

# MERCY CORPS' STRATEGIC RESILIENCE ASSESSMENT

## A Practical Approach to Applying Resilience Thinking

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### Why STRESS?

Mercy Corps developed the Strategic Resilience Assessment (STRESS) methodology to help practitioners use resilience thinking to prevent instability from derailing communities' progress toward humanitarian and development objectives. STRESS provides new ways of:

- › Analyzing each unique context to understand how complex, interconnected drivers of instability threaten progress; how these drivers impact groups differently; and what specific resilience abilities and resources these groups need to learn, cope, adapt and transform in the face of growing risk.
- › Designing a contextualized resilience theory of change based on this analysis, which allows teams to create more robust strategies and targeted interventions that support communities in achieving long-term well-being outcomes and transformational change.

The STRESS process also improves the way teams work together, helping them become collectively more: **proactive**—by developing an evidence-based understanding of each context; **connected**—by restructuring roles and processes to address the interconnections between instability and vulnerability; and **adaptive**—by leveraging the resilience framework to test, measure and enhance their work over time.

### When Do We Conduct a STRESS?

While STRESS is a foundational process for integrating resilience thinking into practitioners' work, it is not appropriate in all circumstances. Mercy Corps has used STRESS effectively to: 1) develop a new country or subnational strategy;



Mercy Corps: Sean Sheridan

### › WHAT IS STRESS?

*STRESS is a methodology that helps teams apply resilience thinking in distinct humanitarian or development contexts. Deepening understanding of risk and the systems communities rely on allows practitioners to adjust what they do and how they do it—helping maintain progress toward well-being outcomes even in the face of increasing instability and fragility.*

[Learn more about Mercy Corps STRESS process.](#)

2) design large, multi-year programs that value resilience; and 3) inform an inception phase or complex program start-up. STRESS should not be used to develop a general strategy or theory of change, conduct community-scale action planning, design short-term projects, research specific questions or replace sector-specific tools.

## What Are We Learning?

Understanding the root causes of risk and fragility—and how they are connected—helps practitioners see and do their work differently. Mercy Corps has an ambitious plan for demonstrating the return on resilience investments. While the work is still new and resilience takes time, STRESS is already yielding important insights that are shaping policy and practice in the field. Recent examples include:

- › In Karamoja, STRESS helped us identify the tension between a new set of development policies that encourage agricultural market development and a pressing need to limit increasing expansion on marginal lands. Our analysis revealed unique vulnerabilities for young women and young men, resulting from shifts in livelihoods and land-use patterns. These findings are fundamentally altering the Uganda teams' strategies around land use, livelihoods and gender, leading to expanded coordination with donors and peer organizations across Karamoja.
- › In Nepal, the process revealed a need to refocus programming on the transformative capacities that support communities' long-term ability to absorb and adapt to shocks and stresses. The team is using these findings to include less tangible (but often foundational) outcomes relating to governance systems, gender equity and social capital as a starting point for programming.
- › In Niger, the process uncovered an opportunity to proactively address the looming water scarcity challenge in an already resource-stressed environment. The team is now complementing its work on water point (e.g., wells) rehabilitation and on-farm water management through efforts to inform and build the technical capacity of national water management institutions to use satellite-based earth observation technology.
- › In Myanmar, STRESS helped identify a need to more effectively measure the use of capacities in response to shocks and stresses, leading the team to develop an innovative monitoring system. Immediately following shocks and stresses, the team now deploys members to determine exactly how and when communities use the resilience capacities. This new monitoring system is transforming the team's ability to hone the capacities, strategies and programming critical to building resilience and achieving development goals.

In an era of rapid change and increasing complexity, we must invest strategically to achieve long-term change. Mercy Corps believes resilience is critical to this work. In helping us apply resilience thinking, STRESS is transforming the scale, effectiveness and impact of our humanitarian and development strategies, getting to the roots of the interconnected challenges driving fragility and reshaping the way our teams learn and work together.

Learn more about the STRESS guidelines at [mercycorps.org/resilience](https://mercycorps.org/resilience).

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