |            |       |
|          |                      |            |              |           |            |       |
|          |                      |            |              |           |            |       |

### Example of bottlenecks description

The *activity* "define the program" may suffer from *redundancy* and *iterations* between the local office (who deals with the local partner) and the fundraising department when it comes to answering questions from the donors. One of the root-causes may be that procedures that were in place before the delegation of responsibility to the local offices have not been properly adjusted yet.

In the *activity* "adapt the program" there may be quite some *dead time* waiting for the validation of the proposed program changes by the donor, even if they are not very material. One of the root-causes may be that the budget formula is totally fixed, without any flexibility.

## e. What are the main vulnerabilities in a process?

### Short explanation of vulnerability concept

Unexpected events may disrupt an otherwise regular process and require the organization to reconfigure and mobilize resources for dealing with the disruption. While such a disruption may constitute an opportunity rather than a threat, the organization should try to minimize its vulnerability to disruptions. To that effect, it should be alert to changes in the environment that could happen and anticipate how it will respond if the change *does* happen. In order to identify vulnerabilities and ways to strengthen the response capability, it helps to consider the following:

- Identify potentially disruptive future events by thinking about the surprises that any stakeholder involved in a process could spring onto the organization. Such surprises could be of a varied nature: financial (e.g., sudden withdrawal of a donor), regulatory (e.g., announcement of a radical new standard), technical (e.g., breakdown of a critical piece of equipment), commercial (e.g., bankruptcy of a supplier), organizational (e.g., a fatal accident), societal (e.g., allegations of abuse), etc.
- Think about both "known unknowns" and "unknown unknowns". The former are events that one easily imagines could happen but whose specifics are not known (when, where, how, etc.). The latter are extreme events generally seen as deadly surprises outside everyday experience that can turn the organization upside-down.
- Focus on those events to which the organization is the most vulnerable, i.e., which represent the highest risk. Risk is defined as the likelihood of occurrence of the event multiplied by the severity of the consequences if the event does occur.
- Consider how the identified risks could best be managed: Avoid (eliminate the risk completely by not doing certain things), Control (reduce the likelihood or severity), Transfer (shift to a third party such as an insurer or partner) or Accept (take the chance of the negative impact while continually monitoring).

### Template to describe vulnerabilities

For each relevant process, identify the disruptive events that could occur. For each event, assess the likelihood of its occurrence and the severity of the consequences. Indicate which of the ACTA options (Avoid, Control, Transfer, Accept) exist for managing the risk.

| Disruptive event linked to a process | Likelihood of occurrence | Severity of the consequences | Ways of managing the risk |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|
|                                      |                          |                              |                           |
|                                      |                          |                              |                           |
|                                      |                          |                              |                           |
|                                      |                          |                              |                           |
|                                      |                          |                              |                           |
|                                      |                          |                              |                           |

### Example of vulnerabilities description

The *activity* "roll out the program" may be *disrupted* by the sudden leaving of a key project team member. Both the *likelihood of occurrence* and the *severity of the consequences* of such a departure may be medium. The best *way of managing the risk* may be to control it by appointing back-ups from the start.

Another *disruptive event* in the same *activity* may be an emergency such as an outbreak of Ebola or a military coup. While its *likelihood of occurrence* may be low, the *severity of the consequences* may be high. The best *way of managing the risk* may be to accept it in the assumption that, if need be, the program will be adapted with the donor's approval.

## ***MORE INFORMATION***

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