

## The sprint cycle methodology as vehicle for adaptive Management: Early reflections from the Climate Smart Jobs (CSJ) Project.

### Introduction

In the dynamic and ever-changing landscape of development programmes, practitioners are continually seeking methodologies that offer both flexibility and disciplined execution. The sprint cycle methodology, which was originally developed for software development teams, has emerged as a promising approach for managing challenging development programmes.

By breaking down an initiative into smaller, manageable segments called **sprints** – each typically lasting several weeks – teams can focus on completing specific tasks, delivering incremental progress, learning about what is required to deliver change, and adapting quickly. It is said that this approach enhances productivity and fosters continuous learning and discovery. Each sprint provides an opportunity to gather insights, identify potential challenges, and refine strategies based on real-time feedback. Teams can experiment with different solutions, assess their effectiveness, and make informed decisions to improve future sprints. This iterative process encourages innovation, promotes flexibility, and ensures that the programme evolves in response to new information and changing circumstances. By embracing this methodology, it is argued that teams can achieve their goals more efficiently.

This thought piece explores the application of the sprint methodology in Market Systems Development (MSD) programmes, drawing specifically on the experiences of the Climate Smart Jobs programme in Uganda (2023-2027). We are finding that the implementation of the sprint methodology may be transformative, but it also presents its own set of challenges and learning opportunities. Here I share initial reflections, following one year of implementation.

### What have we done?

The CSJ programme operates in a complex environment: we know the problems that smallholder farmers face, but solutions are less clear and rarely straightforward. We have therefore chosen to navigate this landscape by continuously testing ideas and assumptions as we implement. We understand that not all CSJ promoted interventions will bear fruit, therefore we will scale down/discontinue interventions and reallocate resources to more promising ones. The basic premise of the sprint methodology is appealing, but we felt that the adoption of 'off the shelf sprint methodologies' that have worked in industries that deal with more predictable challenges, may not be suitable for the complex and unpredictable nature of market systems development.

So, what did we do? We tailored the methodology to meet our needs. We customised the methodology so it would revolve around three-month sprint cycles. This approach ensures that we maintain up-to-date and in-depth knowledge of our interventions, allowing us to make rapid course corrections and adjustments as needed. By adopting this framework, we embrace the principle of "failing fast," which enables us to quickly identify and address any issues, learn from our experiences, and continuously improve our strategies. Specifically, our sprint cycle methodology has the following key features:

1. **Sprint planning:** For each intervention within our trial business models, we plan activities and deliverables in three-month sprints
2. **Implementation and delivery:** Sprint activities are executed by a multidisciplinary team, led by a Business Model Specialist who holds end-to-end responsibilities for field visits, spot checks, and monitoring of interventions. Each intervention is supported by a customised advisory support plan, allowing for technical inputs and mentorship.
3. **Regular check-ins:** We conduct fortnightly and monthly catchups for each intervention. These involve the full technical and Evaluation, Research, and Learning teams. The primary objective of these meetings is to review progress against the approved sprint workplan.
4. **Quarterly strategic reviews:** These internal reviews, chaired by the Team Leader, include participation from technical and operations teams, the communications team, the Evaluation, Research, and Learning team, and part-time technical advisors. The primary objectives are to review the performance of interventions over the past sprint; discuss any delays, risks, or challenges; agree on mitigation measures; and make decisions regarding the scale-up or scale-down of ongoing interventions.

### **After 12 months of applying the methodology, what appeals to us about the sprint methodology?**

The frequent check-ins – be they every four weeks or every quarter – are crucial for keeping track of progress and addressing any issues quickly. These meetings allow us to regularly review what has been accomplished and ensure everything is on track; identify and solve problems as soon as they arise; and discuss what went well and what could be improved for the future. This reflection helps the team learn from their experiences and make better decisions moving forward.

We are confident that sprint cycles provide enhanced control and oversight of our progress. They create a structured environment, offering a clear framework that simplifies project management and oversight. Additionally, the regular scheduling of sprints allows for better planning and resource allocation, ensuring that we stay on track and efficiently use our resources.

Sprint cycles have significantly improved our focus and productivity. Each sprint is guided by specific goals, which help the team stay focused on delivering tangible results. By breaking down projects into smaller tasks, we ensure steady progress and achieve quick wins.

### **And what concerns us?**

The three-month planning and review points come around very quickly. For some, perhaps too quickly. We are mindful that overloading sprints with too many tasks runs the risk of exhaustion and decreased productivity. After all, programmes are marathons, not sprints.

There must be shared understanding of expectations and priorities. The need to “sprint” and be seen to be “sprinting”, coupled with the peer review process at which colleagues offer critical reflection, risks creating a scenario in which staff become or feel overwhelmed; where gaps, next steps, necessary adjustments are lost or overlooked, and colleagues become confused. While the technical merits of sprints are evident, it's important to balance the workload to maintain team morale and efficiency. Teams that carefully plan their sprints to include a manageable number of tasks tend to have higher completion rates.

We remain vigilant about the possibility that the “sprint” language risks fostering a work culture in which teams operate in ‘dash mode’ – that, ironically, they spend more time doing and completing, than taking time to pause, reflect and adapt. We all know that busy-ness does not necessarily translate to quality and impact. And on this front, we remain conscious that the sprints are conceived, planned and reviewed by the CSJ team itself, and the absence of external perspectives might create blinkers.

We remain vigilant about scope creep and changing requirements. Adjustments are often necessary; desirable even. However, frequent ‘jumping about’ during and at the end of sprints can be disruptive and may point to underlying problems. Therefore, we remain keen to ensure that planning is realistic. We want to be intentional in what we do and how we do it, so that we remain strategic and avoid overcommitment and burnout.

### **Based on what we know so far, what advice do we have for others?**

- It's essential to maintain a balanced workload, ensuring that sprints aren't overloaded. A proper understanding of sprint cycles emphasises the importance of testing, learning, and adapting, rather than merely rushing to complete tasks. This mindset helps improve the quality of deliverables.
- It is crucial to have clear goals and expectations for each sprint. Well-defined objectives help maintain focus and align efforts with overall program objectives. Teams must be flexible and adaptable, ready to pivot based on feedback and evolving project needs, which is vital for navigating complex environments.
- Programs must balance the need for operational efficiency with the need for proper documentation. Teams/reviewers must accept that perfect information may be unavailable. Therefore, decisions will have to be made with information that is ‘good enough’.
- Keeping meetings and sprints within designated timeframes ensures consistent progress, and regularly reviewing and adjusting schedules can help uphold these timelines.
- Stakeholder involvement is critical, with early and regular engagement necessary to align priorities and gather valuable feedback.

- When implementing sprint cycles, it's important to focus on proper team onboarding to shorten the learning curve. Providing orientation and necessary tools helps teams grasp sprint methodology principles more quickly.
- Ensure clients understand the process to avoid potential issues and balance the depth of engagement with the cycle's time constraints.

*We recognise that we are not the only ones applying sprints in complex environments. We are curious to know if your experiences have been similar or different from ours. What insights or advice can you share based on your experiences?*

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