

Using adaptive management to navigate uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic

Lessons from the Zurich Flood Resilience Alliance's work during 2020-21

This summary of the third Learning Report from the Zurich Flood Resilience Alliance (hereafter: the Alliance) outlines six key characteristics of proactive programming that have proven useful for Alliance teams to navigate uncertainty. Each characteristic is accompanied by a practical example from the Alliance and recommendations for practitioners.

With the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing climatic shocks and stressors, humanitarian and development organizations are navigating an increasingly complex and uncertain world. Despite the significant constraints from the pandemic and other disasters, we at the Alliance were able to achieve progress towards our goals in both flood resilience policy and practice, in large part due to our 'proactive programming' approach (see textbox). [Our third 'Foundations for Change' report](#) (2021) reflects on our experiences and lessons learned from our proactive programme approach, that we believe practitioners and donors could benefit from.

What do we mean by 'proactive programming'?

Proactive programming involves decision-making based on trust, learning, and contextual understanding. It requires intentionally investing in building capable, proactive teams and providing them the resources and flexibility to modify their programs based on needs, challenges, and opportunities.

In partnership with:

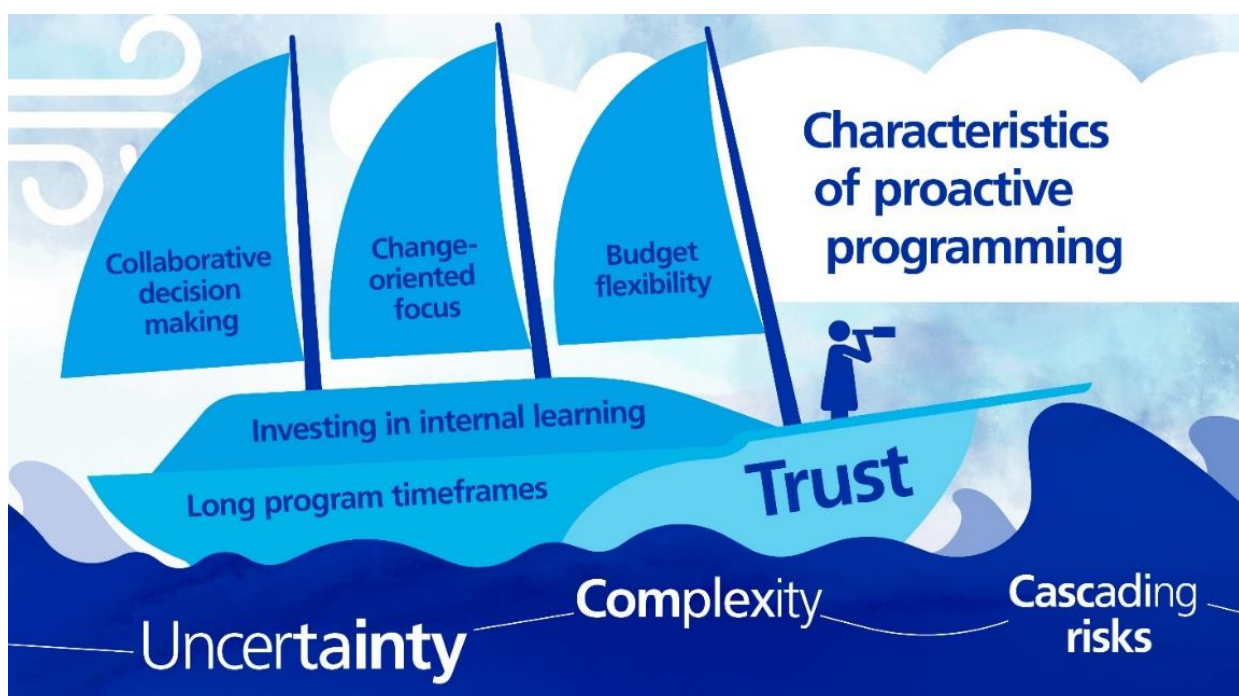


The Alliance's proactive programming approach, grounded within the concept of adaptive management but with an explicit forward-looking element, places a strong emphasis on planning and decision-making for the "what if's," not just the "oh no's". It is not only about adapting to change after or as it happens, but about recognizing that the future is uncertain and difficult to predict. Proactive programming can help programs adapt to changing and complex contexts, while maintaining momentum towards their goals. The design of our systems, mechanisms, and internal culture to address uncertainty over time enables the Alliance's proactive programming approach.

Key Lessons for Proactive Programming

Trust: Trust between donors and implementing organizations is important as it creates a culture of honesty. In a trusting and honest relationship, we don't need to hide challenges; rather, we can discuss them openly to come up with solutions together. Sometimes challenges can even turn into opportunities.

- **Alliance experience:** Being open about operational challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic allowed Alliance members at the global level and the Z Zurich Foundation to understand the realities on the ground. Alliance teams were then given flexibility to use their funds to support communities to prepare for, and respond to, the pandemic and explore how to conduct their planned activities virtually.
- **Recommendation:** Where possible, be open about challenges, and work with your donor to find ways to leverage those challenges. This may include identifying the lessons from failure and what to change next time, or restructuring the work to adapt to roadblocks and changed conditions.



Long Program Timeframes: The combination of long program timeframes, a focus on outcomes, and budget flexibility gives teams the space and time to refocus their programs.

- **Alliance experience:** As planned face-to-face activities paused and everyone's attention focused on the pandemic, many Alliance teams had to reconsider how to achieve their programme goals. For some, this meant strengthening relationships with local government by supporting them during the pandemic, in ways that are aligned with our flood resilience objectives in the long run. With shorter programme timeframes or rigid budgets that are tied to specific activities, teams would not have had the time or flexibility to identify and pursue new pathways towards their goals.
- **Recommendation:** Work to help donors to understand the level of effort that achieving successful outcomes takes, particularly when success requires multiple years of sustained engagement versus short-term funding.

Invest in Internal Learning: Internal learning can help make better decisions, learn from peers, rethink ways of working work, and understand programme progress. This is easier if there are effective and accessible systems and processes that support such learning.

- **Alliance experience:** The pandemic pushed us into an unfamiliar and constantly changing “new reality”, which we had to learn how to navigate. Alliance teams, for example, conducted context analyses to understand the changing context and needs of stakeholders. With this knowledge, they were able to develop new strategies for engaging key stakeholders in ways that supported COVID-19 and flood resilience needs. The results of these analyses were also tracked at a global level to inform global Alliance strategy (i.e. for advocacy) and decision-making.
- **Recommendation:** Do not underestimate the time and effort required to set up internal learning systems and develop ways to use that learning. Expect to learn by doing and adapt your systems over time to better serve your needs.

Collaborative decision-making: The best way to achieve a common vision and goals is by working together and keeping everyone engaged. This requires collaborative decision-making, where inputs from everyone are requested and considered. This approach can be time and resource consuming but allows for strong synergies. It should be complemented by explicit channels for ensuring implementation challenges are addressed, recognizing that ‘collaboration’ can easily become ‘loudest voice wins’ or inaction. This way of working also requires a balance between hands-on/hands-off engagement of the donor, who should be part of the conversation and aware of context, challenges, and issues, but not drive decision-making.

- **Alliance experience:** With growing concerns around the potential catastrophic impacts of floods and COVID-19 combined, Alliance partners mobilized to co-develop the ‘Resilience in Crisis’ advocacy strategy. This joint strategy provided the Alliance and its teams with a strong foundation to amplify shared and needed messaging

around avoiding compound risk. Our growing credibility around this topic paved the way for us to participate in early global and national discussions around responding to and recovering from COVID-19 in ways that also address climate risk.

- **Recommendation:** Draw your donors into your work, sharing with them both successes and challenges. View their choice to fund your organization as an opportunity to build their capacity around the type of work you do and how you do it.

Change-oriented focus: Having a common vision and goals but allowing flexibility for how to work towards these goals allows teams to experiment and determine for themselves which path they want to take to reach the goals.

- **Alliance experience:** Teams developed diverse strategies to ensure that flood risk and resilience were not forgotten during the pandemic. Some teams revised their focus to include 'compound risk' so that COVID response and recovery efforts would not have negative effects on flood resilience, and might even support flood resilience. Other teams have found new pathways, such as through media engagement, to ensure continued government focus on floods. Our experience reflects that there are diverse approaches for reaching our common goals, and that these approaches may have to shift over time. We are not monitoring whether specific activities have been delivered. Rather, we track whether and how we are progressing against our outcomes, and where there are challenges.
- **Recommendation:** Emphasize, in communications and proposals, how your project goals relate to your and your donors' shared vision and the multiple approaches you take to realize those goals. Avoid distilling projects to a series of activities; instead highlight the range of paths you use and how they all lead to the desired change.

Budget flexibility: Budget flexibility allows adaptation to changing circumstances; an outcome focused program will be difficult to deliver without a flexible budget. Trust, backed by good financial management and accounting, is the cornerstone of making the most of budget flexibility. Equally important is the ability and willingness of organizations to take advantage of the flexibility offered to them.

- **Alliance experience:** In some Alliance countries, programme funds for advocacy were rapidly reallocated towards installing handwashing stations in flood vulnerable communities. This reduced compound risk in the short-term and also strengthened relationships with local government in the long-term.
- **Recommendation:** Be transparent with your donors about lost opportunities resulting from budget rigidity. At the same time, consider roadblocks within your own organization that limit your ability to take full advantage of budget flexibility and work to increase your capacity.

¹ <https://floodresilience.net/resources/item/foundations-for-change-zurich-flood-resilience-alliance-phase-ii-full-report/>

² <https://floodresilience.net/resources/item/zurich-flood-resilience-alliance-phase-ii-lessons-from-year-2/>

³ <https://floodresilience.net/>

The Alliance and the 'Foundations for Change' Learning Report Series

The Zurich Flood Resilience Alliance is a multi-sectoral partnership which brings together community programs, new research, shared knowledge, and evidence-based influencing to build community flood resilience in developed and developing countries. Our vision is that floods should have no negative impact on people's ability to thrive.

Every year, the Alliance produces a learning report to capture the lessons learned from its community resilience building programmes and from advocating for better flood resilience investments and policy. The learning reports are informed by the Monitoring, Reporting and Learning reports from Alliance teams and follow-up interviews with Alliance teams and members.

You can find the [first learning report](#)¹ from 2019 and [second learning report](#)² from 2020 on our [Flood Resilience Portal](#)³.

Disclaimer: Members of the Zurich Flood Resilience Alliance are funded by the Zurich Foundation, with the exception of Zurich Insurance Group. However, the views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the official position of either the Foundation or the company.