



Our
**RESILIENCE
APPROACH**

*to relief, recovery and
development*





A BETTER WORLD IS POSSIBLE

Increasingly frequent and intense shocks and stresses—rooted in complex problems ranging from climate change to urbanization—are threatening the development and growth of vulnerable communities. Mercy Corps believes a better world is possible, where people have the capacity to learn, cope and adapt in the face of recurrent crises and are empowered to transform their communities for good.

Credit: Mercy Corps 2014/T. Seivisa

A RESILIENCE APPROACH

Mercy Corps works in places characterized by fragility and crisis, where the impacts of shocks and stresses threaten people's ability to get ahead. Through shared analysis, learning and action, our Resilience Approach helps communities identify and address underlying vulnerabilities, minimize exposure to risks and strengthen resilience capacities to achieve positive, inclusive change.

Resilience thinking deepens our collective understanding of complex and dynamic systems and the people who rely on them. To help navigate the uncertainty and unpredictability inherent in these systems, we use adaptive management and regularly revisit four key resilience questions:

- › What boundaries and systems shape a community's development?
- › What shocks and stresses threaten their plans for the future?
- › Which groups are most vulnerable to these threats, and why?
- › What capacities will help people cope, adapt and transform their future?

Answering these questions enables our teams and partners to design resilient development strategies that adapt as contexts shift, helping us learn how to empower vulnerable rural and urban communities to achieve their long-term goals.



Photo: Mercy Corps 2007/J. Estey

Our work is building resilience capacity in places like Niger, where communities are redefining their livelihoods in a new era of intense cyclical drought and demographic growth. It is supporting vulnerable households in northern Uganda navigate dramatic social and economic shifts, emerging better equipped to provide for their families. In Nepal's Far West region, it is helping disaster-prone communities develop economic opportunities that reduce their risk exposure. And, it is supporting local governments and businesses in cities like Semarang, Indonesia to analyze risks and develop strategies that protect infrastructure and assets against the impacts of climate change.



MERCY CORPS RESILIENCE FRAMEWORK

By using resilience to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic places in which we work, we can secure and enhance the impacts of our relief, recovery and development practices well into the future. This section describes the key components of our resilience approach and the processes we use to operationalize resilience: the four guiding questions, Strategic Resilience Assessments (STRESS), theories of change, adaptive management, resilience measurement and evidence-based learning.



FOUR GUIDING QUESTIONS Framing Resilience in Context

In fragile contexts, resilience is critical to ensuring progress toward humanitarian and development goals—ranging from keeping families safe and protected to improving incomes and health outcomes. Four guiding questions frame our analysis, helping us understand how shocks and stresses threaten desired outcomes.

These questions include:

- › Resilience of What?
- › Resilience of Whom?
- › Resilience to What?
- › Resilience Through What?

Ultimately, a well-defined, context-specific relief, recovery or development goal sets the boundaries for our resilience analysis, and serves as the foundation for a resilience theory of change.





QUESTION 1

RESILIENCE OF WHAT?

Understanding System Dynamics: What needs to become more resilient?

This question helps us understand the context and boundaries of our work. It refers to both the geographical area we are targeting and the elements of social, economic and ecological systems within that area that relate to resilience. These interconnected systems influence development progress and resilience capacities.

We define them as follows:

- › **Social and Political Systems:** The relationships, norms, values and rules that govern behavior among people, households, communities and institutions, as well as the social services (e.g., health, education) these groups provide.
- › **Ecological Systems:** The natural resource and ecosystem services, including climatic functions, which support the major livelihood strategies and living conditions in the target area.
- › **Economic Systems:** The systems governing production and consumption of goods and services in the target area.



QUESTION 2

RESILIENCE FOR WHOM?

Developing Vulnerability Profiles: Whose resilience capacity needs to be enhanced? How are different people vulnerable to different shocks and stresses, and why?

Vulnerability varies across given areas and social groups. The inequitable distribution of rights, resources and power may make certain individuals, households, communities or groups more sensitive to the impacts of shocks and stresses and less able to access the strategies required to deal with these impacts effectively. By investigating the geographic and social factors driving vulnerability—such as gender, race, ethnicity, cultural practices and age—we can better understand the kinds of threats different groups face, informing which populations we target for future interventions, and how.



QUESTION 3

RESILIENCE TO WHAT?

Mapping Shocks and Stresses: To what types of shocks and stresses should individuals, households, communities and systems be resilient?

This question allows us to prioritize a set of shocks, stresses and underlying systemic constraints threatening the target population and describe how they relate to each other. Shocks are discrete, rapid-onset events that tend to be relatively short-term and easy to identify. Stresses are conditions or pressures that grow more slowly, eroding development progress over time. Stresses should not be confused with broader systemic constraints (e.g., poverty, weak governance, thin markets, gender inequality) that also inhibit people's well-being, but are a more permanent feature of the development context.

Communities often manage several shocks and/or stresses simultaneously. Some are localized, affecting one or a few households (e.g., death of a breadwinner, disease outbreak). Others occur on larger scales and can affect a whole region (e.g., drought, collapse of oil prices). Gaining a greater contextual understanding of the trends surrounding shocks and stresses—including their frequency, severity and impact across systems and at multiple geographic and temporal scales—helps us prioritize actions.



QUESTION 4

RESILIENCE THROUGH WHAT?

Identifying Resilience Capacities: What resources and strategies do people need to maintain progress even when facing shocks and stresses?

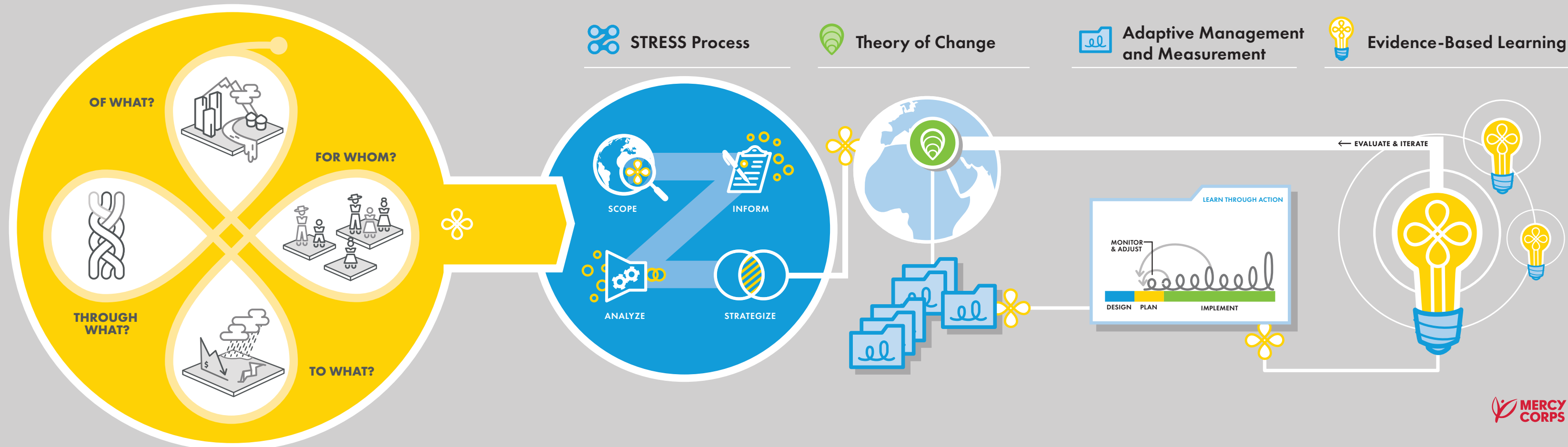
Resilience capacities can serve absorptive, adaptive and/or transformative functions. We envision capacities as strands of rope, made stronger when woven together. These capacities equip individuals, households, communities and systems to prepare for and manage risk over time, increasing the likelihood of achieving relief, recovery and development objectives.

We define these three capacity areas as follows:

- › Absorptive: The ability to minimize sensitivity to shocks and stresses.
- › Adaptive: The ability to modify conditions and practices proactively in anticipation of or as a reaction to shocks and stresses.
- › Transformative: The capacity that enables communities to absorb and adapt over the long-term by addressing the underlying cultural, institutional and learning dynamics within a system.

The way a capacity is used in relation to a shock or stress determines whether it is absorptive, adaptive and/or transformative.

RESILIENCE FRAMEWORK



STRESS Process

Theory of Change

Adaptive Management and Measurement

Evidence-Based Learning



Guiding Questions

Four guiding questions help identify vulnerabilities and capacities that inform resilience strategies:

- › Resilience of What?
- › Resilience for Whom?
- › Resilience to What?
- › Resilience Through What?



Three Capacities

Resilience requires absorptive and adaptive capacities, supported by the ability to transform underlying cultural, institutional and learning dynamics within systems. Capacities are linked and can serve multiple functions in a context.



STRESS Process

Framed by the four guiding questions, the Strategic Resilience Assessment (STRESS) is a systems-based approach for collecting and analyzing data across sectors and at multiple scales (e.g., local, regional), leading to the development of a theory of change.



Theory of Change

A theory of change articulates a long-term vision for the key factors required for building resilience in a particular context. It outlines a measurable path, which serves as the basis for program design and can be tested through program portfolios and interventions.



Adaptive Management

Adaptive management practices guide all resilience programs, fostering a culture where measurement and learning help us rethink theories of change and inform strategic program adjustments. To create deeper and wider impacts, we continually monitor and adjust our strategies as contexts shift.



Evidence-Based Learning

Testing, measuring and sharing what works on the ground is critical to building resilience. Our evidence-based learning helps us work differently, ensuring programs, policies and investments strengthen resilience.





THE STRESS PROCESS

Mercy Corps operationalizes resilience thinking through our Strategic Resilience Assessment (STRESS), a process that supports long-term strategy development.

Framed by the four resilience questions, STRESS specifically helps us: 1) identify, understand and prioritize shocks and stresses that could undermine development outcomes, including differences in impact among populations or geographies; and 2) understand the ability of or opportunities for people, households, communities and systems to absorb, adapt and transform in the face of these disturbances. These exercises serve as the foundation for developing a measurable theory of change (the final output of STRESS) that clearly articulates how programs build resilience in support of humanitarian and development goals.

Because we believe strongly that practice is the best way to understand complexity, we designed STRESS as a capacity-building process, helping practitioners and our stakeholders become: proactive—by establishing an evidence-based, “good enough” contextual understanding; and adaptive—by developing resilience strategies that can be tested, measured and enhanced over time. After completing a STRESS, teams have a set of resources that can be used continuously to improve and adapt their program portfolios during design, implementation and beyond.



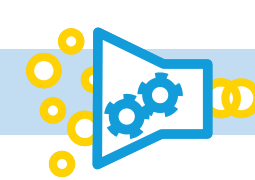
1. SCOPE

The Scope Phase aims to deepen our contextual understanding by answering the four guiding questions. Teams define the rationale and scale of their process, then set the key research questions, define research methods and develop a management plan for the following phases.



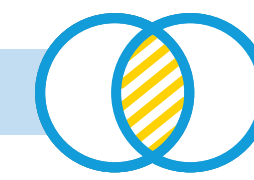
2. INFORM

Using a mixed-methods approach and relying heavily on existing information, the Inform Phase aims to collect sufficient quantitative and qualitative information from different scales and perspectives to answer the key questions determined in the Scope Phase.



3. ANALYZE

Teams then analyze information and data collected during the Inform Phase to answer the key research questions defined in the Scope Phase. While the Inform and Analyze Phases are presented here as distinct, they function in practice as iterative cycles of information collection and analysis.



4. STRATEGIZE

The Strategize Phase aims to use the identified list of resilience capacities to develop a measurable and context-specific theory of change for resilience, which will serve as the foundation for long-term, country-level strategies, on which program designs and measurement plans are based.



THEORIES OF CHANGE

Mercy Corps uses the STRESS process to develop a theory of change for achieving resilient development goals. A theory of change is a written or illustrated vision for our development, relief or recovery work. It includes the specific resilience capacities vulnerable communities and systems must build, enhance or maintain to achieve development outcomes in the face of identified shocks and stresses. In collaboration with diverse partners, we use these theories of change to: 1) frame future interventions, and 2) gauge our progress toward desired outcomes through continuous monitoring, evaluation and adaptation.

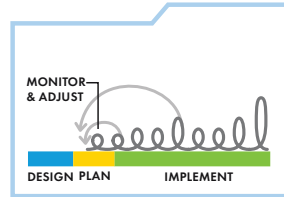
We realize this vision by intentionally layering and integrating programs, sequencing capacities where necessary and understanding communities will have different starting points. By learning and building an evidence base over time, we develop strategic regional approaches that can maximize our impact.



ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

For Mercy Corps, adaptive management practices go hand-in-hand with resilience. What we learn throughout design, planning and implementation helps us adapt programs in real time, enabling us to strengthen our connections to communities and each other. Because our teams need time for analysis, reflection and learning to deliver results, our aim is to gain a “good enough” understanding of the context—then advance quickly to implementation where we monitor, adapt and refine our approach. Ultimately, adaptive management empowers our teams to acknowledge uncertainty and unpredictability, seek opportunities to experiment, and adapt and scale approaches in response to rapid feedback loops, changing circumstances and new information.

LEARNING THROUGH
ACTION AND REFLECTION



RESILIENCE MEASUREMENT

Mercy Corps, with support from our partners, has invested considerably in developing our resilience measurement approach. Through multiple applications, we have tested major assumptions regarding which capacities and interventions contribute most to household or community resilience to a given set of shocks or stresses.

Resilience measurement:

- › Is required at the individual, household, community and system levels to understand the dynamics of and interactions between factors influencing or supporting resilience at these different scales.
- › Goes beyond measuring development outcomes—we must understand how shocks and stresses affect household well-being, which resilience capacities can ensure a faster and fuller recovery, and what interventions best support this recovery.
- › Is most effective in the context of a shock or major stress, incorporating data on the duration and magnitude of impacts, as well as household response, recovery and well-being before, during and after the event. This requires timely, frequent and targeted analysis that does not conform to conventional monitoring and evaluation systems.



EVIDENCE-BASED LEARNING

Knowledge accelerates our progress toward building inclusive, capacity-rich communities where all people have opportunities for growth. Integrating scientific and local knowledge, and testing, measuring and sharing what works on the ground are critical to building resilience. Our evidence base is helping us determine how we need to work differently, enabling us to influence key policy and program decision-makers.

STRATEGIC RESILIENCE HUBS

Catalyzing Strategic Local Learning to Yield Global Understanding

Mercy Corps has operated Regional Resilience Hubs—in South and East Asia; Central, West and North Africa; and East and Southern Africa—since early 2013. These Resilience Hubs deliver program results and measurable impact within their regions, while driving a wider community of practice focused on scaling global best practices and testing new solutions. Our teams regularly push the boundaries of current resilience programming, from building market-based incentives for strengthening community resilience to implementing resilience strategies in the midst of a humanitarian crisis. The Regional Resilience Hubs enable us to be specific about what builds resilience in context, while drawing larger lessons from our research and learning about the policies and practices that lead to transformational change.

The stories that follow illustrate Mercy Corps Regional Resilience Hubs' impact, innovation and influence in action.

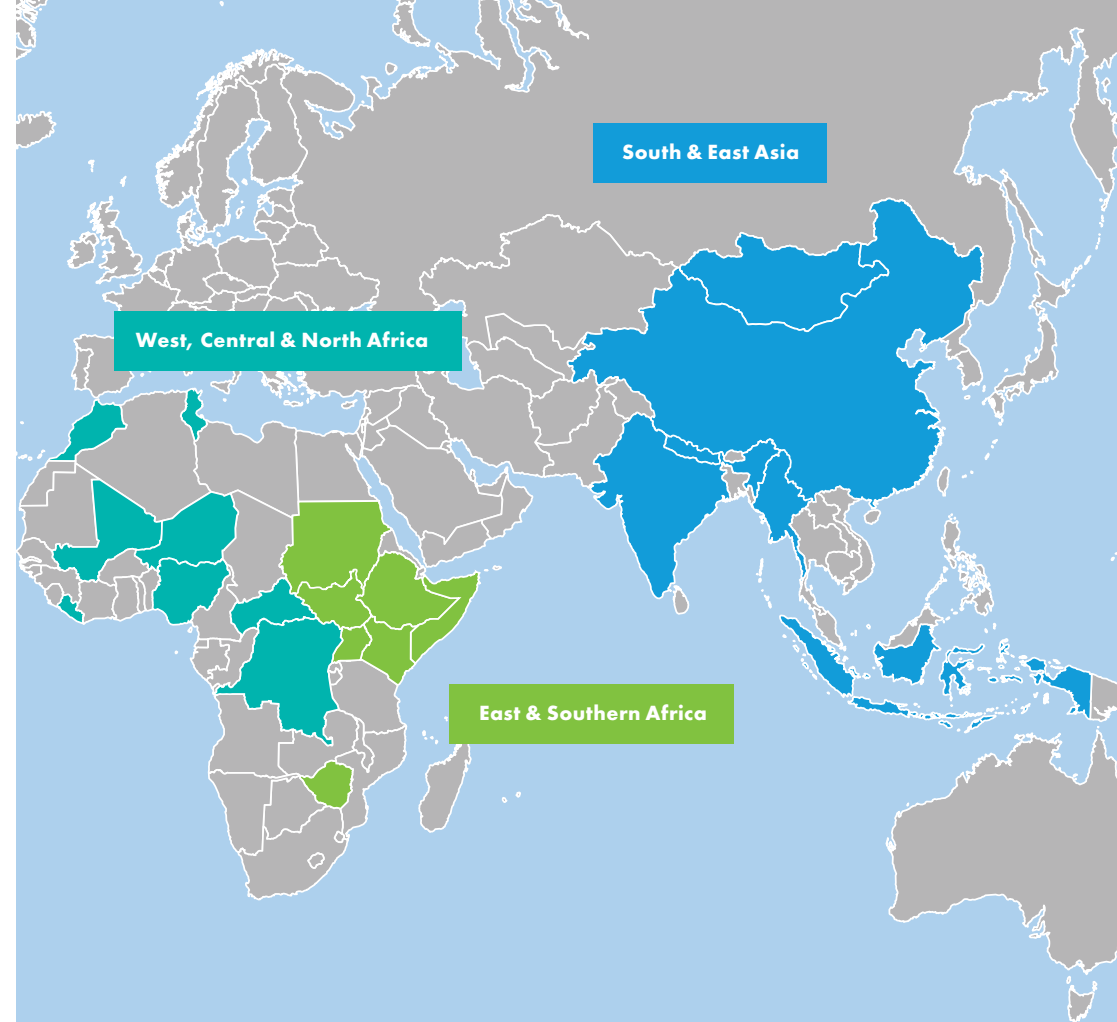




Photo : Mercy Corps 2016/5, Shendan

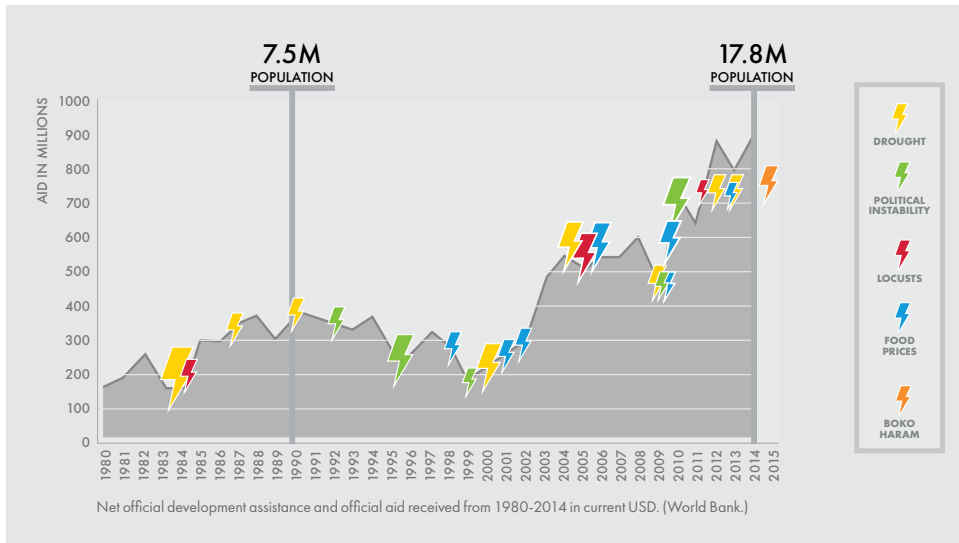
WEST, CENTRAL & NORTH AFRICA: NIGER

In 2011, the Nigerien government and international development community issued an urgent call for aid in response to a set of complex factors—poor rains and drought, a flood of refugees from conflicts in Mali and a spike in food prices—threatening to plunge the country into its fourth major food security crisis in 12 years. While the influx of support prevented the country from reaching the worst famine levels of 2005, the episode highlighted Niger’s chronic food insecurity and aid dependency cycles. Despite receiving billions of dollars in international aid over the last 40 years, Nigerien communities often only begin to recover before facing yet another devastating shock. As a result, even modest seasonal spikes in cereal prices are too much for households already struggling to cope.

Understanding the critical role of resilience in empowering communities to break these vicious cycles, Mercy Corps used STRESS to inform a new country-level strategy for achieving food security. STRESS deepened our understanding of the root causes of food insecurity, who is most vulnerable and the capacities Nigeriens need to ensure they can catch up and get ahead, even when confronted with multiple shocks in the same year. Of the many feedback loops uncovered through the process, STRESS unlocked deeper insights into the link between

ecological stresses and early marriage among girls, reinforcing our understanding that development interventions cannot be designed in isolation.

Early analysis suggested that climate change and poor agricultural practices, coupled with unprecedented demographic growth and a transition to sedentary farming, are contributing to a loss of viable agricultural lands and an escalation of local conflict over increasingly scarce resources. These



A HISTORY OF REPEATED SHOCKS

impacts are dramatically reducing household food production and income, requiring families to purchase more food than they produce—especially during the hottest season when market shocks are most pronounced. STRESS revealed that in these dire financial circumstances, vulnerable households often experience pressure to marry off girls at younger ages, reducing the number of family members they must feed.

In using early marriage as a way to cope, families are compounding overall vulnerability and food insecurity. In Niger, 36% of girls are married before age 15 and 75% by age 18. Young girls often become pregnant within the first year after marriage, with birth cycles averaging every 24 months after. Giving birth young can have devastating health impacts on girls and their children, reducing their long-term health and labor productivity, and reinforcing poverty cycles. In Niger, children share land

inheritance, requiring families to parcel land into smaller and smaller tracts as the population rises. With a fertility rate of 7.6 children, the world's highest growth rate at 3.9%, and a burgeoning youth population (7 in 10 Nigeriens are under the age of 25), demand for social services, cultivable land, grazing pastures and groundwater resources now outpaces supply.

Tracing the impacts of ecological stresses through economic and social systems to determine a direct link with early marriage allowed Mercy Corps and our partners to understand that ending cycles of malnutrition, especially among girls and women, is closely tied with reducing families' vulnerability to the impacts of climate change. A resilience approach, which considers the complex and interconnected set of impacts driving this feedback loop, is informing our food security



Photo: Mercy Corps 2016/ S. Sheridan

programming in Niger. These findings have also expanded our focus on gender-related policy, leading us to collaborate with a diverse set of



Photo: Mercy Corps 2014/S. Sheridan

stakeholders and the Ministry of Population, Women's Promotion and Child Protection to ensure the marrying age for girls is raised from 15-years-old to match boys' legal age of 18.

This is a pivotal moment for Niger, when large-scale demographic and livelihood transitions, more severe and frequent shocks, and regional conflict in Mali, Nigeria and Libya are conspiring to keep Nigeriens poor, hungry and indebted. Mercy Corps is rallying Nigerian stakeholders around a resilient development strategy that unlocks the capacities communities need to transform in the face of these challenges, stepping out of food insecurity for good.



Photo: Mercy Corps 2014/M. Samper

SOUTH & EAST ASIA: NEPAL

Mercy Corps' investment in resilience measurement through our multi-country program, Managing Risks through Economic Development (M-RED), is deepening our understanding of how to test and measure resilience outcomes, allowing us to manage the program more adaptively and incorporate our learning.

In the Far West districts of Nepal, climate change is intensifying annual monsoon flooding, landslides, drought and soil degradation, compounding food insecurity and poverty among marginalized communities. M-RED innovatively integrates disaster risk reduction and market systems development strategies through “nexus” interventions that build economic security and increase incomes, while reducing vulnerability to natural disasters.

M-RED measured resilience by testing whether households who benefited from risk-mitigating interventions had less disaster loss (i.e., loss of land, agricultural inputs, property or assets) than comparison groups. It also measured whether beneficiaries strengthened key resilience capacities, such as building natural structures that prevented landslides and strengthening disaster-risk management committees. An impact evaluation showed that after three years, disaster losses among target communities were

reduced by 75% relative to comparison groups. M-RED beneficiaries were also twice to 3.5 times as likely to protect their fields with structural measures or use improved agricultural practices that mitigated disasters.

The assessment highlighted opportunities to refine our measurement methodology and program approaches. For example, the implementation period coincided with an El Niño year, replacing flooding with drought. In response, we pivoted the program to incorporate a wider range of interventions that can protect communities from multiple threats. The team has also introduced a system of post-shock monitoring, collecting data throughout programming to assess how households are responding as disasters occur. These critical lessons are resonating globally, shaping our resilience measurement and adaptive management practices throughout the agency.



Photo : Mercy Corps 2014/S. Gurung

EAST AND SOUTHERN AFRICA: UGANDA

In Karamoja, pastoral livelihoods have traditionally allowed the Karamojong to adapt to the region's unpredictable rains and long dry seasons. However, significant changes in the last three decades—including a 70% loss in livestock and government policies favoring agriculture—have threatened pastoralist livelihoods, social structures and identity. To cope, many Karamojong are relying increasingly on unsustainable natural resource extraction, urban migration and farming.

With 80% of the population below the poverty line, and nearly three in four people under the age of 25, a diversifying economy and sustained peace could provide Karamoja with vital opportunities to develop and grow. However, its path is threatened by shocks and stresses, from irregular rainfall to increased gender-based violence and alcoholism.

Through STRESS, Mercy Corps and our partners identified the most vulnerable groups in Karamoja, and the resilience capacities they need to manage shocks and stresses. A close look at gender dynamics revealed that a shift toward agriculture has increased women and girls' workloads, without expanding their decision-making power or control of resources.

With primary responsibility for crop production, women and girls are most vulnerable to impacts of erratic rainfall, dry spells and crop pests. Land degradation and water scarcity also impact them first—and most acutely. Our analysis identified the need for expanded access to improved seed varieties, agronomic practices and livestock health services. These services would enable families to diversify their livelihoods and balance labor demands more equally, buffering households against the impact of shocks.

Employing strategies like these will help ensure Karamoja is empowered and resilient in the face of uncertainty and the disturbances threatening its progress.



Photo : Mercy Corps 2008/C. Nelson

SOUTH & EAST ASIA: INDONESIA

Population growth is soaring in Indonesia's coastal cities where social services and infrastructure cannot keep pace with demand. From groundwater extraction causing cities to sink below sea level to unchecked coastal development threatening the marine ecosystems that keep people safe from rising seas, many forces at the intersection of urbanization and climate change are intensifying vulnerability.

As the implementing partner for the Rockefeller-funded Asian Cities Climate Change Resilience Network (ACCCRN), Mercy Corps is building and scaling urban climate change resilience (UCCR) through an innovative, governance-based approach. Our team of Indonesian governance experts worked with local allies to build robust, inclusive City Teams who focused not just on climate change, but on the planning, budgeting and development functions that impact long-term decision-making around UCCR. By breaking down silos between government, civil society and private sectors, City Teams collaborated to design scalable interventions in the pilot cities of Bandar Lampung and Semarang.

Mayors and representatives from both cities were soon sharing success stories with their peers through regional networks. Among these achievements was Bandar Lampung's Mayoral

Regulation No 62, which resulted in the installation of one million biopores, helping conserve water and reduce flood risks for 902,000 people. Semarang's City Team had success integrating rainwater harvesting strategies into the local government's mid-term development plan, providing at least 23,000 people with access to clean water. The city also created an online Health Early Warning and Information System, which alerts its 1.7 million residents if dengue fever cases are reported.

To date, 14 new cities have signed on for the expansion phase, promising their own funds to seed proven interventions. Indonesian municipalities have invested \$10.2 million—160% of the original ACCCRN budget—on local UCCR efforts, directly impacting citizens in 13 provinces throughout the country.

Mercy Corps defines resilience as the capacity of communities in complex socio-ecological systems to learn, cope, adapt and transform in the face of shocks and stresses.



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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action—helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within.

Now, and for the future.



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Photo: Mercy Corps 2014/S. Sheridan