Towards more flexible livelihoods programming

Guidance for programme design and management

Introduction

This guidance highlights the practical steps for practitioners to enable flexibility within recovery programmes that build livelihoods in fragile contexts. It includes components that foster institutional, operational and relational flexibility (the three aspects of flexibility that are needed to create flexible aid systems). Findings are based on the experiences of programmes funded by the Dutch MFA, but can be applied more broadly to other donor programmes. The goal is to help the audience understand the basic conditions for flexibility, as well as actions and considerations at each stage of the process, from preparation and planning, to proposal writing and contracts, to implementation and monitoring.

Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is intended for use by programme designers, project managers, coordinators, senior management and other persons in leadership positions at I/NGO and CSO country offices and headquarters.

How to use this guidance

The guidance should be approached in an action-oriented way to work towards embedding flexible practices/processes into organisations and programmes operating in fragile contexts. Users are recommended to refer to the relevant steps at each stage of the programme cycle, and use it as a checklist to see as a team if they have covered all the aspects (and if not, discuss what actions can be taken). The examples given are either existing projects or descriptive examples of what sorts of things are needed based on the interview and literature findings. Beyond assessing programmes and organizations, it is recommended that users take this guidance as a tool to build the capacities of teams throughout organizations to implement flexible programming (refer to the main capabilities below).

What is flexibility?

Flexibility is about changing the way a programme or project is implemented when contexts change, or when organizations learn more about what is needed in a certain situation. For the purpose of this guidance it is about being able to shift when crisis erupts in fragile contexts where an organization is implementing recovery and livelihoods programming. This guide helps organizations prepare for this situation so that they can respond to crises but also shift back to locally-led recovery and resilient work when a crisis subsides. The next page has a quick overview of the types and levels of flexibility that exist for programmes, as well as the main capabilities needed for teams implementing flexible programmes. For a more in-depth discussion of flexibility, please refer to the lessons learned report that is at the basis of this guidance.

Different aspects of flexibility

Types and levels of flexibility needed in programmes

1. **Institutional flexibility** involves building flexible frameworks and practices into nexus-style programming approaches, such as results-based financing, flexible budget arrangements and negotiation clauses in contracts. It is mostly relevant at the level of donors, INGOs, and other enabling organisations.

2. **Operational flexibility** relates to how implementation supports or inhibits flexible programming in practice, for example, through risk management strategies, innovative MEL approaches, and procurement/logistics planning. It mostly applies to ground staff, local implementing partners and INGOs.

3. **Relational flexibility** involves partnership structures for enabling flexibility, including tools for trust building and transparent communication, clear roles and responsibilities, and equality in partnerships. It is relevant for actors across the aid chain.

Main capabilities involved in being flexible

1. **Knowing when to change:** Identifying the right timing and the right motivation for changing what, where and how programme activities are delivered. This involves using risk assessment tools to recognise when a certain trigger or threshold has been reached. These decisions should be based on accurate and updated information.

2. **Deciding on what change:** Identifying the correct pivot to make, and which strategy works best in which moment. This could be redirecting or expanding assistance to new target groups and locations, rapidly switching activities or scaling up/down to suit needs and risks, or altering the planned timeframe. It requires a strong understanding of the context and an awareness of different options.

3. **Implementing the change:** Bringing about the change by mobilising or shifting resources, adjusting plans and activities to suit the new context and priorities, and following this up with clear rationale and reporting to donors. This reprogramming has a strong human component, needing people to lead and enact change and trust in them to do so.

Checklist flexible programming

1

Working culture

- ☐ Does our leadership facilitate flexibility?
- ☐ Do we have open dialogue around flexibility?

2

Context & risk analyses

- ☐ Can we accurately identify triggers for flexibility?
- ☐ Are we connected with people who can help us respond in emergencies?

3

Partnerships & consortia

- ☐ Do our partners have similar structures and working cultures to us? If not, what problems could this create for being flexible?
- ☐ Have we agreed on how decisions will be made at short notice?

4

Risk mitigation strategies

- ☐ Have we clearly shown the major risks to the programme?
- ☐ Have we identified clear, feasible solutions to these risks?

5

Writing proposals

- ☐ Does the budget arrangement support flexibility?
- ☐ Does the ToC have flexible assumptions and indicators for success?
- ☐ Does the MEAL framework have space for monitoring and responding to changes in the context?

6

Establishing good relations with donors

- ☐ Have we agreed on how often and what we
- ☐ will feed back to the donor?
Are there clear limits for flexibility?

7

Risk monitoring

- ☐ Have we used direct feedback from the field?
- ☐ Are we regularly assessing foreseen and unforeseen risks?

8

Planning

- ☐ Do we have clear logistics and procurement plans for changes made at short notice?
- ☐ Is it clear what each partner is responsible for?

9

Reporting & MEAL

- ☐ Are we taking the donor along in our decision making process?
- ☐ Is there space to justify and celebrate changes?

Preparation & planning phase (Conditions for flexibility)

Issue	Step	Explanation	Examples, resources and tools
1 **Building a flexible working culture**	Creating open dialogue	INGOs and programme managers should initiate discussions around risks and opportunities, and permit and empower field staff to request adjustments (if required for achieving project outcomes and when the subsidy framework allows) without being afraid of looking incompetent or losing partnerships.	▪ Project managers should ask field staff directly for their input on vulnerability (how difficult it would be to conduct activities if certain risks manifested), potential solutions (what alternative options they see) and feasibility (which of these are possible given constraints). ▪ Field staff should feel like they can flag to project managers when things go wrong, ask for extra assistance, and share their ideas of what is needed.
	Leadership that promotes flexibility	Having people within the organisation who are knowledgeable and proactive about flexible approaches can help to streamline responses, follow flexibility guidelines, and make sure that flexible planning results in	▪ In ZOA's ARC programme in Ethiopia, they assigned a dedicated flexibility officer to monitor, support and coordinate flexibility between the different actors. This was seen to contribute positively towards flexibility and programme outcomes. ▪ Staff in leadership positions needs to be willing to listen to- and act on the concerns and inputs of staff and implementing partners.
2 **Context & risk analyses**	Identifying triggers for flexibility	Analysing the local economic, social and political environment, as well as other ongoing programmes, allows you to identify trends and risks that could block or hinder programme activities, or open doors for new	▪ Triggers could include a rise or fall in conflict leading to displaced or returning populations; deterioration in food security due to extreme weather or currency crises; or a change in political leadership creating new legal barriers or entry points to conducting livelihood programmes. (See Obrechts and Bourne (2018, pp.13-16) for a complete list of trigger types and examples).

Context & risk analyses	Identifying triggers for flexibility	activities that reach programme goals faster/more efficiently.	▪ SFCG's guidance note for conflict scan methodology is designed to understand the evolution and dynamics of conflicts, plan or adapt program/project activities, ensure that actors do no harm, and promote dialogue, reflection and reduction of tensions.
	Establishing linkages with different actors	When situations and needs change, knowing experts in a specific kind of response, or people who can connect you with different stakeholders, can significantly reduce the time, money and effort spent on temporary responses, and reduce the damage to / set back of the initial programme.	▪ In ZOA's ARC programme in Ethiopia, efforts were made in the stakeholder mapping exercise to understand local power relations and identify change agents who have budgetary autonomy and influence with local citizens (such as embassies, local government and CSOs). ▪ The Social Network Analysis Handbook (2016) by IRC offers a tool to map actores needed for humanitarian response.
3 **Setting up partnerships & consortia**	Assessing potential partners	It is important to look at the organisational structure and working culture of potential partners (both local NGOs and INGOs), in order to identify any misalignments that could hinder flexibility.	▪ Examine how decentralised each organisation is in terms of budgets and decisions. For example, is funding usually held at HQ, country office, or project level? How much discretion do project managers have to enact changes without approval from higher levels? Do they have experience with adapting projects? And does this match your organisation? ▪ NRC has developed a general partnership assessment checklist (2020) to assess new partners in humanitarian action.
	Finding solutions and balancing incentives in advance	When the context changes, often partners have varying incentives to change course, due to different levels of preparation, differences in how easy it is to get approval/funding	▪ Discuss making funds readily available and more easily disperse to local implementers. In Oxfam Novib's crisis modifier pilot in Somalia, a lump sum fund was transferred in advance to all 8 local partners for use during crises, allowing faster decision-making on the ground.

Setting up partnerships & consortia	Finding solutions and balancing incentives in advance	from the donor/HQ, or differences in how the change impacts their budget and stakes in the programme. Thinking ahead can help to eliminate these disincentives or frictions.	▪ Discuss requesting an extra budget line for overheads during emergencies, so that support can be sought from external organisations who specialise in delivering a specific service without reducing existing budget allocation or dropping one of the partners. (This could be done at programme level, portfolio level, or even multi-laterally, depending on what the donor agrees to). ▪ Take time to agree on a common vision/mission to fall back on. When choosing activities, target groups and areas for each partner, reinforce that it is a collaborative effort as part of a whole programme. In the Maji ya amani Great Lakes Region Water and Food Security programme in the DRC, collaborative efforts between the group leaders allowed the project to move forward despite challenges.
	Agreeing on roles & responsibilities	Having clear protocols in place regarding the process for being flexible, and knowing which partner does what, prevents delays and internal conflicts when the need for flexibility arises.	▪ Will all partners conduct all activities related to flexible planning, or will one be in charge of monitoring, another logistical changes, and another communication with the donor? ▪ Will decisions around programme adjustments be done democratically (e.g. with one representative from each partner), or must everyone agree? Does anyone have veto power or get to make the final call in certain situations? ▪ How long after a change in the context occurs do partners have to reach a decision? In the Oxfam Novib crisis modifier pilot project, they set a 24 hour deadline after submitting an application for changes to get the green light from the field coordinator.

Proposal writing & contract phase

Issue	Step	Explanation	Examples, resources and tools
4 **Risk mitigation strategies**	Risk mapping / identification	Show the donor that you are aware of the major risks to the programme, both in terms of likelihood and expected impact on the prospective programme.	▪ In the Maji ya amani programme in the DRC, implemented by IRC, ZOA and SFCG, they produced an 8 page document identifying specific risks, probability and impact, along with strategies to deal with each (available only in French). ▪ It is helpful to look at both internal (programmatic) risks such as beneficiary participation or partner reliability, and external (contextual) risks such as conflict, environmental disasters or political change.
	Suggesting potential solutions	Come up with responses to these risks (and state what they require in terms of resources) to avoid lengthy discussions and gaps in the programme later on. This could be changing locations, activities or target groups, scaling up/down, or adjusting timeframes.	▪ Relief International have a Risk management in fragile settings toolkit for practitioners. ▪ In World Relief and ZOA's ARC Darfur programme, they identified other secure areas with similar needs in case conflict prevented access to targeted villages in rural areas. ▪ The NRC planned strategies/activities for different scenarios that could be activated at short-notice. When a crisis occurred, they switched to seedling field development before going back to farmer training and other longer-term activities.

Risk mitigation strategies	Having clear criteria and timeframes for flexibility	Propose indicators/thresholds for enacting changes in the programme (e.g. if X% of our beneficiaries cannot be reached), and propose how long you would pursue the temporary approach. This has proven effective for moving smoothly between strategies to meet evolving needs in fragile contexts.	▪ The NRC classified intervention zones according to 3 phases (acute emergency, early recovery, and stabilised) with quantitative (e.g. how long since the last conflict escalation) and qualitative (e.g. perceived threat to security) to assess if situations were improving or deteriorating. When an influx of Congolese refugees returned to the DRC from Angola, they switched for two months to phase 1 (in-kind support) before resuming phase 2 durable solutions.
5 **Writing proposals**	Incorporating flexibility into budgets	Having extra budget or additional budget lines for time spent on being flexible (overheads and administration, programme adjustments, learning during emergencies) helps implementing organisations to take the necessary steps for flexibility.	▪ Cordaid gets 8% over the project budget from the Dutch Relief Alliance to be spend how they see fit without reporting requirements, but local NGOs do not currently get this, so when the project ends or there is a need for extra spending in a crisis, they often need to let people go. Offering this leeway to local NGOs could significantly help them to be more flexible.
	Incorporating flexibility into Theories of Change	Core objectives and higher-level goals should remain fixed (in line with what most donors, including the Dutch MFA, require). However, acknowledging that certain assumptions can change, and having multiple impact pathways and indicators for success, can help to navigate uncertainty and implement the risk mitigation strategy.	▪ IRC and MErcy Corps' ADAPT programme in Uganda, aimed at revitalising agricultural incomes and new markets, had an evolving ToC, while the The ADAPT programme in Sierra Leone found that creating space to explore whether the design assumptions were correct, and continue to be correct in the face of risk, is a huge enabler of adaptive management. ▪ MEL in conflict and stabilisation settings: a guidance note (2019) by the UK government Stabilisation Unit discusses how to incorporate learning into ToCs.

Writing proposals	Incorporating flexibility into MEAL frameworks	Include monitoring changes in the context and options for improvement as core components of the MEAL framework, in addition to the regular performance of activities. Plan to evaluate the use/success of flexible approaches upfront, and focus more on outcomes and less on fixed output indicators.	▪ MEL in conflict and stabilisation settings: a guidance note (2019) by the UK government Stabilisation Unit offer steps for creating flexible MEL frameworks that account for risks throughout the project. ▪ Guidelines for monitoring, evaluation and learning in market systems development (2016) by USAID discusses how to include multi-dimensional results and unanticipated outcomes, and how to evaluate the project process and systems change.
6 **Establishing good relations with donors**	Information sharing	Set up feedback loops (make these as short / direct as possible) and agree on what works for everyone in terms of reporting. Decide on e.g. how often you will report back to the donor, how long after a change occurs the donor will be informed, what level of detail is required, and what information / support the donor is requested to provide in return.	▪ At World Vision Mali, the field office can implement temporary changes directly and only needed to inform the Support Office after, eliminating the long communication chain with National Office and donors. ▪ In the IRC and Mercy Corps' ADAPT programme in Sierra Leone, a complicated decision-making chain and lack of timely and transparent communication with the fund manager and the donor left the project on standby during the Ebola outbreak.
	Setting boundaries	Agree on limits to flexibility, so that all parties are comfortable with the level of risk-sharing and implementer autonomy, and changes are not outside what is deemed acceptable (beyond the scope of that ministry or budget line).	▪ In what circumstances should the implementer ask for clearance before proceeding to adapt their activities? For example, to conduct activities that are not directly livelihoods related, or that require a significant shift in strategy. ▪ It is common that up to 10% of the budget, implementers are free to move how they see fit, but over this they need donor approval. Many practitioners have suggested increasing this amount.

Establishing good relations with donors	Equal partnerships	Place equal value on local and higher-level knowledge and capacities and be clear towards the donor that this is an integral component to the programme. This helps to build trust in decisions, giving partners the confidence to flag when something is not working, and work as a team to find optimal solutions to flexibility challenges.	▪ In South Sudan a review of localization partnerships in practice found that organizations allow local or national NGOs to design, revise and adapt budgets as needed. The full study of the Accelerating Localization Through Partnerships Consortium covers additional practices in Myanmar, Nepal and Nigeria of partnerships by Christian Aid, CARE, Tearfund, ActionAid, CAFOD and Oxfam (2019). The Grand Bargain Localization Workstream has produced a guidance note on partnership practices for localization (2020). Organizations can assess their own performance and progress on localization and sharing power through the NEAR localization performance assessment framework.
	Honest communication	Instil confidence in the donor that you are working towards a common goal.	▪ Be transparent about what you do not know (e.g. uncertainties about the current situation and how exactly it could impact the programme) and be willing to ask difficult questions from the start about how much room there is for flexibility in terms of time and budgets.

Implementation & monitoring phase

Issue	Step	Explanation	Examples, resources and tools
7 **Risk monitoring**	Using feedback from the field	Collect information and direct feedback from communities, field staff and country offices on threats to the programme (and the impacts of these threats on programme activities and outcomes) to complement the risk indicators laid out in the proposal.	▪ In ZOA's ARC programme in Ethiopia, they set up a grievance mechanism to flag urgent issues that could have negative impacts on the programme, and had regular programme review meetings at national and local level to assess progress and discuss/address issues flagged by the monitoring tool and this grievance mechanism. ▪ In Christian Aid's programme in Burundi and DRC, regular field visits by finance and programme staff increased learning, communication and quality control, and made responses faster and more relevant than other similar programmes. ▪ In World Vision's programme in DRC, communities identified events that the programmers either hadn't noticed or hadn't deemed problematic.
	Regular assessment of risks	Regularly review which risks from the proposal have manifested or subsided, as well as new emerging risks and opportunities.	▪ In CORDAID's STARS programme, they held a quarterly reporting (progress monitoring) and feedback session in each country (Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Senegal) to reflect on what was happening and why deviations from targets or workplans had occurred. ▪ The Relief International field practitioners toolkit for risk management in fragile settings distinguishes five situations from low- to high risk (1-5). In high risk situations (5) it recommends re-calculating risks that are already identified every two months, and assessing if new threats have emerged every month. In low risk situations (1) it recommends doing both at least once every year.

Risk monitoring	Regular assessment of risks		▪ Updated risk assessments provide opportunities to share potential or emerging issues with the donor, consider scheduling regular meetings with the donor around these updates.
8 **Planning for flexibility**	Flexible logistics and procurement plans	Have logistics and procurement plans in place so that it is less taxing when the need arises. This includes knowing where extra resources can be found, and training staff on how to adapt when project activities are disrupted.	▪ In ZOA's ARC programme in Ethiopia, they tried to ensure consortium members had the organisational resources, skills, expertise and intervention-specific strategies to mitigate risks, spot early warning signs and handle any conflict that arose. ▪ Organizations can have conversations with suppliers about acquiring extra supplies at short notice, have alternative entry routes to the area, or offer a staff workshop to inform them on flexible strategies.
	Responsibilities	Be clear from the outset what each implementing partner is responsible for when it comes to conducting temporary changes. This helps to alleviate internal tensions and prevent delays.	▪ Refer back to the roles and responsibilities defined when setting up the consortium. ▪ Make sure that decision-makers are at the table for consortium coordination meetings, especially when changes to projects, budgets and other issues of flexibility are discussed. ▪ CORE group and USAID developed guidance for consortium management and leadership training through the TOPS programme.
9 **Reporting & MEAL**	Lighter but more frequent reporting to donors	Rather than informing after the fact through annual evaluations, take the donor along in the process so that they are aware of the situation. This removes the element of surprise and keeps things transparent to reduce risk aversion on the donor side.	▪ World Vision moved away from M&E being used for reporting, towards being used for real-time context monitoring. They hired in MEL managers to be in charge of this process and communicate relevant information with donors and other stakeholders.

Reporting & MEAL	Informal reflection	Next to formal moments of reflection and coordination, also create informal moments of reflection (within the team/consortia and with the donor). This helps to strengthen relationships, communication and trust. And can capture and transfer local knowledge and learning.	▪ In the We Are Able! Programme ZOA and partners organize exchange visits between activities.
	Directly incorporate pivots	Add a section in reporting documents explicitly on what pivots were made and how they helped achieve programme goals. This acts as evidence / justification for accountability purposes, but more importantly, it helps to re-brand adaptation as success instead of failure.	▪ Be specific about the purpose of the change i.e. what the flexibility trigger was, how the change was managed, and what the outcomes were, referring back to the risk mitigation plan and the ToC. ▪ Be transparent about procurement accounts and budget deviations to keep the trust with the donor.

Credits

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Picture
Front cover
PIP farmer DRC
PIP = Integrated Farm Plan. By creating a PIP, awareness grows within families about how to improve together and work towards attainable common objectives though motivated action, based on households' own capabilities and knowledge.

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