

Flexibility and Adaptive Management in Fragile Settings: Lessons from SIPRA

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Charleen Malkowsky (Wageningen Social and Economic Research), **Inge Vos** (ZOA Netherlands), **Joseph Ashong** (ZOA Sudan).
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In protracted crises such as Sudan, aid actors must pivot quickly while staying committed to long-term transformation. The SIPRA programme (Strengthening Inclusive Partnerships for Smallholders in Rain-fed Areas) illustrates how flexibility and adaptive management can allow market-oriented development work to continue amidst conflict. This brief outlines SIPRA's approach, identifies enabling factors, and offers recommendations for donors and implementers.

Introduction and objectives

In fragile areas, situations can change within a moment – and with that also the needs and required approaches on the ground. However, how can we, as actors within the aid architecture, respond to these changing circumstances, to maximize our ability to support people on the ground, whilst managing accountability from all sides?

It is obviously known that following project designs that were developed before major changes in context is not appropriate, and that a more flexible and adaptive approach is needed. But what exactly does that mean in practice?

This brief has two objectives:

- 1 Raise awareness of donors and practitioners on the difference of flexibility and adaptive programming management (through the example of SIPRA).
- 2 Reflect on the operationalisation of flexibility throughout the project cycle based on the example of SIPRA.

This brief will first explain the concepts of flexibility and adaptive programming to set a common understanding, as well as explaining how donors and practitioners relate to one another in this.

Then, the SIPRA project will be taken as an example to show how this can work in practice. The narrative presented is based on 11 interviews that were conducted with SIPRA actors of various levels, ranging from field staff to project managers, country directors and donor focal points, in order to present a balanced view across levels on how information flows and decisions on adaptive management are made, supplemented by notes from consortium and donor meetings.

What is flexibility and what is adaptive programming management?

Programmes operating in volatile contexts such as Sudan or other protracted crises face shifting needs, sudden shocks, and long-term uncertainty. To remain effective, they must combine flexibility (the ability to adjust quickly) with adaptive management (the process to ensure these adjustments are strategic and accountable). More specifically: Flexibility refers to the capacity of a project to adapt or change when needed, particularly in response to acute unexpected shocks (NFP, 2021). Adaptive management is a structured, iterative approach that involves actively adjusting strategies and actions based on ongoing learning and changing circumstances.

Flexibility should be integrated throughout the entire project cycle and not be an afterthought, it should be anchored in the proposal already. There are different, more academic or business-oriented theories on flexibility, but for the sake of simplicity and alignment of consortium practices, the NFP/ZOA developed ones are utilized in this brief. Accordingly, flexibility can be divided in three main categories:

1. **Operational Flexibility:** the capacity to reallocate budgets, revise activities, or shift timelines as access, needs, or security conditions change.
2. **Institutional Flexibility:** systems, decision-making processes, and internal policies that enable fast, decentralized responses in fluid situations.
3. **Relational Flexibility:** trust-based donor and partner relationships that allow renegotiation of plans when crises escalate or opportunities arise.

In these contexts, adaptive management is the tool that ensures effective action:

- It applies structured learning cycles, such as real-time monitoring, reflection, testing, and adjustments, so that changes are data-driven, timely, and strategically aligned, not just reactive;
- It helps programmes to bend or change approaches, geographical areas or timelines, not just adjust logistics, when underlying needs or conflict dynamics shift.

The difference of these two concepts is further detailed in the table below:

Aspect	Flexibility	Adaptive Management
Purpose	Provides the room to adapt operations, systems, and partnerships amidst crises	Take accountable, evidence-based decisions for adaptations through structured learning
Nature of Change	Tactical and operational adjustments (budgets, timelines, delivery), approving deviation from initial proposals	Strategic and deliberate programmatic turns, in response to new insights, and to changes in context, needs, or system dynamics
Learning	Flexibility allows change, but without deliberate learning processes	Continuous monitoring, analysis, and iteration are core to the programme
When to Use	Flexibility should be used in livelihood programmes in fragile settings.	Used continuously to guide how and when to apply adaptations for impact

In crisis and protracted contexts, flexibility gives programmes the space to respond to sudden changes, while adaptive management ensures actions are informed, strategic, and accountable, delivering impact despite uncertainty and donor obligations.

How do donors and practitioners relate to one another in this?

For flexibility and adaptive management to work in protracted crises, donors and practitioners need to operate as genuine partners rather than simply as donor and implementer. Ideally, donors contribute by creating space and trust through flexible funding mechanisms, rapid approvals, and a willingness to revise plans. Practitioners contribute by ensuring evidence and accountability are given, using adaptive management to justify and guide each required change. How well this collaboration functions often depends on perceptions: if either party is hesitant or closed to change, flexibility can stall. The way individuals communicate, how openly, transparently, and proactively programme teams and donor representatives engage with each other, are central to building the trust and shared understanding needed for rigorous changes and responsive programming in volatile contexts like Sudan.

The following section will take the SIPRA project as an example as how this can work in practice.

From theory to practice: SIPRA's flexible and adaptive approach

Flexibility and Adaptive Management for a market system approach focused Rain-Fed Agriculture Programme in Sudan

SIPRA, a rain-fed agriculture initiative in Sudan, illustrates how flexibility and adaptive management can sustain impact in a crisis context. Initially covering East Darfur, South Darfur, Central Darfur, and South Kordofan, the programme was developed in response to a donor call for proposals designed before Sudan's 2021 coup. The concept note and proposal were developed under assumptions of relative stability, and the programme was granted and launched in the third quarter of 2022, prior to the outbreak of widespread conflict in April 2023.

SIPRA's objective is to bring about transformative change for smallholder farmers by building inclusive partnerships between organised producer associations, focused on sustainable, climate-smart production and a motivated private sector willing to engage on fair terms. The programme seeks to strengthen agro-MSMEs linked to large agri-businesses, investors, and sellers, creating durable market linkages for smallholder producers, also through working with a challenge fund. Alongside these market investments, SIPRA aimed to foster an enabling business and policy environment through advocacy, tackling systemic barriers across value chains. Guided by a food systems resilience approach, SIPRA aimed to target leverage points in value chains with high demand, connected to state, national, and potentially export markets.

Once conflict escalated, SIPRA faced disruptions, with organisations offices being raided and access to target locations being even impossible at times. However, instead of reverting to humanitarian relief, the consortium was committed to maintaining this market-driven, systemic strategy, and since the donor was also committed to the underlying idea of the project on market development, the proposed changes by the consortium were well received (operational flexibility).

Although flexibility was ultimately achieved, it was subject to considerable delays due to the absence of mechanisms for flexibility from the projects' start. Good communication helped coordination, but a lack of early alignment on risk appetite caused problems, including a partner leaving mid-project (insufficient relational flexibility). Differences in partners' and donors' views on risk and flexibility slowed decisions, such as the delayed approval of a new project member (insufficient institutional flexibility). The NFP/ ZOA developed guidance on flexibility was shared within the consortium, but only after the process of project adjustments was already far underway.

A core enabler for making the required and timely adjustments in each location was SIPRA's adaptive management tool, whose development was led by the knowledge partner in close collaboration with all consortium members. This co-creation was critical: by jointly defining the parameters that determined whether planned outputs were feasible in each locality, partners built shared ownership and confidence in the decisions the tool supported. The tool has two stages: one that moves the area on a continuum of stability (labels in red – yellow – green at a certain point of time) to determine the situation, and the second stage looks at what this means for the feasibility of implementing initial outputs or emerging needs. The tool operates at locality level, recognising that stability, access, and market conditions vary extremely within a single state. These frequently updated assessments help to decide where activities could continue as planned, where adjustments were needed, where additional measures like seed-plus-cash packages were necessary, and where activities had to pause altogether.

This approach enabled SIPRA to stay true to its food systems mandate while adjusting to ground realities. On this basis, SIPRA expanded into Blue Nile, White Nile, and Gedaref, more stable states where food production and market investments could continue at scale. By doing so, the programme contributes to national food supply and food security, indirectly supporting the original conflict-affected states through systemic impact. This balance, adapting to contextual shifts while remaining anchored to strategic objectives, became SIPRA's core approach.

As one field coordinator explained:

“Tracking the change that justifies the needed adjustment is essential. SIPRA systematically tracks the situation so we can decide on time about movement and feasible activities – whether we can still implement the project as planned in certain localities or need to change.”

How the Approach Works

- **Required flexibility to continuously adjust: communication and trust**

1. Transparent donor partnership

Frequent check-ins and transparent coordination with the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (EKN), and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) built trust. EKN permitted reallocations and revisions of the program's theory of change (ToC) to align with the context, making adaptation actionable.

2. Open communication within the consortium

Formal and informal channels allowed partners to share information and coordinate changes, though some interviewees emphasised the need for earlier alignment on risk appetite, since one consortium partner, left the consortium mid project.

- **Key elements of operationalising adaptive management**

1. The co-created adaptive management tool

Led by a neutral knowledge partner, the tool was developed collaboratively by all consortium members, ensuring ownership and buy-in. Together, the partners defined the parameters that determined whether planned outputs were feasible in each area.

1a. Locality-level detail and a continuum of stability

The tool operated at a granular level, mapping a continuum of stability for each locality at specific points in time. This enabled the consortium to see what kinds of activities, like challenge fund activities or working with producer associations, was feasible where, and to adjust programming accordingly.

1b. Evidence-based decision-making

With shared data and parameters, decisions could be grounded in evidence rather than assumptions, enabling the consortium to act quickly and justify changes to the donor. One donor representative described it as “a very good tool for adaptive management... helpful for communication with the ministry and with partners not deeply embedded in the field.”

2. Geographic re-orientation to maintain strategic focus

Expanding into more stable states allowed SIPRA to continue investing in production and markets, maintaining its food systems focus despite escalating conflict elsewhere.

Of course, in practice there are always some challenges, which the next section will present to allow for learning.

- **Challenges encountered in the process**

1. Varied openness to change

Differences in partners' and donors' perceptions of risk and flexibility often shaped decisions. Some stakeholders were keen to act quickly, while others were described as “reluctant to make strong changes” or slowed by distant decision-making structures.

2. Approval delays

Even when donors supported flexibility, procedural bottlenecks delayed critical decisions. For example, as one actor explained “when one partner left the consortium and needed to be replaced, it took 9 months to have the new member approved as a contractor which slowed down the programme a lot. The challenge fund was basically on hold despite everyone being ready”.

3. Communication breakdowns

When telecommunications collapsed, coordination fell partially back on hand-delivered notes, delaying information flow and subsequent decisions by weeks and highlighting the need for resilient communication systems.

4. Differences in working culture

Some consortium members were less familiar with adaptive approaches, requiring deliberate effort to build a shared culture of flexibility and trust.

5. Changes of individuals

Within the embassy, as well as across consortium partners, staff turnover impacted how effective flexibility and adaptive management could be implemented throughout the project. People who wrote the proposal left, embassy focal points changed, the inception phase had no consortium lead yet – all these combined slowed down fast actions.

The interview analysis revealed several lessons learned from the SIPRA experience, which the next section directly translates into concrete recommendations for practitioners and donors.

Recommendations for action for practitioners and donors

Insights from SIPRA interviews highlight that effective flexibility and adaptive management require both technical systems and behavioral shifts. Key actions are:

For practitioners:

- **Embed flexibility from the start.** Discuss flexible programming early when forming partnerships and consortia. Build co-designed adaptive management tools into proposals, including budgets and approval processes and train teams to use them during inception. Align on risk appetite and decision-making processes, and agree on options if risk appetites diverge.
- **Co-create and use adaptive tools as communication platforms.** Develop tools jointly with partners to ensure ownership. Apply locality-level data and stability mapping to decide what is feasible where, and use tools for evidence-based donor discussions.
- **Communicate boldly and transparently.** Open, proactive communication, both formal and informal, is as important as any technical process in ensuring timely action. Propose major changes when justified, treating the donor as a partner in achieving intended outcomes. Use joint learning workshops to build shared understanding.
- **Balance adaptation with continuity.** Geographic and tactical adjustments should support, not replace, original objectives unless fundamental changes are unavoidable.

For donors:

- **Design for adaptive action.** Provide funding structures and procedures that allow rapid shifts in activities and geographies without lengthy delays. React quickly to evidence-backed proposals to avoid missing critical windows.
- **Foster continuity and trust.** Minimise the impact of staff turnover and engage closely with field realities. Be explicit about openness to change based on evidence and willingness to learn from implementers' experience.

Guidelines such as *Towards More Flexible Livelihoods Programming* (NFP 2021) can help establish these foundations at the outset of projects, rather than after crises force adaptation.

SIPRA shows that adaptive management, when combined with operational, institutional, and relational flexibility, can keep market-oriented programmes effective even in extreme crises. By co-creating a locality-level tool with stability mapping, expanding into more stable geographies when necessary, and maintaining open, evidence-driven communication, the consortium adapted continually while staying true to its food systems mandate. Adaptive programming requires tools, but also trust, shared ownership, and the courage – by both practitioners and donors – to embrace change without losing sight of long-term development objectives.

Resources

Flexible livelihoods and food security programming in fragile settings (NFP, 2021)

- [Guidance for programme design and management](#)
- [Guidance for policymakers and donors](#)
- [Starting the conversation: communicating with donors around flexibility](#)
- [Starting the conversation: flexibility with partners or in a consortium](#)

Resources on adaptive management as a practical guide:

- [Practical Guide: Operationalising Adaptive Management](#)

This is part of a series of briefs “Sudan Spotlight: Insights for Action” which are part of the SIPRA project (Strengthening Inclusive Partnerships for Smallholders in Rain-fed Areas), funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to Sudan, and jointly implemented by ZOA, World Relief and SOS Sahel, with Wageningen Social and Economic Research (WSER) as a learning partner in the consortium. The briefs objectives are to disseminate insights from the context and project and share them with the wider practitioner and donor community to inform actions in Sudan. To learn more about the SIPRA programme and engage with the SIPRA consortium partners, contact us through our LinkedIn page: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/sipra-sudan/>

Contact:

Charleen Malkowsky, WSER
charleen.malkowsky@wur.nl