

Pathways toward change: A model for growth

Insights from the Mexican Red Cross' Flood Resilience Program



Presentation of the 2019 National Civil Protection Award to the community brigades of Jonuta. Mexican Red Cross Archive. Flood Resilience Project.

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.

We help people measure their resilience to floods and identify appropriate solutions before disaster strikes. Our vision is that floods should have no negative impact on people's ability to thrive.

To achieve this, we are working to increase funding for flood resilience; strengthen global, national and subnational policies; and improve flood resilience practice.

Since 2013, the Mexican Red Cross has been working as part of the Zurich Flood Resilience Alliance (the Alliance) to build flood resilience in and with communities in the flood prone state of Tabasco and more recently in San Luis Potosí. Flexible funding and the long-term nature of the Alliance program (over 10 years) has enabled a model of growth, learning, and adaptation that has resulted in improved resilience practice at the local and sub-national levels and enhanced organizational and programmatic credibility. This increase in credibility has, in turn, contributed to the scaling of influence and strong, demand-driven resilience building practices over time, with the Mexican Red Cross increasingly being seen as a leader in the field of resilience in Mexico.

This case study explores the model used by the Mexican Red Cross to set up their Alliance program for long-term operation, scalability, and impact. The details of the program's growth and expansion are particular to the Mexican Red Cross' experience, which are the result of in-depth collaboration with communities, socio-cultural dynamics, Red Cross working methods, and relationships with key actors and sectors. However, the model for growth presented provides a blueprint for a scalable and replicable model of

community resilience programming that allows for continual growth and expansion over time. This can be implemented on a local level and expanded to scale, and can also be used by other humanitarian and development programs to build enduring and successful community resilience programs.



Growth and scaling are never by mere chance; but rather, they are the result of different forces working together towards a common goal over the long-term.

— Francisco Ianni, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
Global Coordinator, Flood Resilience

BOX 1: SCALING

An examination of the growth of the community flood resilience program over the past 10 years highlights three different kinds of scaling: scaling out, scaling up, and scaling in.

- Scaling out refers to how, over time, the number of people impacted increases through the growth and spread of good resilience practices and models (e.g., community brigades) to other communities.
- Scaling up refers to successfully leveraging proven practices and credibility to begin to advocate for shifting policies/programs, etc. at the sub-national and national scales.
- Scaling in/deep refers to the teams' successfully building off credibility and program successes to shift institutional approaches, culture, beliefs, etc.



Presentation of baseline results of the FRMC with government stakeholders in San Luis Potosi. Mexican Red Cross Archive. Flood Resilience Project.

A MODEL FOR GROWTH

The foundation of the Mexican Red Cross's Alliance work is long-term funding, iterative learning, strong multi-sectoral and cross-scalar relationships, demand-driven resilience building practices, earned trust, and built credibility with key community, government, and private sector stakeholders. This supported the development and growth of influence and impact, which, in turn, led to the scaling and expansion of both good practices and further influence. Layered on top of this are four key stages of growth: start-up, growth, maturity, and scaling/expansion. The start-up phase for the Mexican Red Cross began in 2013 and they are now in the scaling/expansion stage. All four stages are characterized by:

- **Flexibility and adaptability** — so that the model can be customized to meet different needs and circumstances, while still maintaining its core features and principles;
- **Collaboration, empowerment, and sustainability** — which support community development and outline a clear roadmap for achieving measurable outcomes and results; and

- **Continual growth and expansion over time** — through ongoing evaluations, feedback, and continuous improvement.

Movement from one stage to the next, however, is accompanied by different resource requirements, foci and priorities, and types of decisions that need to be made to encourage growth. For the Mexican Red Cross, the successful, smooth transition from one stage to the next relied on the solid program foundation.

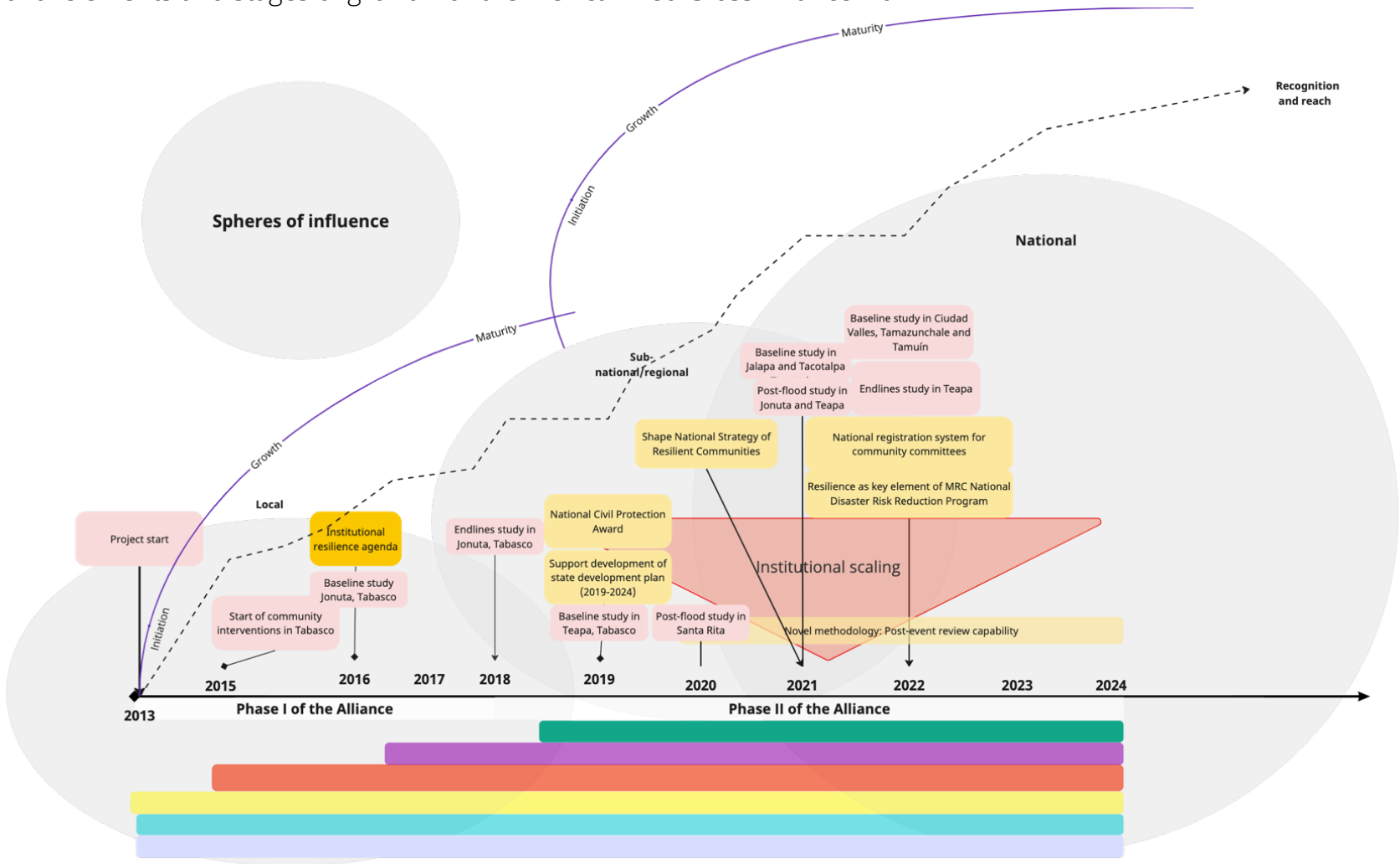
Below we highlight the critical elements of each stage and show how the building blocks illustrated in Figure 1 are leveraged so that the program continues to evolve into the next stage.



Community brigade cleaning main streets and boardwalk areas that protect the community. Mexican Red Cross Archive. Flood Resilience Project.

Figure 1

Foundational elements and stages of growth for the Mexican Red Cross Alliance work



STAGE 1: START-UP

The start-up phase focuses on setting clear and achievable goals, understanding community needs and desires, and setting up the structure for effective community programming. It is important to determine, from the start, the program objective and purpose and to jointly, with a wide range of stakeholders, ensure that the purpose adds value to the local community development agenda.

During this stage, the team laid the building blocks (see Figure 1) to support growth, scaling, and impact. Working from their established reputation in humanitarian response, they started to build trust and credibility in the disaster risk reduction (DRR) and resilience space.

Key considerations:

- **Identify community needs.** Communities are diverse, and their socio-cultural context and needs vary, so it is vital to have a comprehensive understanding of community strengths and needs.
- **Engage with communities.** Engagement with communities is critical to success. The start-up phase must include strategies for engaging community members, building relationships, and fostering trust in long-term programs.
- **Allocate resources.** Teams need to secure and allocate resources effectively; adequate resources — including for staffing, funding, and program infrastructure — are crucial to the successful launch of a community program.
- **Build partnerships and collaborate.** Building partnerships with and between key organizations and local stakeholders is essential for the successful launch of a community program and are critical to the start-up phase as they help to foster trust and credibility. Teams should develop strategies for fostering trust, building relationships, and engaging with community members and partner organizations.
- **Set up a monitoring and evaluation system.** Measuring progress against program goals is essential for ensuring that the program is meeting the needs of the community and making progress. Teams should set up monitoring and evaluation mechanisms at the start of the program.

WHAT STAGE 1 LOOKED LIKE IN MEXICO: EXAMPLES

In the start-up phase, the Mexican Red Cross worked with communities to implement a resilience measurement approach ([the Flood Resilience Measurement for Communities \(FRMC\)](#), developed by the Alliance in 2013) to understand community resilience gaps and strengths. They paired the implementation of this measurement with listening to communities and sharing back the results, and through involving them in participatory activities, such as cost-benefit analyses. These activities, including vulnerability and capacity analysis before applying the FRMC, provided space for communities to present their points of view, reflections, and solutions to problems.

During this phase the program team focused on building relationships with and between local government and communities by involving them in the community resilience measurement process and establishing a sound governance model for the long-term program.



Presentation of baseline results of the FRMC with community leaders in Tabasco. Mexican Red Cross Archive. Flood Resilience Project.

STAGE 2: GROWTH

Two to three years after the start-up phase, the growth stage focuses on evaluating and reflecting on the community programming model. It involves assessing the impact of community programs on participants and the community's overall progress.

During this stage, the Mexican Red Cross built off the foundation they had created in stage 1. They strengthened and scaled good practices, generated and captured knowledge, leveraged credibility, and started to expand their advocacy to the sub-national and national levels.



Long-term funding, transparency in resource distribution, and accountability to donors and communities has contributed to the success of the Flood Resilience program in Mexico.

Key considerations:

- **Manage staff and volunteers.** As community programming grows, there is an increased need for effective personnel management. This requires setting clear roles, responsibilities, and expectations, as well as creating a positive and constructive work environment.
- **Allocate resources.** As community programming grows, the allocation of resources becomes more crucial. The growth phase requires adequate financial, human, and technological resources to sustain program growth and effectiveness. Having sufficient resources for a long-term program supports consistent work and learning while avoiding disruptions to programming.
- **Collaborate and network.** Collaboration and networking with other organizations, community groups, and stakeholders can help bring diverse expertise, resources, and new perspectives. This, in turn, can fuel growth.
- **Learn and innovate.** Continual learning and innovation are essential during this phase as organizations strive to improve and expand their programs. Innovation requires a willingness to step outside of traditional methods and explore new approaches to help achieve desired results.

WHAT STAGE 2 LOOKED LIKE IN MEXICO: EXAMPLES

- Alliance communities and community members worked together to fundraise and contribute to projects. Between communities, community brigades — groups of ~10 community members trained to support communities during disasters and provide basic emergency response — successfully shared learnings, collaborated, and worked with Civil Protection to prepare for and respond to floods.
- To address more community needs, the team and communities sought support from external sources. For example, they partnered with World Animal Protection, who provided guidance and trained community members in protecting their poultry during floods.



The National Water Commission shared knowledge with the community brigade and Civil Protection of Teapa Mexican Red Cross Archive. Flood Resilience Project.

STAGE 3: MATURITY

The maturity stage focuses on building and maintaining strong community-based programming and encouraging locally-sourced solutions and engagement. During this stage, the Mexican Red Cross team solidified their expertise in DRR and began to implement novel approaches such as a post-event review of the 2020 Tabasco floods.

Key considerations:

- **Develop deeper engagement.** As the community programming grows and matures, it will be important to develop deeper engagement strategies that keep community members engaged and invested in the success of the program.
- **Encourage locally-led content, solutions, and strategies.** Locally-led actions can be a powerful tool in building a vibrant and engaged community. Encouraging community members and locally-based organizations to create and share programming ideas and approaches can foster community ownership and innovation.
- **Foster inclusivity and diversity.** It is essential to promote inclusivity and diversity within the community to make everyone feel welcomed and valued and ensure that community programming remains relevant to local needs.
- **Evaluate and hone the community programming strategy.** Data analysis and feedback from community members can help to ensure the program meets the evolving needs and priorities of the community. Ongoing evaluation of how the program is meeting goals and objectives can help in refining the community programming strategy and ensure that it continues to progress.
- **Build partnerships and alliances.** Partnerships and alliances can help to expand the reach and impact of the community programming beyond the community. These alliances can also result in novel ideas and bring in new expertise, as well as identify external resources that can be used to ensure the program's sustainability.

WHAT STAGE 3 LOOKED LIKE IN MEXICO: EXAMPLES

- Years of consistently showing up and working with communities on skills development and capacity building around flood preparedness fostered an enduring trust between the Mexican Red Cross and communities. In turn, this strengthened the community's sense of ownership of flood resilience activities and deepened their commitment to building flood resilience.
- Participatory methodologies used by the Mexican Red Cross encouraged ongoing community engagement and fostering of new ideas that further built the community's resilience and contributed to the sustainability of the program beyond the duration of the Flood Resilience program.

BOX 2: BUILDING STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

The nature and type of relationships generated and strengthened over time through demonstration of good practice and good work is critical for growth and impact. In the case of the Mexican Red Cross, relationships with both the public and private sector contributed in concrete ways to impact and scaling.

Working with the public sector and civil society provided the Mexican Red Cross teams and communities with additional support and resourcing. In turn, this enabled continuing good practices, which positively impacted communities. For example, community brigades in several communities responded to the 2020 floods in Tabasco and worked with Civil Protection; their response and continued support during the recovery helped reduce impacts and facilitate recovery for their communities.

Working with the private sector provided the Mexican Red Cross teams and communities with additional resources and strategic partnerships that helped to highlight and disseminate their work. For example, in response to the 2020 floods, Zurich Mexico provided additional resources for the distribution of hygiene and health kits to program communities.

STAGE 4: SCALING AND EXPANSION

The scaling and expansion stage focuses on leveraging credibility, successes, and lessons learned to scale community programs, expand beyond traditional foci/practices, and shift institutional and broader systems approaches, culture, beliefs, etc.

Key considerations:

- **Allocate resources.** When scaling up, it is essential to allocate resources strategically. This includes determining the budget for expansion, identifying potential funding sources, and creating a plan for resource distribution.
- **Build capacity.** The skills and knowledge of community members and the implementing organization should be enhanced to maximize effective program implementation. This could include workshops, and mentorship programs.
- **Build partnerships.** Collaboration is key to scaling up. It is important to engage key stakeholders such as community groups, government bodies, and/or other critical stakeholders to secure their long-term support.
- **Evaluate and measure impact.** This stage requires careful evaluation and measurement processes to track impact on the community. It is important to collect and analyze data to assess effectiveness and make needed improvements.
- **Maintain community engagement.** Maintaining community interest and engagement may be challenging. It is important to keep the community informed and involved by regularly communicating with them.
- **Ensure sustainability.** It is important to consider the long-term sustainability of the program during this stage. Teams should develop a long-term plan for ongoing funding, building capacity, and ensuring community involvement.
- **Capture and share knowledge.** Knowledge capture and dissemination is important in this stage. Strategically sharing successes and lessons with diverse stakeholders is critical to the scaling and expansion of good practices.

WHAT STAGE 4 LOOKED LIKE IN MEXICO: EXAMPLES

- At the start of the Alliance work, the Mexican Red Cross had experience in resource management for shorter-term, response-focused programs. The long-term nature of the Alliance program required a shift in fund planning and management, which included an internal administrative reorganization and adjustments in personnel management and roles. This expansion and shift in resource management was, and will be, key as the Mexican Red Cross seeks to expand and scale their programs.
- In 2020 the team conducted a post-event review of the Tabasco floods, which highlighted the need for more nature-based solutions and the integration of green and gray infrastructure to strengthen flood risk management. While nature-based solutions represent a novel area of focus for the Mexican Red Cross, they are also an opportunity for the team to adapt their programming to meet identified needs.

BOX 3: THE IMPACT OF LONG-TERM PROGRAMS

While the activities and building blocks discussed in this case study are key to the growth and evolution of the flood resilience program, they also result in real impact on the ground. Since the implementation of the National Strategy for Resilience, 75 community brigades with at least 10 members each have been registered in the National Risk Atlas as part of the National Strategy for Resilient Communities. Previous research conducted by the Mexican Red Cross on the 2020 floods in Tabasco highlights how one brigade member can support approximately 40 community members during and following a flood. These numbers therefore represent at least 30,000 people who are positively impacted by the National Strategy for Resilient Communities due to the long-term work and effort of the Mexican Red Cross to conceptualize, demonstrate, and then scale their community brigades model.



Signing of a collaboration agreement with the Secretary of Education of the Government of the State of San Luis Potosí. Mexican Red Cross Archive. Flood Resilience Project.

PROGRAM EXPANSION TO URBAN AREAS

In 2021, the Mexican Red Cross expanded their programming to working with the urban population of San Luis Potosí, which has a population of over 800,000. This signified an expansion of the disaster risk management, flood resilience, and climate change knowledge of the Mexican Red Cross. However, it also required them to rethink the way in which they work, including reconsidering how some of the program’s building blocks and foundational elements might look different in an urban context.

The team fostered collaborations with other local government agencies (Ministries of Education, Civil Protection, and Health) with whom the San Luis Potosí branch of the Red Cross was already closely collaborating. These partners will also be key for advocacy and the promotion of program goals as they have critical linkages to community members through outreach and centers that are visited regularly by the public. This collaboration also provides a space for community (and possibly regional) advocacy and sustainability of activities that the community itself can maintain over time.

WHEN WE SAY SUCCESS, WHAT DO WE MEAN?

One of the first activities undertaken by the Mexican Red Cross in its initial Alliance communities was to help establish ‘community brigades’. The brigades grew out of the results of the FRMC baseline study, Vulnerability and Capacity analysis (VCA), and community input: there was a clear need to strengthen social capital in communities where access to aid can be difficult and slow during emergencies. The first step was to educate interested community members on flood prevention and response, first aid, collaboration with key actors, and identification of community resources and capacities. The brigade members then practiced using this knowledge in brigade organized drills. Eventually, brigades in separate communities were linked to encourage knowledge sharing and collaboration. The third step was to link the brigades with key government institutions, NGOs, etc., using these collaborations to provide them with needed information, support, connections, and resources.

Today, there are 22 ‘community brigades’ with 204 active members successfully mobilizing to prepare communities for, and reduce the impacts of flooding.



Presentation of the 2019 National Civil Protection Award to the community brigades of Jonuta. Mexican Red Cross Archive. Flood Resilience Project.

This represents 10 years' worth of effort and coordination, with each step building on the previous one.

This highlights that 'success' doesn't have to be limited to a particular accomplishment or stage — yesterday's 'success' is tomorrow's foundation for the next layer of engagement. And, thinking of success this way has two added advantages:

- First, missteps or unexpected set-backs or failures can be examined and lessons learned to inform the next step, accelerating learning and ultimately building stronger good practices; and
- Second, activities can be fluidly and naturally developed over time, deepening and broadening impact and visibility.

Over time, the brigades have been formally recognized by institutions such as Civil Protection and integrated into national level strategies. Their success underscores that successful, broad impact and action consists of many small steps layered one on top of the other over time.

CONCLUSION

While this Mexican Red Cross case study is ultimately context specific, the model explored is broadly applicable, as are the key considerations regarding what an organization will need to think about and address to move from one stage to the next. Any of the stages

highlighted in this case study can be designed as a strong short-term program. However, given the opportunity to evolve from one stage to the next and build a long-term vision, good practices can be developed, shared, and amplified, and ultimately small-scale solutions can be broadly scaled and expanded.

The strength of this example is in the continued growth, from one phase of the work to the next. This growth isn't easy: it requires rethinking, restructuring, reassessing, reallocating, and retraining for every phase. For the Mexican Red Cross, the final outcome is a program that has been far more impactful than any one of its elements or stages, and an organizational reputation for excellence in an entirely new discipline.

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