Flexible programming

Insights and lessons learned report

Content overview

Focus/objectives

This project seeks to identify the tangible benefits, risks, barriers and steps to increasing flexibility within Dutch MFA and other donor-funded livelihood and food security programmes in protracted crises. We look at what room already exists for flexibility within the current aid system, as well as what can be done to create more flexible systems, then carve out specific actions and pathways for translating knowledge and willingness into practice. The issue is examined holistically throughout the programme cycle (from subsidy frameworks, proposals and design, to implementation and monitoring), and from the perspective of different actors, in order to instigate system-wide change in how we approach programming in dynamic settings. [1]

Motivation / background

- The policy letter 'Towards a World Without Hunger in 2030: the Dutch contribution' (MFA-ANF 2019) states that "Food insecurity is increasingly concentrated in areas that are susceptible to conflict and ecologically fragile. Achieving results in these vulnerable regions requires careful programming, learning and adaptation, and a long-term presence".
- The IOB evaluation of MFA-DSH interventions in fragile settings found that:
  1) There is a large gap between policy goals of the MFA and project activities, leading to 'paper realities' where reporting on high-level policy goals came at the cost of analysing local needs;
  2) The way in which programmes were financed and implemented resulted in an upward 'accountability-stream', which impeded learning and flexible programming
  It recommended to consider alternative tender procedures and explore financing that enables iterative programming and adaptive planning.
- There has been much discussion around flexibility within humanitarian aid and relief efforts, but very little when it comes to more cooperative and holistic approaches that link relief, recovery and development-oriented programmes.
- Bi-lateral donors, including the Netherlands, have raised their multi-year contributions in recent years, in part thanks to the 2016 Grand Bargain commitment, making funding more predictable. [2] But the needle has not moved far enough, as local NGOs have seen little increase in the multi-year amounts they receive, and budgets and decisions still lie too high up the chain to allow for flexibility during implementation.
- There is a marked trend towards localising aid and shifting decision-making power towards actors who understand the context best, which has been shown to lead to better programme outcomes. Flexibility can contribute towards this goal of decentralisation by placing resources closer to impact and giving autonomy to local partners, in order to respond to emerging needs and realise the potential of flexible funding and risk frameworks.
- In protracted crises, a recovery phase can easily fall back into an emergency situation during project implementation. In such circumstances, flexible programming allows activities to be revised to meet newly arising needs. This can help them through the relief phase and continue building resilient livelihoods as soon as it is again possible.

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1   We set out to look at the role and actions of donors and policymakers, local implementing partners, and intermediaries (such as INGO HQ and country officers and embassies) in order to create a holistic view of the problem, as each actor has different profiles, challenges and opportunities and roles to play in making the system more flexible. Given remote work, it was challenging to reach local NGOs and gather their perspectives, and we had to rely on the information from country staff about the challenges faced by field staff.

2   Germany, DFID (UK) and Sida (Sweden) have also made notable improvements in long-term funding.

- The need for flexibility has always been present in fragile settings, but gained renewed attention due to the needed programming adaptations during the Covid-19 crisis. The pandemic has triggered the need for significant programmatic shifts and shown that institutions and organisations are not always prepared for these shifts, which has led to paused, scaled back and cancelled livelihood activities.
- Risk mitigation requires flexibility, but should not be at the expense of accountability. Reporting on changes in the interventions and positive and negative consequences still applies, and understanding how to balance this trade-off is a major question.
- Initial talks with Partos revealed that enabling organisations to operate more flexibly is an important topic to the NGO community overall, and will be a key focus of the new learning activities for the strategic partnerships (2021-2025) – though the civil society focused programming is not necessarily focused on fragile settings.
- During communities of practice meetings at the NFP, the Dutch MFA thought along to shape this project and help make it useful for policymakers, and showed interest in implementing the recommendations from the guide in their trajectory/way of working.

Outputs

1 Two guidance documents for policymakers and practitioners
2 A report on lessons learned from the literature and data collection (this document)

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Methodology

The information and cases for this project were gathered via an analysis of background literature (mostly INGO programme documents and evaluations, guidelines and reports from international organisations, and journal articles) and a series of interviews with policymakers, embassy representatives and NGO staff at both HQ and local levels. The majority of cases are projects funded by the Dutch MFA that target livelihoods and food and nutrition security, but this is supplemented with exemplary cases from other donor programmes and other sectors. A full description of cases, along with the list and affiliation of interview informants and the guiding questions for the interviews, can be found in the annex to this report.

1. Background/focus

The Humanitarian Development Peace (HDP) nexus approach

For almost a decade, the European Development Fund has emphasised the 'continuity of cooperation from crisis to stable conditions for development' (Muguruza, 2015). This initially emerged as the 'linking relief, rehabilitation and development' (or LRRD) strategy, which focused on transitioning from emergency situations to the development phase. It then became a continuum where all elements could be carried out simultaneously, but this often happened in silos. It is now understood that crisis-affected populations rarely experience humanitarian and development needs separately or linearly (Alcayna, 2019); within the same country, different regions or population groups can be in different stage.

Nexus programming aims to meet acute and chronic needs in an oscillating and dynamic (rather than sequential or isolated) manner, and to address root causes by reducing risks and vulnerabilities. Humanitarian, development and peace-building (HDP) actors are increasingly called upon to work together to address protracted and complex crises by building on their comparative advantages (Veron and Hauck, 2021). The triple nexus approach seeks to achieve collaboration, coherence and complementarity between these actors in an effort to strengthen the resilience of communities and support prevention efforts. Flexible programming fits naturally within the nexus approach, as it recognises that the boundaries between HDP activities are blurry and overlapping, and helps programmes fit their contextual realities. [3]

Thematic and country focus

For this project, we are interested in relief and recovery programmes linked to livelihoods and food security in countries affected by protracted crises. Relief programmes focus on saving lives through meeting basic needs during emergencies, while recovery programmes focus on building livelihoods by creating some stability and self-reliance. Immediate and longer-term needs are often packaged separately and responded to consecutively, however, in fragile contexts, such a simplified, linear approach is inappropriate (Alcayna, 2019). In these contexts, conflict and political crises, natural disasters, and economic crises create chronic risks, change the circumstances and needs of target populations, and impede the delivery of effective recovery programmes. If agencies cannot tide populations over with basic needs during an emergency, it becomes hard to move out of the relief stage, and they must start the recovery process again or stop altogether. Organisations must therefore switch back and forth between responding to immediate needs and working on long-term needs, or work closely with other actors to coordinate (rather than undermine) responses as the context and priorities change.

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3   See also https://www.thebrokeronline.eu/pathways-for-market-oriented-development-on-the-hdp-nexus/

2. What is flexibility in projects?

The literature scan and interviews conducted as part of this project revealed that the meaning and purpose of flexibility is still not well understood by all actors in the aid chain, and that this has created a mismatch in the degree of flexibility between different levels within organisations and programmes. Obrecht (2019) states that "flexible approaches are about actors doing things differently when situations and contexts change, or when they learn more about what a situation requires". Although this sounds like common sense, applying a flexible approach in donor projects can be complicated and challenging. Aligning views on what flexibility should entail, and its role in livelihoods programming, will help to facilitate the necessary steps for increasing flexibility across the system.

Are there any agreed upon definitions?

Alcayna (2019) defines flexibility as "the range and speed within which an organisation can respond to changes in its operating environment". The Dutch Relief Alliance talks about being able to shift mode and gear when situations change, but also to shift back to locally-led recovery and resilience work when the crisis has subsided (DRA, 2017). Flexible programming is extremely context-driven, focusing on evolving local trends. It builds on the flexible and adaptive mindset that already exists in much of the aid sector, but offers a more formalised and intentional approach to adjusting programmes to meet dynamic needs and situations (Obrecht, 2019). [4]

How does it differ from adaptive programming?

The term flexibility is often used interchangeably with adaptability, but there is a distinction between the two; adaptability relates more to learning and complexity, while flexibility is more to do with fragility and risk. When we think about adaptive systems, we envision the longer-term evolution of programmes to remain relevant and effective in the face of chronic stressors and changing environments (The Broker, 2019). Flexibility is about dealing with acute unexpected shocks in a rapid, effective and localised manner in order to avoid reversing longer-term recovery/development efforts and exacerbating the root causes of exclusion, conflict and crises. It involves tweaking activities in line with risk mitigation strategies that are developed during planning and updated through regular monitoring. Nonetheless, there are overlapping features of flexible and adaptive systems (such as their context-driven nature and managing change), as well as common steps to achieving them. This project might therefore also be useful to organisations working on adaptive programming.

What does flexibility entail, and where can it be introduced/strengthened?

Obrecht (2019) identifies three 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.

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4   The Grand Bargain of 2016 defines flexible funding through four categories, which offer a range of restrictions on scope, destination of funding, and/or flexibility: 1) unearmarked funding contributions (typically allowing recipients the maximum amount of flexibility); 2) softly earmarked; 3) earmarked; and 4) tightly earmarked funds.

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.

These capabilties from the literature are fundamental to being flexible when the need arises, however, the interviews revealed other important types or aspects of flexibility that should preceed, complement and facilitate this operational flexibility.

Guiding framework on the types/levels of flexibility needed in programmes:

We found that distinguishing between the following 3 types of flexibility helps to explain how to build a truly flexible system and identify which levers can be pulled by which actors:

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.

3. Why is flexibility necessary?

How often is flexibility needed in livelihood programmes in fragile settings?

As we learn more about the complexity of development problems, we are recognising greater flexibility as part of the solution, but it is currently not there in practice. Actors across the humanitarian sector have always tried to respond to crises in a timely and efficient manner, but we need new approaches to deal with complex challenges in a more proactive and integrated way, including in recovery and development work. We are increasingly trying to move from interdisciplinary thinking towards coordinated and integrated action, but funding siloes, different interests, working cultures and organisational competition hinder this to some extent.

We came across many instances (from the last few years alone) where Dutch-funded livelihoods programmes were interrupted by the (re)escalation of an old or existing crisis, the onset of a new crisis:
- In ZOA's school feeding programme in Liberia and Ethiopia, school closures during COVID meant that the delivery mode for the programme was no longer viable.

- During Cordaid's STARs programme, turmoil and war in Ethiopia and Burkina Faso led to people being displaced from beneficiary communities, and they also had to drop a local partner mid-way through as they deviated from the objective of getting loans to farmers.

- During ZOA's ARC programme, escalation of conflict in Darfur caused rising tensions, and the Sudanese revolution in 2019 triggered changes in governance structures.

- Activities in World Relief and ZOA's ARC programme in Ethiopia were disturbed by the war in Tigray in 2020/21, and the change of prime minister in 2017.

To what extent is flexibility there or lacking?

Organisations often operationalise flexibility, for example, by allowing 'wiggle room' (usually 10-15%) in their budgets, but this is far from shifting the power to, and instilling trust in, local actors, which is needed for them act flexibly. Wiggle room only allows for small, simple changes (usually operational) that have minimal budgetary/reporting implications for donors (Obrecht and Bourne, 2018). Our interviews confirmed that low-level activities are commonly adapted in line with changes in the context, but that higher-level strategies and outputs are rarely revisited or require lengthy discussions with donors. The COVID-19 pandemic has sparked the need for significant programmatic shifts across all regions and sectors, including in non-crisis contexts, drawing attention to the importance of flexibility and autonomy.

There is an important difference between proactive and reactive strategies, and the failure to distinguish between these two approaches has led to the misperception that agencies are more flexible than they really are. Proactive strategies identify potential responses to risk before a change in the context occurs, while reactive strategies respond to changes that are happening or have already happened (Obrecht, 2019). [5] Generally, we find that aid organisations are good at reactive decision-making, but could improve at projecting ahead to facilitate a deeper level of learning and course correction

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5   The NRC classified intervention zones in advance according to 3 phases (acute emergency, early recovery, and stabilised) to monitor and anticipate the direction of change, and agreed on activities for each to enable smooth, temporary transitions. In contrast, in the ARC programme in Ethiopia, they had to request donor permission to change activities after the change in context had occurred, which created some gaps in the programme.

The amount of flexibility varies significantly between programmes and donors. Flexibility tends to be greater among privately-funded initiatives than those using public donor money. [6] This is due to the commitment of governments to their tax-payers and their multiple agendas, whereas companies only need buy-in from board members and are often focused on solving a single problem. This variation in flexibility between donors sometimes causes reluctance by implementing organisations to utilise the flexibility certain donors allow.

It also varies a lot between the different levels of a programme or organisation. In some cases, the donor is willing to adjust activities and give the power to local partners, but these partners are not always strong at articulating their needs or deviating from the project plan. In other cases, the partner organisation is very capable at understanding and requesting change, but the donor is much more rigid in terms of bureaucracy and reporting/targets. The donor-partner relationship (things like trust and communication), as well as the localisation of aid, are therefore crucial for creating and using flexibility.

What happens in cases without flexibility?

In the cases we examined, there were multiple examples of where flexibility was needed, but was difficult or impossible to execute due to constraints at the institutional, operational and relational levels. A lack of flexibility led to some common outcomes among programmes:

Funds are exhausted or cannot be diverted. Demands for humanitarian activities have in some years grossly exceeded budgetary allocations (Muguruza, 2015). In recent years, the emergency aid reserve by ECHO, which is set aside annually for unforeseen emergencies that cannot be pulled from regular budget lines, has been regularly exhausted. Funds that are tied up in development-oriented programmes cannot be freed up at short notice due to ongoing investments and commitments to beneficiaries. Without contingencies in place, there is no money left to act swiftly in the face of changing needs and priorities.

Delayed responses and deterioration of the situation. Without the building blocks for flexibility, organisations are reactive instead of proactive, increasing the chance of making poor or uninformed decisions. Long decision-making chains, revising strategies off the cuff, and needing to procure/mobilise extra resources can take a lot of time, which is not optimal given the nature of emergencies, and can allow the impacts of a crisis to be prolonged or deepened. The 2011 crisis in the Horn of Africa, despite early warnings, resulted in famine due to late response and lack of an LRRD approach (Muguruza, 2015). In the IRC and Mercy Corps's ADAPT programme in Sierra Leone, activities ceased for 9 months during the Ebola outbreak in 2014 while they decided on a new direction.

Failure to meet local needs and wasted resources. Models which prioritise top-down control, centralised decision making and linear planning tend to ignore the capacities of local staff and communities, as well as the dynamics of the operating contexts. Relying too heavily on restricted, earmarked funding and pre-set activities and outcome measures can reduce the impact of aid and even exaggerate initial needs when the situation and priorities shift. [7] This can result in the stagnation or reversal of progress (for both individual projects and broader sustainable development) and make investments up until that point futile.

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6   This was a finding from interviewees who had experiences with both types of programme.

7   While a project could fail according to stated project criteria, it could perform well in the broader context. On the flipside, it is also possible for a project to achieve stated criteria but perform poorly in the system context.

What could be gained from incorporating flexibility more explicitly in proposals and action plans?

In addition to the examples where flexibility was lacking, we found other instances where flexibility was granted by donors and managed effectively either by INGOs or by local implementing partners.

- In World Vision's multi-sectoral Area Rehabilitation Programme in the DRC, there was a drought in planting season followed by heavy rains. Implementers switched to seedling distribution and soil erosion prevention before they could resume cooperative seed initiatives and farmer training workshops.
- In ZOA's ARC programme in Darfur, following the 2019 revolution, they reverted to the sensitisation activities from the start of the programme to keep ownership and acceptance until tensions died down.

In these cases, there were some clear positive outcomes. Gains from flexibility have been found to be particularly large in longer-term programmes where outcomes are achieved incrementally over time (such as livelihoods programmes or interventions requiring large investments in infrastructure (IRC, 2020)), and in rapidly changing and fragile contexts (Alcayna, 2019).

Enabling more efficient and effective risk responses. Avoiding things like re-negotiation, applying for new funding, and ad-hoc planning saves time and costs, and creates more incentive to respond to real needs as they emerge, rather than addressing fixed needs and activities from the initial work plan (Poole, 2020). Shifting budgets, adding new activities and being in a dialogue around learning, risks and mistakes has been shown to improve programme outcomes and keep interventions relevant (Obrecht, 2019). In two IRC and Mercy Corps recovery programmes in Syria and Liberia, allowing partners on the ground to make discretionary decisions was seen as the main factor that enabled smooth and effective responses.

Improved relationships with local actors. When affected communities see that their feedback is being listened to and their needs prioritised, their confidence and trust in aid organisations tends to increase (Obrecht, 2019). When local staff know that the organisational culture permits deviations from the original plan, they are more willing and confident to ask the questions and assume responsibility for change (Alcayna, 2019). Flexibility can help to build trust in each actor's knowledge and capabilities, plus honest communication and participation of key stakeholders, which improve implementation.

Dealing with exclusion and discrimination. Crises can affect target groups and locations differently, and add/remove constraints that skew the outcomes of a programme. It can also be the case that certain barriers (e.g. social norms) were not perceived at the outset as being a risk. Flexible projects can allow activities and budget allocations to be rebalanced across target groups and locations to prevent marginalisation from the programme (for example, by giving extra support to those more affected by an emergency). Cross-cutting issues such as gender equality and women and girls' empowerment have benefited greatly from the adjustments permitted by multi-year programmes (IRC, 2020).

More integrated and sustainable programming. Having a guiding flexibility framework based on thorough context analysis can help to identify smooth transitions between emergency and longer-term activities. This helps to develop continuous support over time and prevent short-term solutions from derailing long-term resilience efforts and exacerbating the root causes of exclusion, conflict and crises. For example, the World Vision and NRC both established three different strategies for their programmes in the DRC, the core recovery strategy, and two strategies for improving and deteriorating situations. This allowed cord activities to be resumed after temporary changes.

4. Why has it not been done systematically?

"Moving from policy to practice has proven to be a difficult and entangled process. The pathologies of the aid world, such as self-interest, accountability mechanisms, risk avoidance, short time frames and slow speed, are often counterproductive. This is especially evident within large government donors, who, because of political considerations and organizational structures, often end up with superficial changes." (NORAD, 2019)

Is the flexibility there but just not being used, or does it need developing from scratch?

Despite the clear benefits to being more flexible, and the shift in rhetoric towards flexible and adaptive programming, we are yet to take full advantage of these opportunities. In ZOA's ARC programme, among others, the "adaptive programming" model did not materialise in any major adaptations that would perhaps have been anticipated given the fluid and volatile contexts in the programme's operating countries. Although a lack of changes does not automatically imply a lack of flexibility or lead to sub-optimal outcomes (it is also plausible that the initial context assessment and strategy remained accurate and relevant throughout the programme), it does indicate some knowledge gaps in terms of 'how to do' flexibility.

Some organisations and programmes are already fairly flexible; they should lead by example and move from accidental to intentional flexibility. There are already many cases where aid agencies have developed their own approach to risk monitoring and mitigation in fragile contexts (World Vision's 3 dials approach; the NRC's 3 phases approach; Oxfam Novib's crisis pilot project; and Christian Aid's Integrated Conflict Prevention and Resilience (ICPR) approach). It would be useful to formalise, document and share the mindset and practices of these organisations so that others can learn and integrate them, and so that the benefits can be made more explicit to donors. [8]

Local implementing partners are not always aware of the room for flexibility within the budget, so it needs to be made more explicit and visible. Where budgets are flexible (e.g. contingency funds or no-cost extensions are available), and donors agree to let certain decisions be made without their approval, it is key that ground staff are made aware of these opportunities and encouraged to use them (along with their local knowledge) to initiate adjustments. It is crucial to maximise this existing space for flexibility given that wider systemic change takes time.

What are the barriers preventing translation of flexible plans/policies into practice?

Insufficient, piecemeal change. Flexible financing for livelihood programmes has greatly improved since the Grand Bargain agreement in 2016, with multi-year and multilateral funds becoming more common. However, the majority of funding remains earmarked towards short-term, donor identified priorities (which cannot solve longer-term, complex crises), and there is not yet a critical mass of flexible funding to allow the degree of manoeuvrability that would unlock the full potential of flexible approaches (Relief Web, 2020). Moreover, most local implementing partners have seen little increase in the multi-year amounts they receive (intermediaries pass on funds in short-term disbursements), and more predictable budgets have not been matched by more flexible mindsets and behaviours. Having extra money at short notice is pointless without the capacity or plan to use it effectively.

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8   Some documents do exist, e.g. the Oxfam Novib crisis modifier template and the ARC formalised feedback and accountability mechanism, but few learning studies exist purely on the subject of flexibility.

Old evaluation models and working cultures. Despite an increasing number of alternative development methods (e.g. Doing Development Differently), "future-of-aid" debates and new aid instruments, many donors still choose to demonstrate impact by assessing progress against pre-determined and measurable indicators (NORAD, 2019). The dominant approach to evaluations is still to instigate learning and reflection at the end of the project cycle (and paint outcomes in a positive light); traditional reporting methods take time, while fragile contexts move fast. Another major bottleneck is the way decisions are made, with authority lying with the donors, too many actors involved in decisions, and the need for joint agreement between consortia partners or between donors and project managers. The challenge will be to build trust in new reporting methods among policymakers and practitioners.

Risk avoidance, accountability and pressure for results. Giving grantees freedom to change course is a daunting prospect for many donors, as it comes with uncertainty and risk (Bond UK, 2016). Risk avoidance is strongly correlated with domestic reputational and political pressures, limited country knowledge, and incentives for short-term results. Donors feel a trade-off to being flexible in their reduced ability to attribute results to specific funding streams, and a reduced ability to target funding towards policy commitments and interests (Poole, 2020). In most cases, accountability outplays learning. In some cases, the expectation that additional funding should deliver additional results has become attached to flexible funding, which is not the core objective of being flexible.

Fear of looking 'wrong' and losing reputation. With the degree of competition for donor funds, NGO and INGO partners want to look as capable and knowledgeable as possible in order to attract further partnerships and continue their work. Multiple interviews revealed a fear of expressing when something isn't working, as it feels like admitting failure and can be interpreted as 'the initial assessment was inaccurate' or 'the partner is incompetent', when this is not always the case. Instead, partners often try to deal with problems themselves or stick to the original agreement, even if it is no longer the best fit. A lot of important information gets left out of polished, publicly available reports and lost as it travels up the aid chain, which minimises knowledge transfer, learning and improvement.

Insufficient evidence on the added value of flexibility. It can be difficult to sell flexible projects to donors, since it requires a level of unconditional trust in the implementers. The need to say upfront what is going to be done and achieved with donor money is unlikely to change (Alcayna, 2019). There is a catch-22 at play: without evidence, projects are unable to access larger flexible funds, but without flexible funding, they are limited in what they can do to provide that evidence. Moreover, some stakeholders don't see the point in deviating from livelihoods programmes to relief work during crises. It can feel counterintuitive to reserve budgets for crises that haven't happened, when current livelihood and food security needs are so great. Some actors hold the view that if you have thorough assessments and able teams, you won't need to make so many changes down the line.

Inadequate preparation and planning. Flexibility is still not incorporated in projects in a systematic way, from inception to implementation and learning. It is important to establish and strengthen the link between flexible planning and flexible action by increasing knowledge and experience on how to lead the process, and ensuring enough time and capacity for local staff to conduct dynamic risk assessments, hold proper reflection and articulate needed changes to the donor. Failing to embed flexible practices from the start is a major inhibitor to being flexible when the need arises.

Consortia challenges. There is often little incentive to restructure projects, as it can affect local partners' stakes in the programme, their relationships with each other, and the work and communities they support. Partners are not willing to adjust (especially reduce) their own budget and have difficulty in reaching consensus. In the Dutch bi-lateral food security and nutrition programme in Burundi, missed opportunities arose from the fact that each party had already chosen its activities, target groups and areas, which created internal conflict and stalled programmatic changes. Even with solid planning and risk assessments, managing consortia with different levels of decentralisation and different priorities can be challenging and inhibiting to flexibility.

5. What findings and lessons can be drawn for increasing flexibility in programmes?

The following findings and recommendations, based on the case literature and interviews, cover the general issues and considerations for increasing and using flexibility within programmes, in order to make them more durable and more responsive to dynamic needs. Although the findings are based on donor-funded livelihood and food security programmes in fragile settings, we see them as being relevant and applicable to programmes by other donors and in other sectors. The practical guideline, which complements this report, provides more detailed actions and tips for policymakers and practitioners to implement these recommendations within each phase of the programme cycle.

General findings

- The need for flexibility is seen by most actors, but the ways to do it are less well understood, specifically, how to balance trade-offs (such as accountability and continuity), how to adjust mindsets and ways of working, and how to fit in the extra planning and preparation required.
- We need to acknowledge the multiple layers of flexibility within the aid chain, in order to balance / match flexibility at different levels (the whole-of-organisation approach).

Flexibility and donors

- The Dutch MFA is seen as more flexible than many other government donors due to a few factors such as outcome-level reporting and willingness to adjust budgets and activities, but less flexible than private donors due to factors like accountability to citizens and broader agendas/priorities.
- Donors require more evidence to demonstrate the value that flexible approaches can and do have, and show that accountability and flexibility do not have to be incompatible goals.
- Increased certainty and predictability of funding has helped the effort to become more flexible; donors should continue with multi-year funds, but also look into new core funding arrangements, no-cost extensions, contingency funds, and results-based financing models which place less requirements on funding and allow NGOs to respond to needs as they arise.

Flexibility with partners and consortia

- Even with solid planning and risk assessments, managing consortia with different levels of decentralisation and different priorities can be challenging when it comes to being flexible.
- Programmatic changes can affect local partners' stakes in the programme, their relationships with each other, and the work and communities they support. It can therefore be difficult to reach consensus.
- Agreement is needed at the start of each programme on the roles and responsibilities of each partner, and how to proceed when the need for flexibility arises.
- More frequent interaction between donors and practitioners, and between implementing partners, can help to build trust and communication around flexibility by sharing risks and taking each other along throughout the process.

When and how to be flexible

- Some situations are much more conducive to flexibility than others. Within-sector changes (those that remain directly linked to food security and livelihood activities rather than, for example, switching to education or WASH activities, even if they contribute to livelihood objectives), those that align with donor agendas (priority sectors of the donor) tend to be much easier to justify and implement.
- Programme duration and magnitude of risk are also important factors - flexibility is less useful in short-term projects or projects that have less than one year left to run. Temporary changes that are small-scale and localised are more in line with flexible planning than longer-term, large deviations in strategy.
- Different contexts require different flexibilities, and there is no universal blueprint. The type and extent of flexibility needed depends on the trigger for change, which enabling conditions are in place, and what resources are available.
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Conditions that support flexibility

- Success with flexibility comes when programme managers are given the skills and autonomy to make evidence-based decisions, and where there is community involvement, risk sharing, and equal partnerships.
- Having clearly defined roles and responsibilities helps. There is also an enabling role for intermediaries (such as embassies in connecting levels/actors, and civil society with their intimate understanding of local dynamics) that is not being fully used.
- Having short learning and feedback loops, with regular monitoring and frequent reporting on which risks have materialised or not, as well as new and emerging risks, and what the implications and trade-offs are for the programme, and communicating this to donors.
- Having persons (flexibility officers, or appointed learning groups) dedicated to monitoring flexibility within a programme. Creating leadership roles specifically for coordinating different actors and identifying complementarities with other projects or sectors.
- A clear process for flexibility that is built in from the start of programmes by embedding enabling structures and processes:
    - Clear risk management strategies that can be revisited at short notice and updated throughout the programme
    - Agreements on negotiation, responsibilities and decision making in contracts (including removing the need for prior approval)
    - Templates for reporting, with transparent criteria for programme deviations and space for justifying (and celebrating) changes/improvements to the programme
    - Budget and results frameworks that allow for flexibility – rewarding outcomes instead of the achievement of targets, setting aside budget for learning activities
    - Theories of Change which offer room for flexibility through their assumptions, impact pathways and indicators for success

The risks and limits of flexibility

- There is a learning curve and start-up costs involved in becoming more flexible. It requires an initial investment of time and energy to plan correctly and build in flexible practices. Some things we can do now, but others take time (new ways of working, trust building).

- Flexibility is not always desirable or feasible, and there are certain limits:
    - Flexibility should not be used to deviate from a programme's overall objectives, for example, to suddenly switch target groups or spend funds on immediate relief and leave no money for the initial programme. Shifts in activities, modalities and target groups should be specific, serve higher level goals, and continue to meet the needs of beneficiaries groups despite changing contexts.
    - Commitment to stakeholders (both donors and communities) must be maintained, and flexible interventions should not undermine activities or cause unintended harm.
    - We don't want 100% of the budget to be fully flexible. This can compromise the integrity and continuity of aid, so it is important to agree on something that works for everyone, something that enables enough flexibility but does not leave large portions of the budget unused.
    - Sometimes being flexible is just not possible. In these cases, business as usual and trying hard to keep activities going is the best option.

Case studies

Table of cases (funded by Dutch MFA)

Organisation/Donor	Country / Programme	Timeframe	Links / more info
ZOA / Plan / NRC / IMC	ARC Ethiopia	2016-2021	Programme document Annual report 2017
Oxfam Novib	Crisis modifier pilot Somalia	2018-ongoing	Programme info
Cordaid	STARS Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Senegal	2017-2021	5-year evaluation End of programme brochure Programme page
ZOA	School feeding Ethiopia and Liberia	2018-ongoing	Briefing note
IFDC	PAPAB	2015-2019	Programme info Final report
ZOA	STR Sudan	2016-2021	Programme document Annual analytical report 2020
ZOA	Maji ya Amani DRC	2017-2021	Risk mitigation strategy Progress report 2019
EKN	Food & nutrition security bi-lateral programme Burundi	2016-ongoing	Dutch development results

Table of cases (funded by other donors)

Organisation/Donor	Country / Programme	Timeframe	Links / more info
Mercy Corps / IRC	ADAPT Sierra Leone and Uganda	2015	Case study
Christian Aid	DRC / Burundi	2017	Info in Alcayna (2019)
World Vision	DRC	2015	Info in Alcayna (2019)
NRC	Cameroon / DRC	2018	Info in Alcayna (2019)
IRC and Mastercard	Pro Jeunes Cote D'Ivoire	2016-2022	Programme webpage

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