

Foundations for Change

Using adaptive management to navigate uncertainty

Lessons from Year 3



learning

 /'lɜːnɪŋ/

noun

- 1 the activity or process of gaining knowledge or skill by studying, practicing, being taught, or experiencing something: the activity of someone who learns
- 2 knowledge or skill gained from learning

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Year **3**



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.

This report presents lessons from Year 3 of Phase II of the Zurich Flood Resilience Alliance community engagement, learning, research, and advocacy work. The report focuses on how the Alliance structure and culture have allowed us to adaptively manage to ensure continued focus on flood resilience and progress toward our goals, while also addressing COVID-19 needs and concerns.

Enabled by the Z Zurich Foundation's flexibility and the Alliance's overall proactive programming approach, we continued to progress on our advocacy and programming in 2020. With the Alliance's commitment to maintain our flood resilience engagement throughout the pandemic, we avoided fully pausing our programs and maintained our flood resilience focus. Our ability to identify pathways for achieving change that have co-benefits for flood resilience and COVID-19 have critically helped us to strengthen our relationships and credibility. Both are foundational to achieving change, as evidenced in [previous Foundations for Change reports](#).

The report presents concrete recommendations for both donors and practitioners regarding why and how to proactively implement similar adaptive management elements in development, risk reduction, climate adaptation, and resilience work.

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1.0 Proactive Programming: The Alliance approach to adaptive management

For the international development and humanitarian sector, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a reckoning. Mobility and supply chains have come to a standstill and community needs have shifted due to economic devastation and exacerbation of poverty, vulnerability, and inequity. Globally, donor and practitioner organizations are figuring out how to continue to move towards their objectives and protect development and humanitarian gains while also being sensitive to the growing humanitarian needs facing the communities and national governments they work with.

Yet even as the globe struggles with the current challenges posed by COVID-19, there is growing recognition that in our increasingly populated and interconnected world, these are precisely the types of shocks we need to be prepared for, in particular because of climate change. Climate change is exacerbating underlying vulnerabilities, and traditional programming approaches are being challenged to deliver on changing needs. To meet the growing demands of our time, donors and practitioners need to regularly review and adapt their programs to account for changing, increasingly complex compound risks and shifting local contexts, while maintaining focus on, and momentum towards, their goals.

The Zurich Flood Resilience Alliance (hereafter, 'the Alliance') is long-term; we began operating in 2013 and Phase II runs from 2018 to 2024. As of 2021, we operate in 23 countries, where we are delivering community programming, global and national advocacy, and generating knowledge to improve flood resilience practice, spending,



*Community brigades and the Mexican Red Cross work closely together to support flood affected households in Monte Grande, Mexico © Antonia Martínez, **Brigade Member of Monte Grande***

BOX 1. ALLIANCE 'PROACTIVE PROGRAMMING' AND HOW IT DIFFERS FROM ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

Adaptive management is flexible, but not always explicitly forward-thinking. Recognizing the need to adaptively manage in ways that respond to today's needs, longer-term objectives, and future uncertainty, the Alliance has adopted the term 'proactive programming' to describe how we work. Proactive programming places a strong emphasis on planning and decision-making for the "what if's," not just the "oh no's," and in doing so considers these possibilities not just as risks to be mitigated, but as potential alternative pathways to be optimized.

This is achieved by cutting away some of the bulk and burden of more structured approaches. We do this by:

- De-emphasizing management and focusing more on 'unmanaging', or enabling autonomy and decision-making based on trust, learning, and contextual understanding.
- Intentionally investing in building capable, proactive teams and providing them the resources and flexibility to modify their programs based on needs, challenges, and opportunities.



LONG-TERM FLEXIBLE COLLABORATIVE FORWARD-LOOKING TARGETED ADAPTIVE
LEARNING
PROACTIVE PROGRAMMING
CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING
UN-MANAGING

and policy. Because we are a multi-organizational and multi-sectoral Alliance working together over several years to build community resilience, we have designed our program to be adaptive to enable us to advance our flood resilience goals even when contexts are uncertain or changing.

Our ability to adapt is enabled by the Alliance ‘proactive programming’ approach (see Box 1), the term we use to describe how we manage the Alliance and implement our programs. Our approach is grounded within the concept of adaptive management, but with an explicit forward-looking element. 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 anticipates that both strategic and operational changes will need to be made to programs from the program design stage through implementation. Our approach is enabled by how we have designed our systems, mechanisms, and internal culture to address uncertainty, and has evolved since we started, thanks to the scope and flexibility of the funding available from the Z Zurich Foundation (hereafter, ‘the Foundation’).

When the Alliance was launched in 2013, the Foundation was new to funding international development programs of this scale and therefore unencumbered by pre-existing systems, processes, or ways of doing things. They were also open to co-creating the program design and outcomes with practitioner organizations that had worked in the development and humanitarian space for a long time and were aware of the benefits and pitfalls of historic and current development and humanitarian program approaches. This has allowed Alliance members to create our proactive programming approach and the tools we use to deliver it over time. It has required active learning, learning that we are increasingly integrating into program decision-making processes (see Box 2 on the evolution of our internal learning system).



Meeting with members of Community Flood Resilience Action Group, Char Charitabari, Sundarganj in Bangladesh, 2020 © Mijanur Rahman, ASOD



Distribution of hygiene kits and hand washing demonstration in the Philippines © Philippine Red Cross

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a stress-test for the Alliance proactive programming approach - it has been a crisis demanding adaptation, and there is continuing uncertainty regarding how it will impact the communities the Alliance works in and teams over the longer-term. Given this reality, the Alliance has implemented both short-term operational and long-term strategic shifts in our work based on opportunities and constraints presented by COVID-19. Based on evidence of shifting needs on the ground, our teams are working to adjust not just individual activities, but entire pathways for achieving program outcomes and objectives. Section 2 of this report explores some of the changes we have seen and what made those changes possible.

The Alliance's approach to proactive programming is specific to our needs and structure; however, there are parts that can be retrofitted or integrated into existing and new programs in the development sphere. Proactive programming is particularly relevant for complex programs with long timeframes and clear goals, but no rigid pathways for achieving those goals. We provide specific lessons and recommendations for donors and practitioners on how to strengthen their work to flexibly respond to changing conditions, particularly climate change and the changing risk environment it is creating.

“COVID-19 showed that you can’t be locked into a rigid approach. You have to suspend your expectation of delivery if you’re locked in.”

- David Nash, Z Zurich Foundation

BOX 2. EVOLUTION OF A SYSTEM FOR INTERNAL LEARNING – 2013-2021

A core part of the Alliance work is centered around learning, both internal and external. External knowledge-sharing supports advocacy and outreach. Our internal learning and knowledge management approach is set up to support our proactive programming approach by ensuring that: (1) we can respond to changing needs and proactively plan for uncertainty, and (2) the knowledge we generate supports achieving our Theory of Change (ToC).

Internal learning is challenging in our multi-organization set-up with staff turnover, multiple languages and time zones, differing levels of technical capacity and conceptual understanding, and differing institutional priorities. The need to invest in internal learning was not obvious when the Alliance began in 2013. Learning did not happen organically and organizations defaulted to working towards Alliance goals in their own ways and within their mandates. Little program learning was shared between and within organizations.

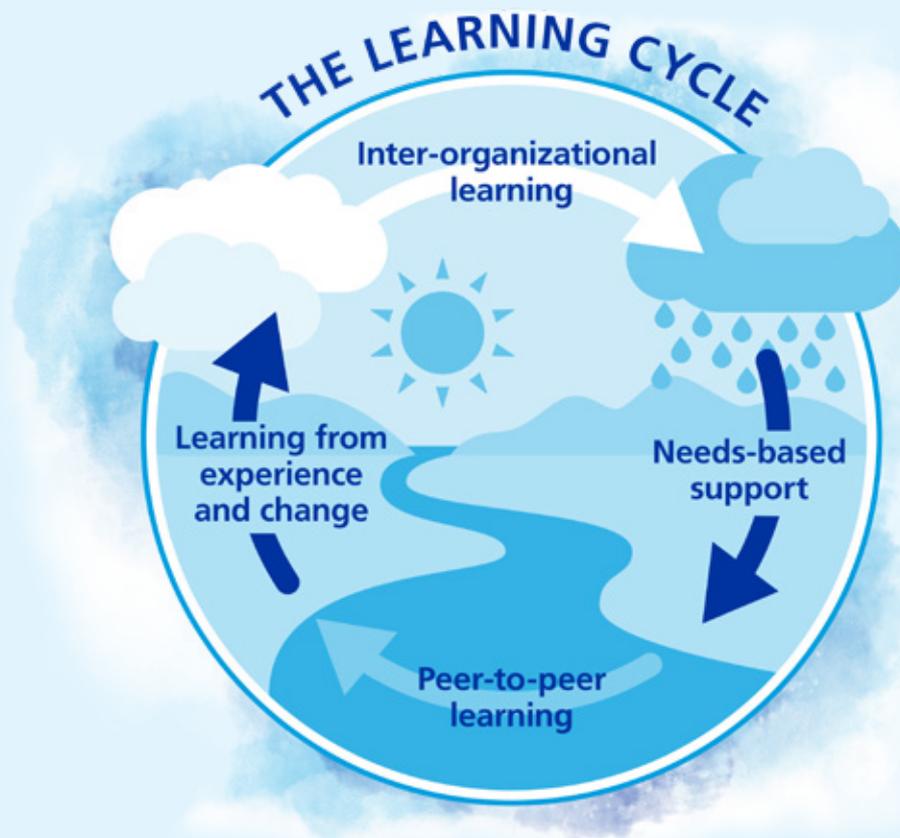
Recognizing this, in 2017 the Alliance took steps to integrate internal knowledge more intentionally and set up systems and processes to deliberately track and capture knowledge and learning. Beginning in Phase 2 in 2018, the Alliance structured work into operational workstreams – including one specifically for ‘Knowledge.’ We also developed a ‘living’ ToC which, combined with the workstream structure, has helped improve collaboration and coordination towards common objectives.

We facilitate four types of learning to deliver our ToC; each type of learning requires a different combination of systems and processes to allow knowledge to be captured, shared, and used.

Bottom-up learning to capture emerging needs and challenges. The Alliance operates in multiple countries, in different languages and cultures, reporting to different organizational contact points. Finding ways to bring together that learning in common, comparable ways has required the development of specific tools and approaches. Bottom-up learning is generated through bi-lateral meetings, inter-organizational meetings, targeted research, and the Monitoring, Reporting, and Learning (MRL) system implemented on Salesforce. The MRL reporting is analyzed to generate cross-program learning (shared in our annual Foundations for Change reports) and identify if and how our internal strategies or operations need to change. This is complemented by a SharePoint questionnaire where we capture information about the effectiveness of community-based activities delivered across the Alliance.

Peer-to-peer learning for improved practice and innovation. Peer-to-peer learning is underpinned by a ‘learning agenda’ which identifies knowledge needs and how those needs will be met. Learning is facilitated via webinars, training visits, exchange visits, and in-person international visits. More recently, we have instituted regional platforms to encourage country teams to engage with each other. We also use Yammer and circulate an internal newsletter for better information flows and to support shared learning.

Needs-based guidance, tools, and technical support for ensuring quality program delivery. All of the Alliance community work utilizes the same framework and tool, the Flood Resilience Measurement for Communities (FRMC), to develop a deep understanding of community context and needs. Based on this, we engage our communities in designing projects to build their resilience in ways that deliver co-benefits for development, risk reduction, and climate change adaptation. Because the technical skills this demands are broad, we support teams with a variety of tools, drawing from the diverse Alliance skills and expertise. Using SharePoint as a central



knowledge management repository for electronic materials allows teams around the globe transparent, easy access to all Alliance materials.

Cross-workstream and inter-organizational learning for Alliance decision-making and managing change. We feed information coming out of the MRL, regular workstream and bi-lateral meetings, and peer-to-peer learning into our strategic and operational decision-making bodies, which include representatives from all Alliance partners, including Zurich.

Based on the Alliance’s experience – involving much trial and error – of the above learning approaches, we include below our key considerations for setting up internal learning systems that support a proactive programming approach:

1. Explicitly value the role of learning in your work.
2. Identify the different kinds of learning needed for your program size, complexity and requirements, taking into account your ToC and the needs of staff delivering programs.
3. Develop systems and processes that are adapted to suit the different requirements of your learning needs.
4. Be flexible and regularly re-evaluate your systems and processes.
5. Resource adequately for supporting teams in the process of learning and knowledge gathering and sharing.
6. Balance the benefits of learning with the time required to capture, share and evaluate learning (which means going back to point 4!).

2.0 Alliance proactive programming during the COVID-19 pandemic

2.1 Setting up an enabling environment for proactive programming during COVID-19

Globally, COVID-19 has halted many development program operations and shifted focus and financial support away from disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate change adaptation (CCA)¹. However, extreme weather events did not pause for the pandemic; in 2020, cyclones, hurricanes, and floods hit many of the communities we work in. The Alliance's decision-making during the pandemic is based on the premise central to our proactive programming approach: that regardless of broader context changes, our goal is that floods have no negative impact on peoples' and businesses' ability to thrive.

The pandemic began with great uncertainty. Globally, people were unsure of the seriousness of the situation, how individuals, communities, nations, and the world would be impacted, and how governments would react and respond. Physical distancing requirements were put into place and lockdowns were implemented, making it clear that normal program and project operations would be heavily constrained. There was also uncertainty around how long the pandemic would last and if, and how, communities and community needs would change.

The Foundation's initial pandemic messaging to partner organizations was to retain staff, maintain salaries, and start rethinking how to deliver on Alliance objectives given the changing circumstances. Some Alliance members stated that this security was a significant source of stability, financial safety, and personal reassurance in a highly fraught landscape.

The Foundation also maintained open lines of communication and stayed abreast of developments within organizations and country programs. To support this, at the global level the Alliance developed a 'COVID-19 situation reporting' tool and partner organizations conducted regular collaborative risk monitoring with their country offices to identify emerging challenges and support problem solving. Learning was fed into both monthly workstream discussions and high-level Alliance decision-making processes to enable coordinated action and decision-making that took into account how COVID-19 was manifesting in the countries we work in, how country team operations had been impacted, and how they were managing around the crisis. Our 'Resilience in Crisis' strategy is a key example where the Alliance mobilized around the recognition that the pandemic was leading to significant shifts in national government priorities and spending and that the compound risk of COVID-19 and floods could be catastrophic (see Case Study 1).

¹ See At What Cost: How chronic gaps in adaptation finance expose the world's poorest people to climate chaos at: <https://floodresilience.net/resources/item/at-what-cost-how-chronic-gaps-in-adaptation-finance-expose-the-world-s-poorest-people-to-climate-chaos/>

Awareness of the changing context and country team experiences meant that the Foundation was able to quickly approve requests from partner organizations for budget reallocations to act on opportunities that had co-benefits for both COVID-19 and flood resilience. In the Alliance, organizations have always had budget flexibility and small and even moderate line-item changes can be quickly approved with an email or phone call. This has in part been enabled by having a global ToC, which recognizes that there are multiple pathways for reaching our outcomes and objectives, and in part by the trust that the Foundation has in Alliance organizations. Thus, Alliance budgets are not tied to delivering specific activities or outputs, but to delivering outcomes over the long-term.

However, the dramatic contextual shifts and broad uncertainty arising from COVID-19 needed more than just short-term and case-by-case reallocations. By June 2020, the Foundation communicated their intention to provide teams with an 18-month costed extension. This extension was already in discussion prior to the pandemic, as part of a larger expansion of the Alliance flood resilience programming and advocacy efforts globally. However, by signaling their intention to go ahead with this extension in early June 2020, the Foundation provided the Alliance with a significantly increased program timeframe.

Knowing we had four years, rather than two and a half years, to achieve our goals allowed Alliance organizations and country teams the time to significantly rethink and adapt strategies and operations to better account for the emerging, long-term realities and risks posed by COVID-19 (see Section 2.3). Many teams reported that, although their other donors had been understanding and relatively flexible, they had received three-to six-month no-cost extensions. While helpful, short-term, no-cost extensions in the Alliance context would have been insufficient to account for the work required to maintain relationships with target stakeholders, keep track of ongoing and emerging changes, and make necessary strategic shifts.

In 2020, in response to COVID-19, the Alliance maintained an **enabling environment** for proactive programming by:

- Focusing first on the well-being and stability of partner organizations and their staff.
- Tracking contextual changes and challenges and regularly communicating to ensure common understanding of issues and manage expectations.
- Leveraging emergent opportunities through collaborative decision-making between donor and partner organizations.
- Quickly responding to budget reallocation requests to enable teams to support target communities and local governments.
- Providing a costed 18-month extension to support teams to identify and implement long-term strategic shifts.

The Foundation has provided the Alliance with the flexibility to make operational and strategic shifts that suit the various organizational and program contexts. The only significant stipulation posed by the Foundation has been that teams adapt their programs in ways that maintain the Alliance flood resilience focus. Where teams pivot to support COVID-19 response, they need to do so in ways that contribute to flood resilience or strengthen the ability to build flood resilience in the long-term. With this flexibility, the Alliance has focused on the following efforts to advance our flood resilience objectives during COVID-19.

Generating and sharing new knowledge: The flexibility to adapt work plans and reallocate budgets as needed, combined with the recognition that program contexts were rapidly shifting, meant that many Alliance teams spent the initial series of lockdowns conducting remote or virtual research (e.g. context analyses, needs assessments, and technical research). This allowed teams to further deepen their knowledge about community and government needs and refine their project strategy and operations based on new entry points for supporting COVID-19 response and flood resilience in co-beneficial ways.

These efforts, overall, were crucial for identifying entry points for staying engaged with, and relevant among, target stakeholders and communities, and for maintaining stakeholder focus on floods to reduce compound risk. For example, Mercy Corps in Nepal and Indonesia worked with local governments and communities to understand sanitation and hygiene needs. They identified handwashing stations as key for reducing the compound risk of COVID-19 and floods. The Foundation's rapid approval of budget reallocation requests allowed Mercy Corps to act on these findings and engage in COVID-19 response efforts that also reduced short-term flood risk.

Community programming achievements

In the third year of Phase II, the Alliance nearly doubled the number of people reached through our programmes globally, and continued to deepen our impact on peoples' lives in ways that help them better cope with both flood risk and the COVID-19 pandemic. This will increase in the coming years with the expansion of our community programming in 2021 to an additional 11 countries, the extension of the program through the end of 2024, and the growing impact of our advocacy and policy work.





Example of Flood Early Warning alert sent via text message in flood prone areas of Nepal © Michael Szoenyi, Zurich Insurance Company Ltd.

Prioritizing and modifying program plans to deliver realistic programming given the changing context:

Alliance partners are given autonomy to make decisions based on their learning and contextual understanding. This enables teams to adapt their programs given what is doable or relevant in a changing context while also maintaining a focus on floods and flood resilience (see Case Studies 2 and 4).

At an operational level, teams and communities have modified their programs to suit remote operations. In Mexico, an inter-community communication mechanism, via WhatsApp, was established between the leaders of four communities. This was used during the October and November 2020 floods to communicate the hydrometeorological situation in each community and in so doing, provide an overview of the situation in the river basin. In Costa Rica, the Red Cross found that shifting to a virtual format for developing their advocacy strategy meant they could involve more stakeholders and thus build greater local ownership around their advocacy priorities.

At a strategic level, teams have deepened their understanding of changing stakeholder needs and used that information to adapt their programs. In Nepal, Practical Action refocused their implementation to deliver what they could, working with government institutions that were not involved in COVID-19 response. Engaging with the Nepal Department of Hydrology and Meteorology, Practical Action utilized the data from the Alliance Flood Resilience Measurement for Communities (FRMC) tool to extend the coverage area for sending SMS alerts to cover all communities in the SEPEDRR (Strengthening

“There’s always the desire to be adaptive, but it needs to be enabled by higher-level management approaches.”

- Miguel Arestegui, Programme Manager, Practical Action Peru



Psychological Support Programme session for frontline respondents in Mangatarem, Pangasinan in the Philippines, 2020 © Philippine Red Cross

End-to-End Flood Early Warning Systems and Preparedness for Effective Disaster Risk Reduction) USAID supported project area. Practical Action Peru expanded the flood focus of their network of resilient community leaders to remotely provide communities with knowledge and support around health-related topics that suit the COVID-19 context (e.g. psycho-social support and home grown vegetables). The Albania Red Cross complemented their prior work, which advocated for contingency planning for floods and earthquakes, to also include COVID-19 contingencies.

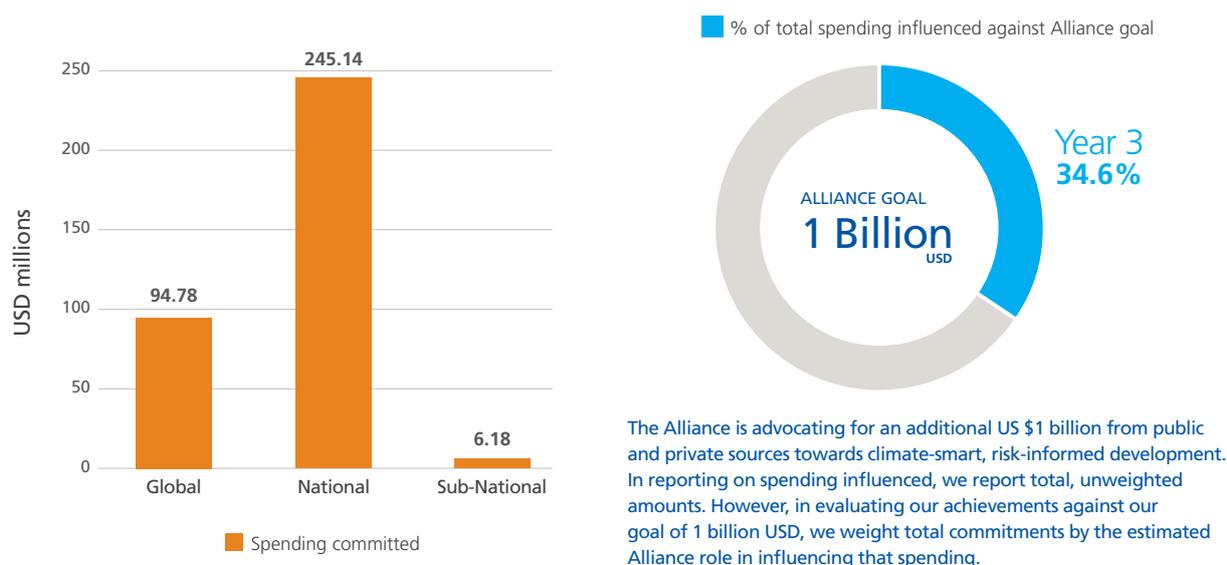
Identifying and leveraging entry points presented by COVID-19 to build flood resilience: The combination of our outcomes-focused approach and the learning and collaborative nature of our decision-making helped to identify alternative pathways for building flood resilience. For example, country teams are working to push sub-national and national governments to account for flood risk in their COVID-19 response and recovery. Mercy Corps Indonesia is working to identify specific business models and pilots for governments for climate resilient COVID-19 recovery via improved or alternative livelihoods. Practical Action Bangladesh and Concern Bangladesh received media coverage from CNBC for their reports on the compound risks of COVID-19 and flooding, and presented their findings in high-level forums in webinars and sessions leading up to COP26.

Building and strengthening relationships: The Alliance’s ability to remain engaged while quickly pivoting to address both flooding and the pandemic enabled teams to support their community partners, advocacy partners, and target stakeholders to manage COVID-19, further deepening relationships and cementing trust between the Alliance and key stakeholders. This has strongly positioned us for future programming and advocacy while also ensuring a continued focus on DRR and CCA (see Case Study 3).

Teams that had organizational mandates to conduct pandemic response had to significantly slow down program operations. The Red Cross of Montenegro maintained

Policy and Spending Achievements

We influenced improved donor, national, and sub-national policies related to DRR and CCA that have implications for flood resilience. We also influenced over USD 340 million in commitments and spending towards flood resilience as of December 1, 2020, a 53% increase from June of 2020. Almost 4% of the money we have influenced has been spent, though how COVID-19 impacts commitments remains to be seen.



strong relationships with the communities they work with and local government by finding ways to connect Red Cross humanitarian and flood resilience efforts. They made vulnerable households in their flood resilience communities beneficiaries of their COVID-19 humanitarian efforts.

Teams faced with limitations on movement and face-to-face restrictions, leveraged relationships with government and civil society stakeholders built through their flood resilience work to make progress towards Alliance objectives. For example, the Plan El Salvador team is actively participating in different clusters and sectoral teams within the COVID-19 and Tropical Storms Amanda and Cristobal response, directly focusing on the compound risk environment created by the concurrent health and storm disasters. This has provided Plan with access to dialogues and joint work with government and humanitarian actors. In Bangladesh, Practical Action worked with community 'resilience agents' to disseminate early warnings in communities prior to monsoon flooding during the pandemic and identify flood preparedness actions (e.g. where livestock could be taken to shelter and household-level preparatory actions). Resilience agents also worked with the local government to create plans for smooth relief distribution and disseminate messages on how to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission during the floods. This is indicative of strengthened relationships between communities and government and collaboration to manage crises.

Stories from the field

1 CASE STUDY 1 Mobilizing around the “Resilience in Crisis” strategy

As governments globally shifted their focus to responding to and managing the COVID-19 pandemic, Alliance country teams began to see the pandemic shifting the focus away from flood resilience, DRR and CCA, even as floods were impacting the communities and countries we work in. The recognition that the combination of floods and COVID-19 in 2020 had the potential to be far more impactful and deadly than either peril alone facilitated a broader conversation within the Alliance and led to the development of the Alliance ‘Resilience in Crisis’ strategy.

‘Resilience in Crisis’ began as a communications effort to develop and disseminate messaging that would raise alarm bells for governments, practitioners, and donors around the compound risk of floods and COVID-19. The blog post, “Laying in Wait: Responding to the Pandemic Amidst Impending Disasters”¹, highlighted the humanitarian implications of floods occurring during the pandemic and how the international donor community, governments, and humanitarian actors needed to act to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe.

Building on this, the Alliance developed a broader advocacy strategy that framed grounded advocacy asks to policy makers and international donors. These asks are laid out in a policy brief, “Building Back Better: Ensuring COVID-19 response and recovery builds long-term resilience to climate impacts”². The ‘Resilience in Crisis’ document is now a key element of the Alliance’s global advocacy strategy. In parallel, some Alliance country teams are advocating for a ‘green, sustainable and resilient’ COVID-19 recovery that integrates flood resilience thinking and climate change considerations in their respective locations.

The ‘Resilience in Crisis’ strategy came at a critical time when the international community was grappling with how to manage the pandemic while also responding to the climate crisis. By mobilizing quickly, we were able to amplify needed messaging at the right moment and participate in early discussions around responding to COVID-19 in ways that have positive benefits for climate change. In turn, this strategy has built our

1 “Laying in Wait: Responding to the Pandemic Amidst Impending Disasters” can be found at: <https://floodresilience.net/blogs/laying-in-wait-responding-to-the-pandemic-amidst-impending-disasters/>

2 “Building Back Better: Ensuring COVID-19 response and recovery builds long-term resilience to climate impacts” can be found at: <https://europe.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/1033-PA-ZFRP-PB-BuildingBackBetter%20WEB.pdf>

credibility around multi-hazard resilience and compound risk. We have seen significant uptake of messaging around 'green, sustainable and resilient' COVID-19 recovery and 'building back better', and Alliance partners have received substantial media coverage both internationally and nationally.



In Monte Grande, brigade members work with the Mexican Red Cross to deliver humanitarian aid to flood affected community members © Paulo Cerino

Stories from the field

2 CASE STUDY 2 Maintaining government focus on floods in Nepal

When COVID-19 hit, Practical Action Nepal developed a three-stage process to maintain government focus on flooding in the midst of COVID-19 response.

At the local-level, Practical Action ensured a continued focus on floods by leveraging the capacity, understanding, and local ownership of flood resilience they have built to date. Practical Action community programming has been developed using a combination of national and sub-national government data and assessments, FRMC data, and dialogues with local government and community. As a result, both communities and local governments have a vested interest in moving forward with these plans.

At the national-level, Practical Action facilitated continued national government focus on floods through a savvy media engagement strategy structured around using and building the local and national media's capacity to report on DRR, CCA, and resilience. Practical Action, in partnership with media houses, supported journalists working in print and visual media to highlight climate resilience, DRR, and early warning systems for hydrometeorological hazards in light of the upcoming monsoon. Simultaneously, Practical Action maintained an active social media presence and regularly disseminated 'soundbites' that could be and were picked up by the media. Key successes in 2020 included Reuters and other large media houses publishing interviews with Practical Action experts on flood risk and climate resilience.

The third stage of the work involved leveraging their in-country profile to organize a media roundtable with federal and sub-national level decision-makers. The media, with their increased capacity to engage around issues of DRR, CCA, and resilience, were able to get decision-makers to make commitments towards flood resilience in ways that would be difficult for a single organization to do. The media disseminated these commitments widely across Nepal, which helped to mainstream DRR and CCA into national, provincial, and local planning.

The Alliance's long program time frame has helped support Practical Action's long-term presence in Nepal. They were well-connected and recognized for their resilience expertise from the local to national levels. They were also able to leverage their credibility and relationships to operationalize their strategy to maintain the Nepal government's focus on floods during COVID-19.

Stories from the field

3 CASE STUDY 3 COVID-19 relief distribution in Bangladesh

In July and August 2020, COVID-19 lockdowns coupled with heavy flooding disrupted community engagement and activities, livelihoods, and government engagement in Bangladesh. In response, Concern Bangladesh, with their local implementing partner Assistance for Social Organization and Development (ASOD), re-directed Alliance funding to distribute sanitation equipment, personal protective equipment, and cash, and mobilized local Community Resilience Action Group (CRAG) volunteers to deliver these materials and assist the local government in their response. This was accompanied by clear messaging on COVID-19 risk and mitigation measures.

By maintaining their engagement with community members, Concern and ASOD enhanced the capacity of both local partners and communities and put them in leadership positions. Over 100 volunteers received orientation, information and introduction to Union Councils, and ensured continuity of contact with communities even when Concern project staff were cut off as a result of movement restrictions. Through the Union Councils, the CRAG members were able to leverage support from government line departments. This has led to enhanced coordination between the community representatives and government departments involved in the response, which in turn has improved support for the communities for COVID-19 recovery and flood response.

Concern's response to COVID-19 turned an unforeseen challenge into an opportunity to build community capacity and better understand how government systems work, while keeping community groups engaged and without losing momentum in their broader work.

Stories from the field

4 CASE STUDY 4 Refocusing community work in Peru

In Peru, the combination of COVID-19 and political turmoil has been catastrophic and resulted in huge socio-economic shifts in much of the country. High unemployment in peri-urban communities around Lima led to significant migration back to hometowns, increasing food and resource issues in those communities. Urban-to-rural migration also introduced the virus into particularly vulnerable, semi-remote areas with low healthcare capacity, resulting in high illness and death rates. As a result, the social fabric of communities has been significantly changed and psycho-social needs are very high. Community priorities for building resilience have likely shifted.

Practical Action Peru is working in peri-urban areas on the Lima outskirts and in rural areas on the upper Rimac watershed; COVID-19 impacts in the two areas have been very different, requiring different project modifications. In both areas, the changes taking place in communities required the Practical Action team to adapt by delaying or re-configuring activities. Their approach includes:

- Reinforcing and expanding existing interventions that were jointly identified with communities. For example, by strengthening the field schools for climate resilience with a virtual training module and introducing satellite data, and expanding planned nature-based DRR flood resilience solutions to include short-term livelihoods benefits.
- Identifying new opportunities for engagement. For example, because many state agency activities are now being delivered virtually, administrative or logistical bottlenecks are no longer impediments for state agencies to directly engage communities. This has resulted in state agencies maintaining or increasing their involvement in capacity building activities, despite deep context changes.
- Conducting a mid-line flood resilience measurement (FRMC) assessment to get a better sense of how the communities they work in have changed with COVID-19 and what new needs will have to be addressed to reduce vulnerability and build flood resilience.
- To capture these changes, adapting their project and advocacy work plans and national ToC. These planning documents are updated annually, but the changes as a result of the pandemic are more significant.

The Alliance's budget flexibility has been a key enabler for adapting this project. Other donors have been understanding, but the projects, expectations, and budgets are more rigid. Thus, those projects are on hold rather than adapted to suit changing contexts and needs.



Community DRR work in Chaclacayo, Lima, Peru, 2015 © Marco Antonio, **Practical Action**



Washed away health center in Sundarganj, Bangladesh, 2020 © Finola Mohan, Concern Worldwide

2.4 Being realistic about proactive programming

Proactive programming is not without challenges. It comes with higher learning demands, greater need for intentional, engaged communication between practitioner organizations and the donor, new ways of working, and deliberative, co-created decision-making. Donors and practitioners should account for the following constraints and realities of proactive programs in program design and decision-making.

Work with communities is often 'locked in' to overall project design and plans.

In engaging with communities, organizations make a commitment to them; in exchange for the community's partnership, time, and/or leadership, the organization will support them in pursuing community priorities. Therefore, the 'experimentation' emphasized in much of the adaptive management literature is frequently unrealistic in community contexts. Any significant shifts to community programs require trust, buy-in, and re-design with both the communities and donors, which in turn has implications for budgets and timelines.

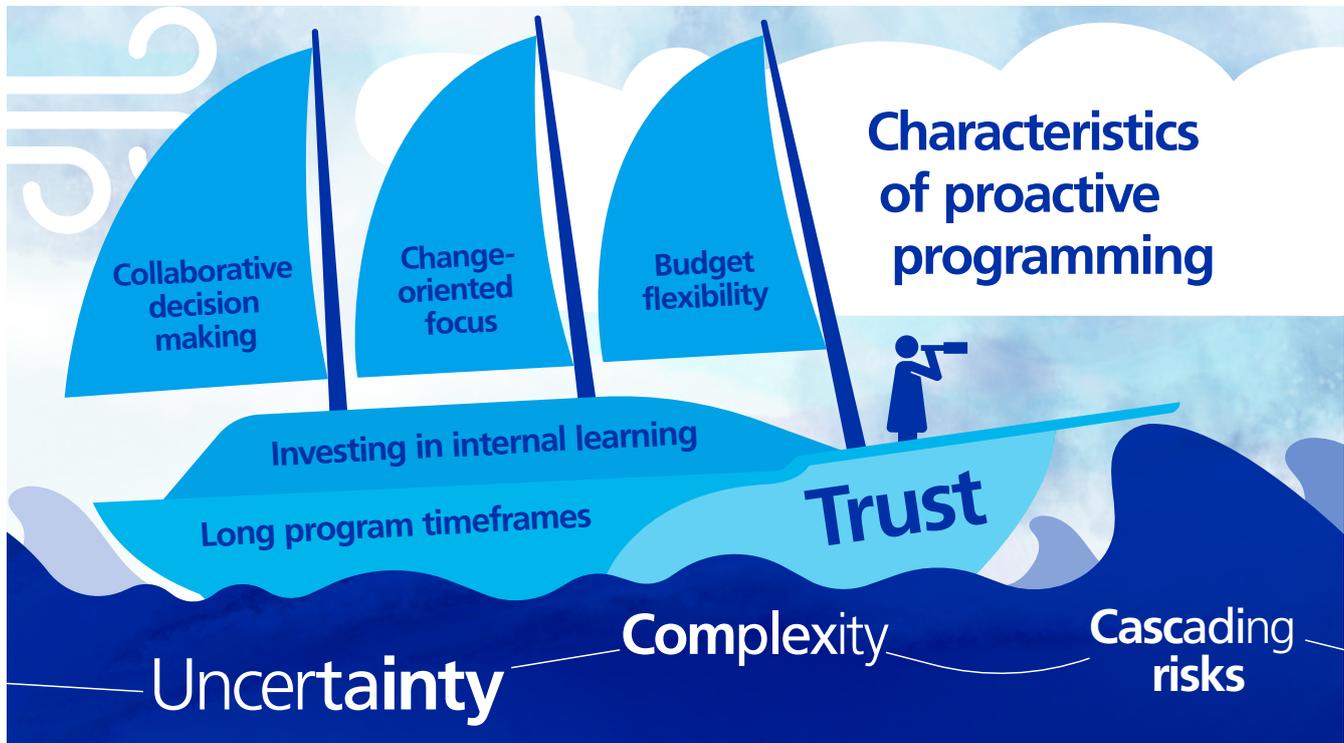
Internal learning is difficult, even when it is intentionally planned, funded, and facilitated. Demand-driven internal learning and uptake of learning require active facilitation and strong participation, which requires time and resource commitment from partner organizations and staff. As a result, it is important to establish communication checkpoints to track whether learning demands are reasonable, being met, and generating the desired results.



Fully operationalizing proactive programming is constrained by organizational culture, mandates, and ways of working. Managing different donor requirements and ways of working is typically a balancing act for practitioner organizations; flexible approaches often do not align with existing internal budget and reporting systems. Furthermore, proactive programming can push practitioner organizations to move beyond their mandates and areas of expertise. Both donors and the organizations they fund may need to grow into proactive programming approaches over time as they learn what works and doesn't in their contexts.

Balancing flexibility with cost recovery in proactive programs can be challenging. Practitioner organizations need to deliver on budgets in order to recover the cost of implementation and keep the lights on. Adaptively managed programs that restructure and reorganize based on shifting dynamics, shocks, or stresses are resource intensive and take a longer time to deliver, potentially shifting the timing of cost recovery. To address this, either budgets need to be structured at the onset of the program in ways that do not penalize practitioner organizations for shifting course as needed and in anticipation of future risks, or, donors need to set aside contingency or emergency funds to help practitioner organizations absorb the cost of proactive programming.

3.0 Using proactive programming to address uncertainty



“Our approach has been forward-looking. We recognize that COVID-19 is not a one time phenomenon and that we constantly need to adapt our work.”

- Manuel von der Muehlen, Alliance Global Program Coordinator, Plan International

Globally, the effects of climate change are becoming increasingly visible and damaging, and this is likely to intensify in coming decades. This is on top of other significant demographic and development shifts, economic realignments, and geo-political shifts. Together, these are already changing and will continue to influence the needs and priorities of national governments, local governments, and communities, often both dramatically and abruptly. We will increasingly need to identify pathways to address development priorities while also accounting for the ways in which climate and other changes are shifting risk landscapes, vulnerabilities, and needs in the places we work.

The Alliance has committed to build flood resilience in ‘climate-smart’ and ‘risk-informed’ ways. One of the biggest challenges we see in making our work ‘climate-smart’ is the need to address and work under conditions of uncertainty and change. We got a taste of this uncertainty and changing priorities with the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, we draw on our experience and learning during the pandemic to identify key characteristics of our proactive approach to programming that supported our adaptation to the COVID-19

landscape, characteristics that we believe will be equally valuable in our work to address climate change. These characteristics can be integrated into existing or new programs to better account for uncertainty and the changing contexts, needs, priorities, and risks experienced by communities and nations, while still supporting progress toward development objectives.

Trust

From the beginning of the Alliance, our donor, the Foundation, has chosen to approach its partner organizations with trust, and specifically, trust that partners will deliver what they are funded to deliver. Partner organizations have also placed their trust in the Foundation to not penalize them if things do not go as planned. Therefore, there is an established culture to report honestly and quickly on challenges, and challenges are embraced as opportunities rather than signs of incompetence. Combined with open lines of communication between the donor and partner organizations, this has enabled both budget flexibility and collaborative problem-solving.

What this means for **DONORS**

Look for organizations you are excited about working with and think of your funding to them as both a relationship and an investment in their capacity to deliver good programs. You will be delivering this work together, it is not just a financial exchange.

What this means for **PRACTITIONERS**

Where possible, be forthcoming about challenges, and work with your donor to find ways to leverage those challenges, whether that is identifying the lessons in the failure and what to change in the next iteration, or restructuring the work to adapt to roadblocks and changed conditions.

Long program timeframes

In combination, Phases I and II of the Alliance will amount to 11 years of sustained funding to advance flood resilience. Our experience managing this program through crises and challenges has shown us that proactive programming is a long-term endeavor; systematically and iteratively reviewing what needs to change is slow work. However, long timeframes mean that disruptive events are less stressful. The combination of our long program timeframe, outcome focus, and budget flexibility have enabled teams to refocus their programs to further strengthen relationships with government and support them with their needs during the pandemic, in ways that will support achievement of our flood resilience outcomes and objectives in the long run.

What this means for **DONORS**

For areas where you want to catalyze real change, fund long-term programs (at least five years) that have in-built systems and processes for collaborative learning, problem-solving, and restructuring in response to crises, challenges, and changing needs.

What this means for **PRACTITIONERS**

Work to educate your donors on the level of effort that achieving successful outcomes takes, particularly when success is a legacy of multiple years of sustained engagement and not just the result of isolated pockets of short-term funding.

Invest in internal learning

Setting up effective and accessible systems and processes for learning continues to be an evolving process for the Alliance. Our knowledge management approach supports learning for both external and internal stakeholders. Internally, it helps us to improve Alliance decision-making, enable peer-to-peer learning, and understand our progress against our global ToC, including where we need to rethink approaches.

Internal learning processes need:

- Adequate resourcing (staff time, translation costs, activity/output costs)
- Clear and realistic learning objectives based on a Theory of Change
- Systems and processes that are appropriate to the different learning objectives
- (Pro)active facilitation
- Commitment from stakeholders and a culture of valuing learning
- Regular re-evaluation and the flexibility to be modified where necessary.

What this means for **DONORS**

Encourage or request that the organizations you fund set up internal learning systems, coupled with feedback loops where that learning is reviewed and the work adjusted based on what is learned.

What this means for **PRACTITIONERS**

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.



Women sharing their experience of savings generation in Bangladesh, 2020 © Ohidul Islam, **Concern Worldwide**

Collaborative decision-making

For the Alliance, maintaining an outcome-focused approach means keeping all our members engaged and committed to the work, which in turn requires collaborative decision-making, where input from the full range of partner organizations is intentionally solicited across the full spectrum of Alliance engagement. This approach can be time and resource consuming, but it allows for stronger synergies across our work. It is complemented by explicit channels for ensuring implementation challenges are addressed, recognizing that ‘collaboration’ can too easily devolve to ‘loudest voice wins’ or inaction. The Alliance balance between collaboration and accountability was particularly effective when COVID-19 hit, as we were quickly able to agree on and roll out consistent messaging across all partner organizations.

One of the aspects of the Alliance that makes this collaboration particularly effective is the active role Zurich plays in delivering the program. The Foundation has dedicated staff that are involved in maintaining partner relationships, learning from the work, and engaging in daily decisions. Because the Alliance has a donor who is part of the conversation and aware of context, challenges, and issues, it is easier to maintain mutual trust, and flexibility is not only allowed but encouraged. However, this requires a careful balance between hands-on/hands-off engagement on the donor’s part.

What this means for **DONORS**

Maintain interest and active engagement in the programs you fund, to develop a better understanding of the work and how it is being done. Strategic decision-making should be collaborative and based on internal learning, but provide the organizations you fund with a level of autonomy to course-correct in ways that make sense given their contextual and organizational realities. Couple this autonomy with accountability so that corrections are visible and build, rather than erode, trust.

What this means for **PRACTITIONERS**

‘Share the problem’; draw your donors into your work to the extent possible, 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 the way you do it. If donor policies or practices limit your ability to be effective, look for opportunities to share the impact of these challenges so that donors appreciate the potential benefits they could reap from change.

Change-oriented focus

The Alliance's strategy is guided by a shared understanding of our goals, as articulated in an evolving global Theory of Change (ToC). This goal-focus is supported by Memorandums of Understanding which are more flexible and outcome-oriented than contracts or Terms of Reference and provide Alliance organizations the opportunity to adopt widely varying approaches to achieve our goals based on the contexts, risks, and needs they are addressing. This approach is coupled with a reporting system that tracks progress against outcomes, explores how those outcomes are being achieved, and generates the necessary information for shifting strategy if and when needed. Our ToC and reporting system have enabled us to absorb changes with a minimum of fuss, and experiment and innovate to achieve outcomes (e.g. by leveraging opportunities arising from the COVID-19 crisis) rather than focus on delivering specific activities.

What this means for **DONORS**

If your goal is to achieve significant development gains, move towards outcomes-focused funding and programming. This will require collaborative development of a ToC with the organizations you fund (and, through them, the communities you aim to serve) and an associated outcomes-oriented reporting system to track progress, learn, and course-correct.

What this means for **PRACTITIONERS**

Emphasize, in both external and donor-focused communications and in proposals, how your project goals relate to your and your donors' shared vision and the multiple approaches you take to realize those goals. Too often, proposals and projects are distilled to a series of activities, rather than a set of possible paths all leading to the desired change.



Zone Brigade Coordinators meet to discuss the flood situation in communities and potential response activities in Mexico, 2020 © Paulo Cerino

Budget flexibility

Budget flexibility is most powerful for work that is outcome and results focused, because it allows the work to adapt to changing circumstances. Equally, 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 them. This is not always apparent to either donors or the organizations they fund; the ability to work flexibly requires well-established internal learning loops coupled with the capacity to integrate that learning into planning, and an organizational culture that builds these approaches into their long-term work.

Ideally, for long-term, flexible programs, donors will set up mechanisms to provide costed-extensions that can be activated as needed or if program results prove so exciting that there is a desire to continue and further deepen the work. For COVID-19, the costed-extensions that were already in the pipeline within the Alliance were a game changer. Having Alliance teams paid and finding ways to continue to move work forward during COVID-19 lockdowns meant that we not only did not lose ground, but because we were funded to stay active, in some locations we were able to find exciting new ways to further the work and made progress that would not otherwise have been possible.

What this means for **DONORS**

Work toward long-term relationships with those you fund and maintain open lines of communication so that organizations can approach you as challenges arise. Provide organizations line item flexibility and avoid rigid and long approval processes for funding reallocation. If budget flexibility cannot be easily built into existing program budgets, set aside contingency funds to support organizations in managing emergencies.

What this means for **PRACTITIONERS**

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.

4.0 Conclusions

Managing programs in the context of climate change will be a complex endeavor. COVID-19 was a rapid-onset event and the best ways to manage it (e.g. physical distancing, lockdowns, vaccinations) are globally applicable, whereas climate change is slower onset and will cause a variety of shocks and stresses of different magnitudes and frequency. How climate change will manifest and how to adapt to climate risk are highly complex and contextual. This necessitates shifting towards proactive programming that provides practitioner organizations with the flexibility to manage and leverage shocks and stresses and provides donors with the confidence that program objectives can be met in spite of challenges. It is not enough to simply 'pause' programs during climate shocks that erode development gains, exacerbate vulnerabilities, and dramatically change community needs and priorities.

Developing a proactive program requires starting from the position of "we want people to be better off," setting clear end goals, and then putting in necessary review points and flexibility to restructure programs and activities as needs change. This requires donors and practitioner organizations to act in concert. Donors need to create an appropriate enabling environment, including long-term funding and flexibility in budgets and work plans, and confer greater trust and autonomy on practitioner organizations to manage challenges that arise in their contexts. In parallel, practitioner organizations need to be open to new program approaches and exhibit openness to new ways of working, in particular an openness to reevaluate and readjust their implementation based on new knowledge.

Ultimately, how to best create more adaptive programs is not prescriptive or linear. It is dependent on continual learning to modify and course-correct. We encourage donors and practitioner organizations to start implementing aspects of proactive programming, experiment for yourselves, and share what you learn. Doing so will leave us all better able to act on pressing development issues, and will protect development gains against climate shocks, stresses, and uncertainty.



Community groups receiving hygiene kits during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nicaragua, June 2020 © Félix Rugama, Plan International



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