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RISK AND RESILIENCE ASSESSMENT CASE STUDY SERIES:
NORTHEAST NIGERIA

THE NEXT FRONTIER—
PRIMING RESILIENCE IN A
PROTRACTED CRISIS

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A CLOSER LOOK AT RISK AND RESILIENCE ASSESSMENTS

With generous support through the USAID-funded Resilience Evaluation, Analysis and Learning (REAL) Award, this case study series is taking a closer look at risk and resilience assessments—any process aimed at deepening understanding of risk, resilience and system dynamics within a given context—to reflect on where and how these processes have positively impacted strategy and programs.

A series of cases, representing very different applications, explore central questions for practitioners interested in conducting a risk and resilience assessment:

- Under what conditions are risk and resilience assessments most effective and why?
- What assessment components yield the most impactful findings and capacity strengthening opportunities?
- How can we ensure teams are able to apply findings after the assessment?

Each case explores the unique context in which Mercy Corps conducted their risk and resilience assessment. We end with lessons learned and recommendations for humanitarian and development practitioners who are considering conducting a similar assessment.

Conflict broke out in the northeast Nigerian state of Borno in 2011, leaving long-lasting impacts on human health and well-being, infrastructural destruction, environmental degradation, economic disruption and governance challenges in its wake. Right now, more than half the population needs humanitarian assistance, nearly a quarter are food insecure, and tens of thousands have been killed over the past ten years.¹ Even if the conflict comes to an end, unresolved questions remain about the return of those displaced—roughly two million people²—and the reintegration of ex-combatants. And a range of factors predate and exacerbate this conflict: Borno state is characterized by significant inequality and marginalization, including high recruitment rates of boys who are vulnerable to enlistment into the Almajiri system.³ Despite recent improvements in humanitarian access, the scale of this protracted crisis is overwhelming, and instability will likely remain into the foreseeable future.

In light of these immediate life-saving needs and long-term development challenges, it is crucial to invest in programming that reduces risks and strengthens the resilience capacities that can successfully manage adversity in northeast Nigeria. To understand what shapes resilience in this challenging context, Mercy Corps embarked on a Strategic Resilience Assessment (STRESS) in Borno.⁴ STRESS assessments aim to deepen understanding of risk, resilience and system dynamics within a given context. The Borno assessment was groundbreaking as the first STRESS application in a protracted crisis. It raised many questions for the Mercy Corps team: is STRESS feasible in a protracted crisis? Does it offer the same value as when conducted in more stable places? What exactly is different about working in this context? How do we need to adapt our approach? Mercy Corps carefully documented the STRESS process in Borno to answer these questions, learn from the experience, and take these lessons forward to STRESS processes and resilience-strengthening efforts in other protracted crises.

¹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/north-east-nigeria-borno-adamawa-and-yobe-states-humanitarian-dashboard-june-2019> - looking for Borno-specific data.

² <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/nigeria-emergency.html>

³ System of Islamic education practiced in northern Nigeria.

⁴ Mercy Corps (2018). Northeast Nigeria, Borno State Strategic Resilience Assessment Report. <https://www.mercycorps.org/research/borno-strategic-resilience-assessment> (accessed March 1, 2019)

INTRODUCTION

Mercy Corps conducted a Strategic Resilience Assessment (STRESS) in Borno State, Northeast Nigeria from May 2017–July 2018.⁵ The STRESS⁶ is a risk and resilience assessment methodology and participatory learning process that aims to understand the system dynamics, vulnerable groups, shocks and stresses, and key resilience capacities within a particular place. This assessment then guides the operational vision for strengthening resilience through programming, partnerships and policies.

This case study is part of a learning series under the Resilience Evaluation, Analysis and Learning (REAL) partnership with USAID's Center for Resilience that reviews risk and resilience assessments⁷ conducted in fragile and conflict-affected contexts (FCAS). Each case explores the unique context in which Mercy Corps conducted their risk and resilience assessment and concludes with lessons learned and recommendations for practitioners who are considering a similar assessment. This case study specifically identifies the operational challenges and solutions to applying a risk and resilience assessment amidst protracted crisis.

The STRESS team encountered a wide-ranging set of challenges when implementing the STRESS process in a conflict-driven protracted crisis for the first time. In particular, the STRESS team struggled with organizational dynamics around: (1) pitching the utility of resilience in the midst of a humanitarian crisis, (2) addressing capacity-building challenges from turnover and operational constraints, and (3) translating resilience terminology to make sense in a protracted crisis. When it came to navigating the operational environment, the STRESS team faced challenges around (4) centralized systems that could not keep pace with a fast-moving environment, (5) access to field sites, and (6) data quality. Finally, the team confronted new realities when it came to (7) survey fatigue and participants' short-term priorities, and (8) the potential for unmet expectations and reduced impact amidst complex and fast-changing dynamics. Some of these challenges are common for assessments and interventions set in a protracted crisis (e.g., turnover, site access, and the need for flexibility) and others are unique to resilience and the STRESS process (e.g., pitching the importance of resilience and translating resilience terminology to the context).

The STRESS team came up with a range of creative and adaptive solutions to meet these challenges. To pitch the importance of resilience in a humanitarian context, the team sought consistent messaging from senior leadership while also building buy-in at the working level on the value of a resilience approach. To address capacity-building challenges, the team adopted a flexible staff engagement model grounded in informal learning and sharing opportunities. To translate resilience terminology for a protracted crisis, the team kept an open mind and gained new insights from participatory approaches. The team also relied on their social capital and adaptive management skills to navigate rigid and centralized organizational systems. They hired diverse facilitators, sought diverse key informants, and practiced conflict sensitivity to compensate for their restricted site access. To manage weak data quality, the STRESS team pursued a range of innovative ideas: they identified and collaborated with new stakeholders that had access to important data, held roundtables to generate and validate data, and otherwise triangulated their findings across many sources. Finally, the team confronted new realities and limitations when it came to survey fatigue and participants' short-term priorities, as well as the potential for unmet expectations and reduced impact amidst complex and fast-changing dynamics. The team found that better coordination as well as empowerment through participatory approaches can strive to mitigate these realities.

5 Borno Strategic Resilience Assessment, <https://www.mercycorps.org/research/borno-strategic-resilience-assessment>

6 Mercy Corps Strategic Resilience Assessment, STRESS: <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/resilience/strategic-resilience-assessment>

7 Rex, E. et al (2018). *Assessing Risk and Resilience: Reflections on the Use and Impacts of Risk and Resilience Assessments*. Produced by Mercy Corps as part of the Resilience Evaluation, Analysis and Learning (REAL) Associate Award. <https://www.fsnnetwork.org/risk-and-resilience-assessment-case-study-series>

The STRESS team also identified three key practices that can help link STRESS findings with current and future programming and organizational approaches: creating a regular practice of resilience-focused reflection sessions, planning for customized and staff-driven capacity-building, and supporting a highly involved, hands-on approach to field engagement that strengthens resilience vocabulary, awareness and expertise over time.

WHY CONDUCT A RISK AND RESILIENCE ASSESSMENT IN A PROTRACTED CRISIS?

Aid investments and gains can be undermined by recurrent short-term shock events and longer-term stresses, compromising the immediate and sustained well-being of people. The value of resilience-strengthening efforts for managing these shocks and stresses and promoting well-being is now well known.⁸ But within protracted crises, these shocks and stresses are even more dynamic, complex and often sustained over many years or even generations. Protracted crises call into question the artificial siloing of humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development assistance. After all, the problems facing people in the midst of a protracted crisis have no sectoral boundaries; all kinds of assistance are needed to strengthen the capacities that can help people manage adversity in these challenging contexts. A multi-sectoral and systems-driven resilience approach is all the more important in protracted crises and crucial for sustaining impact across kinds of assistance.

And yet, there has been limited resilience investments in protracted crises and specifically on how to integrate humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding assistance in these contexts. This gap has led Mercy Corps to ask, “What does resilience look like in protracted crises?” We are trying to understand how and why people positively and negatively cope and adapt to shocks and stresses within protracted crises, what systemic factors drive risks, what role conflict plays in influencing shocks, stresses, and capacities, and what is needed to transform these negative dynamics so that positive impact can be sustained over time.

“A lot of the work that we do up here is difficult, because of the context, the operating environment, we’re seeing things on a daily basis that are difficult, what STRESS has done now...and the inputs from everybody...has pointed us in another direction which we were not thinking.”

- STRESS workshop participant



⁸ USAID Evidence Forum report https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1867/0717118_Resilience.pdf

Conducting a risk and resilience assessment in a protracted crisis is a crucial first step towards answering this question. Risk and resilience assessments analyze the system dynamics, vulnerable groups, shocks and stresses, and key resilience capacities that will then guide the operational vision for strengthening resilience. They also provide practitioners and donors with a common language for thinking about, approaching and implementing across kinds of assistance.⁹ But before these findings can be applied to resilience-strengthening efforts, we need to understand the operational challenges to applying STRESS in the first place during a protracted crisis.

THE ASSESSMENT AND ADAPTING TO THE HUMANITARIAN CONTEXT

This case study is framed around the following research questions, answered through a series of field visits and commingled adaptive management and evaluation activities:

- 1. What is the feasibility and utility of applying a risk and resilience assessment **within a protracted crisis?****
- 2. How did we have to adapt the risk and resilience assessment, and our practices, given the protracted crisis context?**
- 3. What impact has the resilience assessment had on translating learning into action within our humanitarian, early recovery and development programs, **as a result of STRESS?****
- 4. What have we learned and can recommend for similar assessments in humanitarian contexts?**

Data for the northeast Nigeria STRESS case study was collected through a variety of methods over the course of the STRESS process. Methods included participant observation, individual interviews and focus group discussions with Mercy Corps staff and partners, and surveys and participatory activities during STRESS workshops with Mercy Corps Nigeria core team members, to glean changes in attitudes, understanding, and knowledge of resilience concepts and applications. Data collected for this case study also informed adaptive management of the STRESS process.

There are several key takeaways for how the team adapted the STRESS process that cut across the key challenges and solutions described in this case study. These takeaways draw from the STRESS process in northeast Nigeria but are likely relevant to many other fragile and conflict-affected settings.

- The sampling strategy in a protracted crisis is likely based on **snowball sampling and other adaptive approaches**. In light of the diversity of communities in a protracted crisis, they might also require more breadth and less depth across sites.
- The availability, reliability and quality of secondary data in a protracted crisis is likely much weaker, and will require both **resourcefulness and a willingness to move forward with “good enough” data**. Examples include qualitative methods such as Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIs), and hosting events that generate and validate data.
- The timeframe for the STRESS process in a protracted crisis may require a **longer time horizon and flexibility** in light of site access challenges, the need for exploratory data collection approaches and internal challenges such as gaining buy-in and capacity-strengthening.
- More funding might be needed to address **security constraints, longer timelines, and other costs to adapting to challenging conditions**.

⁹ New Way of Working Initiative. The World Humanitarian Summit. <https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/initiatives/5358> (accessed March 8, 2019).

- Access to field sites might be heavily restricted, requiring **flexibility with the STRESS timeline and creativity with data collection approaches**.
- Team capacity-strengthening is especially important in a protracted crisis in light of **staff turnover and the high demands on frontline staff**.
- Participatory learning assessment tools are **very important amidst a protracted crisis, where participants are especially vulnerable and other forms of data are limited**. Participatory methods can help empower those most affected by conflict and crisis.
- Conceptual challenges might crop up in a conflict-affected protracted crisis and humanitarian setting, where **many diverse actors and approaches are all operating in the same space**. System-thinking and resilience concepts might be especially foreign to humanitarians, while conflict and peacebuilding vocabulary might not quite line up with resilience vocabulary.

SETTING THE SCOPE AND CONVENING THE STRESS TEAM

In early 2017 the conflict in Borno State approached its eighth year and Mercy Corps' humanitarian portfolio continued to expand in response to what was belatedly recognized as an unprecedented regional humanitarian crisis.¹⁰ With this expansion, leadership recognized that Mercy Corps' future vision for northeast Nigeria required strategic reflection. While the idea of applying STRESS in a protracted crisis met few initial internal hurdles, finding the appropriate time, funding source and approach proved more difficult. The two former issues were resolved with an opportunity to embed the STRESS within flexible grants. The latter issue—how would STRESS look different here?—lies at the heart of this case study.

A dedicated three-person team embedded in Mercy Corps' main office in Maiduguri led the STRESS, with support by technical staff from the region and headquarters. The Borno-based team included one Borno native, one Abuja native, and one ex-patriate staff, who were respectively responsible for research coordination, logistics and overall STRESS program management. Their placement in Maiduguri enabled them to have regular engagement with Mercy Corps field staff and leadership, local civil society organizations who led the data collection and entry, better ensuring on-the-ground understanding and adaptability of the process and methods, ultimately improving the quality of the data collection process, results, analysis and presentation of results to field teams in interactive workshops.

Illustrative STRESS Learning Objectives

- Staff can explain significant shocks and stresses that affect vulnerable adolescents and youth in Borno State, their interrelated drivers and main impacts on food security, economics opportunity and social cohesion.
- Staff can describe priority resilience capacities at the individual, household, community and systems levels and why they are critical for sustainable recovery and development.
- Staff can use STRESS findings to evaluate how different proposed interventions in current and new programming would strengthen resilience.
- Staff can integrate resilience concepts into specific startup assessments for humanitarian, recovery and development programs.

The Borno STRESS benefitted from the findings in the other STRESS cases studies. Among these findings was the need to define what staff, in various roles, need to be able to do differently in their day to day work to apply findings and adopt a resilience approach; and, what knowledge and competencies they need to do so. This plan should explicitly link to STRESS components and define their function in a deliberate learning pedagogy. The Borno STRESS began this process, but was unable to fully achieve this pedagogy alone. A key recommendation from this case study is to invest in examining what these critical learning competencies are and how they apply to different staff roles.

¹⁰ New Way of Working Initiative from the World Humanitarian Summit. <https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/initiatives/5358> (accessed March 27, 2019).

The Borno process included the main components of other STRESS processes carried out in other contexts alongside an additional phase of “Operationalization.” The key phases to the Borno STRESS process included:

- A remote “**pre-scoping**” phase to compile as much background research and secondary data as possible, in order to narrow the scope of the STRESS process. Mercy Corps led a short in-country, internal kick-off workshop to introduce resilience and STRESS, ascertain the validity of background research, and agree on a refined set of scoping criteria. Mercy Corps also conducted a climate and environmental trends and risk analysis as part of this phase. Concurrently, with USAID support, Mercy Corps analyzed data from the World Bank Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS) Nigeria General Household Survey focused on determinants of resilience to conflict in Nigeria.¹¹
- A **scoping phase** consisting of an in-depth workshop with a wider group of staff on both resilience fundamentals and knowledge of Borno. The workshop then informed the development of the research plan. During this phase, the STRESS team developed an initial learning plan (see text box), identified priority target staff with country leadership, and defined roles and responsibilities for engagement.
- **Inform and analyze phases.** In these phases Mercy Corps developed a specific methodology for primary data collection and the implementation plan, recruited and trained two local partner organizations to support data collection, designed, piloted and refined tools for FGDs and KIIs, and collected and iteratively analyzed data. The STRESS team also conducted two expert roundtables on 1) conflict and climate and 2) gender to better understand the interconnected dynamics of conflict, climate, environment and gender. During this phase, the STRESS team frequently touched base with staff across five field office sites to gradually socialize resilience concepts, build buy-in, and obtain contextual insights from the “deep field”—those on the very front lines of the protracted crisis, those in direct contact with people affected by conflict and crisis. Mercy Corps held two analysis workshops, in Maiduguri and Biu, to share the results of the data collection and engage staff in applying resilience thinking to deepen the STRESS analysis. These workshops analyzed the root causes and current dynamics of conflict and reviewed current programming in light of these findings.
- The final official phase is the **strategy phase**. In this phase Mercy Corps addressed loose ends identified in the data, finalized written outputs, designed the theory of change, and further socialized findings with external stakeholders in Nigeria.
- **Operationalization phase.** This phase is an ongoing process in which Mercy Corps applies STRESS findings to new programming, ongoing programming, and broader strategy.

CHALLENGES

As the Mercy Corps team moved through these phases in the STRESS process, they encountered a range of challenges along the way. This case study now describes these challenges alongside the creative and adaptive solutions Mercy Corps identified to address them.

The STRESS team struggled with pitching the feasibility of a resilience approach in a humanitarian context. At the outset, Mercy Corps faced skepticism about the feasibility of strengthening resilience when weighed against the everyday difficulties of fulfilling humanitarian goals. *For example, in an informal poll during a STRESS analysis workshop, staff agreed that resilience was important to apply in a protracted crisis, but just over half of the participants said they understood resilience, and only three quarters thought it was feasible. Staff agreed that resilience matters but struggled with the concept itself as well as its feasibility in a protracted crisis.*

¹¹ Mercy Corps, 2017:“Resilience and Conflict in Nigeria:Analysis of dynamics and programming leverage points.” <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/resilience-and-conflict-nige- ria-analysis-dynamics-and-programming-leverage-points>

Interestingly, resilience skepticism seemed to vary by position and location: more isolated field staff, sitting farther away from centralized program decision-making, tended to be less wary about the feasibility of a resilience approach and showed an eagerness to experiment. In some instances, this openness seemed to be because they were in a position to recognize community issues that pre-existed the conflict (such as youth marginalization, corruption and rainfall variability). They also had deep local knowledge of the context and were often residents of Borno themselves, which perhaps gave them an even stronger incentive to support a resilience approach. But for other staff, resilience-strengthening amidst a protracted crisis simply did not seem possible. They believed that resilience-strengthening and changing systemic risk required multiple generations and systemic transformation. Team members found it very difficult to envision this kind of change while implementing short-term humanitarian response programs in which life saving and sustaining efforts are the highest priority and demand constant attention.

The STRESS team faced challenges with capacity-building as the result of turnover, the restrictions of a humanitarian context, and leadership buy-in. The Borno STRESS team applied learning from other STRESS processes on the importance of building staff capacity. The STRESS team recognized that in order to be effective, they needed as many touch points and as much participation as possible to build this group's learning competencies and understanding of resilience. However, the "gold standard" for participation in other STRESS applications was not possible given the practical demands of the humanitarian context. For instance, staff often experienced humanitarian access challenges, such as road closures due to bombings or threat of kidnapping, restricted aerial access due to fuel shortages or threat of attacks, that prohibited their ability to engage with internally displaced persons (IDPs) and communities in certain areas. In this case, local enumerators from civil society organizations were hired to carry out direct fieldwork and data collection instead. The STRESS team also experienced higher rates of turnover, which are typical in high-stress contexts like Borno. Turnover delayed the creation of the core STRESS staff and hampered sustained engagement with the core STRESS staff too. This was a loss for team engagement and associated learning. Finally, it is challenging to move ahead with resilience without active leadership support for staff engagement and capacity-strengthening. Despite theoretical buy-in, program leadership did not necessarily dedicate the necessary time and resources to the core team of staff, from deep field staff to national HQ staff and international technical support staff.

Applying resilience terminology to a conflict-affected protracted crisis was another challenge for the STRESS team. Certain resilience concepts are complex already, and they became all the less clear when a resilience framework is applied to a protracted crisis. For instance, in technical exercises during workshops, it proved difficult for staff to differentiate a stress, which Mercy Corps defines as ongoing or seasonal pressures such as land degradation, ongoing conflict, or climate variability—from a systemic development constraint—typically recognized as broad and generalized conditions endemic to a development context such as poor mobility, weak governance, or social inequality.

The team saw ongoing conflict as a stress that also caused discrete shocks. The team also identified structural factors that were actively driving and sustaining conflict (i.e., corruption and marginalization) as a stress too. But in more stable contexts, these same factors are generally characterized as systemic development constraints. During systems mapping exercises, the team faced further confusion with how to crosswalk resilience terminology with conflict analysis terminology, and how to identify and agree upon the "root causes" of conflict versus the factors currently sustaining conflict. All in all, these issues created some murkiness for the team, who determined that some resilience vocabulary did not translate tidily to a conflict-driven protracted crisis.

ADAPTIVE SOLUTIONS

The STRESS team sought consistent messaging from senior leadership while building buy-in at the working level on the importance and feasibility of a resilience approach. Senior leadership has played a central role in the success of the STRESS process in other contexts, and the Borno STRESS process was no different. The team specifically benefited from consistent senior leadership messaging and participation. Senior leadership reinforced that resilience was a priority for Mercy Corps, recalled its broader purpose, and clearly and consistently communicated its relationship to the country office's broader strategy and goals. The STRESS team then sought opportunities to pitch the utility (conceptual and operational) of applying resilience in humanitarian contexts with humanitarian program staff by continually building buy-in through formal (e.g., workshops) and informal (e.g., social gatherings) means. They also managed gaps in institutional memory through efforts such as newsletters and resilience onboarding materials to address high turnover rates.

The STRESS team dealt with capacity-strengthening challenges through a flexible staff engagement model grounded in informal learning and sharing opportunities. The Borno STRESS adopted a flexible staff engagement model to accommodate each staff member's availability and unique learning journey through in-person meetings, personalized emails and phone calls, and regular check-ins with middle managers and senior leadership. Lighthearted but effective, the STRESS team organized frequent informal social events where staff living in field sites could meet and discuss findings outside of work hours. At these events staff talked about risk, resilience, and other key concepts through anecdotes and storytelling based on their own experiences with risk and resilience in their daily work. These in-person touch points brought together staff who were typically isolated in deep field sites (sometimes only reachable by helicopter) with their peers, offering a welcoming forum to discuss heavy and complex issues and experiences in their work. These informal gatherings served as learning labs, and were highly effective mechanisms for building social capital around the Borno resilience agenda, establishing a sense of camaraderie on shared challenges and vision, and essentially strengthening the resilience capacity of the Mercy Corps team itself.

Incorporating these multiple feedback loops across sites and levels of staff was time consuming, yet critical for addressing the core team's learning objectives. Senior leadership in Nigeria also invested resources in an internal communications campaign to build consistent messaging, underscore key concepts in ways that were relatable to their daily lives, and socialize resilience as a new approach the organization was investing in. These efforts were important for cultivating wider buy-in, especially as core staff dedicated more time to STRESS in lieu of their everyday responsibilities (the burden of which fell to other colleagues). To address turnover, the STRESS team committed to continual resilience onboarding, often on a one-to-one basis. Staff also reiterated key resilience concepts at every touch point, from workshops and newsletters to resilience onboarding materials and informal conversations.

The STRESS team translated resilience terminology to a protracted crisis through participatory approaches and an open mind. Ultimately, discerning between stresses and development constraints was not critical to the STRESS team understanding the systemic dynamics of shocks and stresses in Borno. Through systems mapping, vulnerability analyses, and discussion of a resilient development vision, the team was able to learn key intervention points to disrupt shocks, stresses and development constraints to improving wellbeing outcomes in the face of these dynamics. The team especially found value in the participatory research and learning activities piloted in the STRESS, such as the risk and resource mapping and historical timeline tools used in focus group discussions. The STRESS team found that adapting technical vocabulary and finding flexibility within the STRESS framework was necessary to fit the context and needs of the team. While guidance on how to apply resilience terminology in the context of a protracted crisis could be very useful for future STRESS processes, the team nonetheless found creative ways forward.

NAVIGATING THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

CHALLENGES

The enabling environment¹² is key to the success of any risk and resilience assessment, and conducting an assessment amidst a protracted crisis is no exception. The STRESS process in Borno revealed both the constraints of the operating environment and the limits of organizations trying to navigate this environment.

Rigid and centralized organizational systems were a key challenge for the STRESS team. The STRESS team encountered rigid, centralized and disconnected financial, administrative and logistical systems that made fieldwork training and assessment activities difficult and burdensome to plan, coordinate and execute at a pace that matched the fast-moving context. *For example, the field team and headquarters used different financial platforms, which made communication through standard forms and online platforms very challenging and time consuming. Exacerbating this challenge was highly complex layers of forms for simple tasks such as purchasing snacks for workshops and paying enumerators. These complicated operational systems were a by-product of Mercy Corps' need to scale humanitarian response rapidly while maintaining quality oversight. Another example is that Mercy Corps needed institutional partnership agreements to train and support local enumerators to collect field data. While intended as a protection, the agreement layered on more bureaucratic barriers and delayed or derailed field assessment activities. The STRESS team ultimately identified a potential tradeoff between quality control and opportunities for innovation. Centralized management systems play an important role in ensuring quality oversight and donor accountability in a dynamic, rapidly changing and growing humanitarian response. However, this kind of structure may undermine responsive programming and innovation in deep field sites—a challenge that practitioners using a resilience approach in complex crisis will need to address.*

The STRESS team struggled with access and coordination challenges in a non-permissive environment.

Accessing various areas in Borno was an anticipated challenge given the state of ongoing conflict and humanitarian access barriers. As a result, defining the field sites for primary data collection was a complex, iterative process. The team struggled with balancing the feasibility of access alongside the importance of assessing hard-to-reach areas in order to gain an accurate understanding of the context. The team could not access many frontline communities, including those that may have the greatest need, and faced multiple security hurdles that regularly blocked or complicated access both to and from rural communities. The team also struggled with defining households and communities in light of the high mobility of IDPs. Finally, communication barriers due to poor cell network coverage, particularly in field locations, put a strain on coordination between national headquarters, the major field offices, and rural field offices and assessment teams.

The lack of accurate and reliable data was another key challenge for the STRESS team. During the pre-scoping phase of the STRESS process the team typically reviews secondary data such as: historical trends related to target systems dynamics (resilience of what); frequency, intensity, and severity of shocks and stresses (resilience to what); population statistics on youth and adolescent groups highlighting differential vulnerability (resilience for whom); and the capacities people have and need to better manage adversity over time (resilience through what). However, the Borno team discovered that strong, reliable data and reports were few and far between.

For example, the team observed unoccupied offices with no contacts and a closed-door attitude overall. The team felt like they were being bureaucratically obstructed from relevant data. Even when data was available, it was not updated regularly. This presented a significant challenge in light of the highly dynamic context and rate of change

¹² This environment includes the operational logistics, administration, leadership, procurement systems and human resources, and the local context such as security, livelihood and religious activities, political dynamics and the seasonal climate.

in environmental degradation, urbanization, displacement and climate trends, among other issues. Humanitarian assessments and reports have filled some gaps in recent years, primarily on humanitarian access indicators, but many areas remain inaccessible and data sets are difficult to come by. Historical analyses to provide a view of longer-term trends are limited too. Even fewer institutions have studied the region within a resilience lens.

ADAPTIVE SOLUTIONS

The STRESS team needed to navigate the same shocks and stresses as the communities being assessed. In Borno the team found a variety of innovative ways to do so, from leveraging their social capital and embracing adaptive management, to seeking diverse partners and informants and finding creative ways to generate and validate data.

The STRESS team managed rigid and centralized

systems through a combination of social capital

and adaptive management. The STRESS team found

creative and industrious solutions to the rigid and centralized systems they encountered, though sometimes these solutions were not without personal sacrifice. Field staff leveraged social capital (e.g. friendships, professional support services and personal loans to enable flexible funding) through personal, institutional and external networks in order to mitigate the aforementioned operational, administrative and environmental systemic barriers. **For example, newfound awareness of shocks and stresses in the field enabled the STRESS team and partners to better anticipate such disruptions, and plan multiple contingency options for various scenarios, such as alternate transportation types and routes, alternate meeting venues, reordering the sequencing of site visits, and adapting the length of assessment activities to ensure everyone's safety. The work plan, timeline and budget were also adaptively extended to account for actual and potential internal and external disruptions, and to learn from piloted and adapted tools (discussed later on). By embracing the reality of constant shocks and stresses, the team was able to better anticipate, prepare for, and adaptively manage the assessment activities. Without social capital and adaptive management the STRESS process would not have been successful in this challenging environment.**

The STRESS team compensated for restricted site access by hiring diverse facilitators, seeking diverse key informants, and practicing conflict-sensitivity. Fieldwork with IDPs and host communities was a key source of data collection in the STRESS process especially given the weak secondary data on Borno state. It was important for the STRESS team to make the most of the site access they did have through thoughtful and conflict-sensitive data collection approaches. Diverse key informants were an important source of information during fieldwork, but they were often difficult to interview depending on their willingness to voluntarily (without pay) and transparently share information and perspectives with the team. Having skilled facilitators fluent in local languages was especially critical for facilitating focus group discussions. The team addressed initial challenges in finding female facilitators by proactively hiring and training more female facilitators. In a “Training of Facilitators” for the fieldwork data collection, the team also verified facilitators’ ethnicities and religions and sought to understand the power dynamics and influence of civil society organization partners. Doing so allowed the team to anticipate and mitigate potential tensions in engagement with IDP and host communities. In spite of limits to field site access, the team found creative and thoughtful ways to ensure they were gaining the most accurate data possible with the access they did have.



The STRESS team addressed data quality changes by identifying new stakeholders, holding events to generate and validate data, and otherwise carefully triangulating data. The STRESS team worked around the institutions unwilling or reticent to share information with them by expanding their network of stakeholders. For instance, the team began discussions with the INGO Forum around coordination of assessments and data. First, the team built social cohesion and trust amongst the key stakeholders that were the gatekeepers of such information. Second, the team held two high-level local expert roundtables, including one on climate and the environment, to solicit expert local feedback on a climate and environmental risk assessment (that was based on secondary data), and another roundtable with experts on the root causes and impacts of conflict, including sexual and gender-based violence. The team then triangulated the evidence from these sessions with data gathered from key informant interviews and IDP and host community FGDs. Diversity was key to this triangulation approach. The STRESS team sought to consult with all of the assessment's prioritized vulnerable groups (i.e. adolescent boys and girls ages 15-19, and male and female youth ages 20-34) as determined in the Scoping Workshop as well as the groups in power (e.g. government, the wealthy, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) or local leaders), to understand the complex dynamics at hand. Finally, the team embraced snowball data collection and an exploratory approach by being open and responsive to new trends requiring deeper inquiry, and uncovering and understanding underrepresented issues or dynamics.

LIMITS TO ASSESSMENTS AMIDST PROTRACTED CRISIS

CHALLENGES

The STRESS team noted that participants suffered from survey fatigue and held short-term priorities.

Conducting assessments with people directly and indirectly affected by conflict, natural hazards and poor access to basic services and rights is inherently sensitive. Due to humanitarian access challenges, some populations in Borno are over-researched, while others have not been reached at all and their needs are unknown. The team identified survey fatigue of over-researched populations in many areas.

Respondents were often still recovering from their recent exposure to conflict while also grappling with food insecurity, forced displacement, and other shocks. The STRESS team identified their participation as, understandably, often rudimentary, truncated and guarded. The STRESS highlighted how many IDPs and host communities in Borno are starting from a very low baseline of development, governance, and rights, coupled with high rates of conflict. People's perception of short-term vs. long-term needs and risks seemed to be very different from those in more stable contexts. In areas exposed to conflict, people consistently prioritized access to money, food, freedom of movement, and other short-term needs as their top concerns. Longer-term concerns, including traumatic stress, disrupted education, or future conflict risks were not a priority in most discussions. This is not necessarily a challenge, but rather a reality of this protracted crisis that is important for practitioners to understand and engage with.

The STRESS team noted the potential for unmet expectations and reduced impact amidst complex and fast-changing dynamics. The STRESS found that a significant stress elevating vulnerability in Borno is the limited flow of information about security and humanitarian aid. The STRESS team relied on rapid humanitarian assessments that were often outdated by the time they were produced, or were limited in information beyond immediate needs. Given the rapidly changing dynamics and complex tapestry of compound shocks and stresses, it was often difficult to determine what kinds of interventions would be most impactful. This issue raises protection concerns as well as the importance of transparency on the purpose and use of the assessment. The difficulty of keeping up with dynamics on the ground should also be viewed as a new reality for operating amidst a protracted crisis. A perennial risk in protracted crises is that limited, outdated information could lead to interventions with minimal impact or even unintended consequences.

ADAPTIVE SOLUTIONS

Coordinating assessments and combining data sources can address survey fatigue and short-term priorities. The STRESS methodology combines community-level (i.e. IDP camps, host communities) data with higher trend-level data and analysis (e.g. climate and environmental risk analyses). This approach is likely helpful across protracted crises, where data is often lacking and perceptions of needs and risks are driven by recent and immediate shock exposure. This perception bias is important to note as it does not mean that less prioritized issues are less important to address in programming. Rather, these priorities indicate that practitioners must layer services and strategies that support short-term priorities while addressing the other longer-term development constraints and stressors. In addition, humanitarian and development actors and donors should reduce the burden that assessments place on those already enduring so much by: 1) proactively sharing data and coordinating surveys across the INGO Forum and other cross-sector platforms; 2) curbing extractive research methods and minimizing raised expectations through ethical, participatory learning assessment practices; and 3) deciding what amount and quality of data is “good enough.”

The STRESS team found that better coordination and empowerment can help maximize impact amidst fast-changing dynamics. Improved communication and coordination through coalitions like the INGO Forum can lead organizations to plan joint assessments, share assessment data and more efficiently identify and fill data gaps. The Borno STRESS aimed to influence a broader strategic vision on strengthening resilience across sectors and organizations too. Aiming for collective impact is a laudable goal, but it faced an uphill battle in practice. Coordination was often deprioritized because it was challenging for the STRESS team to pitch a straightforward understanding and clear value to resilience in a humanitarian context. Building a common vision and better coordination among actors outside the STRESS process will be an important goal for resilience efforts in other protracted crises.

“The big learning for me is that...I thought we knew what resilience was, but what has transpired now...I now understand that people cope ordinarily when things happen to them, crises, but now we are thinking through it deliberately and how we are going to imbibe that into our programming.”

— STRESS workshop participant



The STRESS team also pursued participatory approaches in order to “Do No Harm” and promote the agency of participants whenever possible. Participatory learning assessments like the STRESS build the capacity of local CSOs and use focus group discussions to elicit community capacities and help identify sources of risk. The Borno STRESS team specifically adaptively piloted historical timelines and participatory risk and resource mapping exercises. Doing so facilitated learning, awareness and empowerment in both IDP camps and host communities to take collective action to reduce risks and promote the transparency and accountability of humanitarian assistance. The STRESS

team asked open-ended questions around resilience questions with a humanitarian access framing, (e.g. “How did you deal with, or respond to, these negative impacts? What strategies and resources are most helpful to you?”) that created trust with participants and led them to share more of their experiences with managing shocks and stresses. To further reinforce a participatory approach, the STRESS team added questions to the end of each FGD to inquire about peoples’ learning, impressions and motivations to take action. In the face of ethical concerns and the potential for unmet expectations among vulnerable groups, participatory approaches were an important way for the STRESS team to promote trust, empowerment, and capacity-building whenever possible.

RECOMMENDATIONS: TRANSLATING FINDINGS INTO ACTION

BUILD RESILIENCE-FOCUSED REFLECTION SESSIONS INTO REGULAR PRACTICE

Amidst the standard challenges of staff turnover and programming in a complex environment, it is difficult to maintain institutional memory and the insights gained from a learning process such as STRESS. Building the capacity of practitioners to design, implement and measure with a resilience approach must be reinforced through deliberate knowledge management, learning and communication systems. This capacity-strengthening is all the more important for resilience efforts, which sit outside the traditional humanitarian and development silos, and can help integrate sectors. *For example, promoting intentional team reflections on context changes drawing from fundamental resilience concepts, or reviewing how STRESS findings are still relevant or have changed at regular intervals can help break the habit of falling back into “regular development” or “regular humanitarian aid” thinking. Investing in powerful and simple visual products to communicate key concepts and serve as consistent cues can support institutional memory too. Initial hesitancy of staff to engage in a resilience approach stemmed from a need to better understand its meaning and utility, particularly in a protracted crisis. Reflection sessions can build this capacity and train staff to think and act with a resilience mindset.*

PLAN FOR DEMAND-DRIVEN, CUSTOMIZED CAPACITY-STRENGTHENING

The STRESS case study series has illustrated that team members often need additional training, resources and guidance to translate strategic-level findings into program design, implementation, and evaluation. The Borno STRESS was no exception. To practically institutionalize and mainstream STRESS findings into resilience-strengthening practices within and across programs, capacity-building needs to be designed holistically and not as a stand-alone activity. It also requires supportive operational and administrative structures. Staff need practical solutions and training that layer into (and not on top of) their current workload, that is customized to their needs, with clear direction on what it looks like to use a resilience approach in their sector and context. They also need guidance on how to integrate resilience across all of their work, from scoping, understanding system dynamics and root causes of risks, participatory engagement and assessments, to service design and delivery, monitoring and evaluation, and adaptive management. Follow-up capacity building during the “operationalization phase” should be anticipated and built into the program design. A longer-term strategy should also lay out how current and new programs can integrate and layer over space and time and take stock of how programs may be undermining or catalyzing other programs’ progress in strengthening resilience.

DEEP FIELD ENGAGEMENT

Deep field engagement—highly hands-on interaction and capacity-strengthening with staff on the front lines of the protracted crisis—is crucial for linking STRESS findings to action. A key part of this engagement is to promote a common understanding of the resilience approach and key concepts while staff and partners also take part in participatory data collection. Doing so can level the technical playing field and improve communication between deep-field staff and leadership communication, as well as facilitate buy-in on how to best apply STRESS findings. STRESS workshops and informal conversations with staff on key resilience concepts and approaches can also help staff operationally link resilience to their everyday work. This combination of a common language and empowerment transformed how humanitarian and development stakeholders understood complex systems and helped create a common resilience strategy.

Engaging staff and partners in STRESS workshops as well as participatory data collection processes enabled them to witness new aspects of participants' lives and perspectives, and to see the impact of humanitarian programs on supporting (or undermining) people's resilience capacities. Ideally, such assessment processes and findings would be incorporated into existing community mobilization platforms and ongoing programs. Unfortunately, this was not the case with the Borno STRESS since most assessment activities occurred in locations outside of Mercy Corps programming. But these approaches are key for modifying humanitarian and early recovery program activities and informing advocacy for earlier inclusion of "development" funding modalities. This process connects partners and programs to layer and sequence interventions in ways that holistically strengthen resilience in the near and long term.

"I have a new lens now, when I go back to the field I'm going to be looking at what our field staff are doing to build resilience for our beneficiaries... how we are going to imbibe that into our programming... and what are beneficiaries doing for their own resilience."

— STRESS workshop participant



PHOTO CREDIT : SARAH HENL Y-SHEPARD FOR MERCY CORPS (2017). WOMEN WALKING IN AN IDP CAMP IN BORNO STATE, NE NIGERIA.

LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RISK AND RESILIENCE ASSESSMENTS IN PROTRACTED CRISES

The following key themes emerged from this STRESS and serve as recommendations for future risk and resilience assessments in protracted crises.

Prioritize buy-in from senior leadership when introducing a new technical concept such as resilience.

To pitch the importance of resilience in a humanitarian context, the team sought consistent messaging of endorsement from senior leadership, while also building buy-in on the value of a resilience approach across all team members. Leadership buy-in for the necessary staff, resources, and structures is crucial too. Leadership needs to message the importance of resilience strengthening and reinforce this with facilitating sufficient staff time, resources, and the flexibility needed for the STRESS to be a success. *For example, in Nigeria senior leadership supported field-based analysis workshops and interviews and a dedicated weekly communications email and monthly newsletter. These communications went out to all team members highlighting the latest updates on the progress and findings of the STRESS, including spotlight anecdotes from team members and assessment participants.*

Create informal learning and sharing opportunities as a technical capacity-building tool.

Working-level buy-in is also essential, and informal learning and sharing opportunities are a key tool for gaining buy-in while also building technical capacity. Resilience strengthening is a fairly new aid approach, and resilience strengthening amidst a protracted crisis is nearly unprecedented. To address technical capacity-building challenges, the team adopted a flexible staff engagement model grounded in informal learning and sharing opportunities.

For example, the STRESS team often had to work flexibly and creatively to take advantage of brief, often informal windows of staff time to provide short and repeated messaging on resilience and resilience learning, technical capacity-strengthening, raising awareness and time for feedback. For example, team members would meet when it was convenient for each other in the hallways or during long field trips. They also hosted social events like barbeques, offering informal opportunities to discuss the STRESS, resilience concepts, and how people have learned and changed their mindsets and approaches to aid based on their exposure to the STRESS.

Remember that each Fragility, conflict, and violence (FCV) setting is unique. When applying STRESS, keep an open mind and learn from the context.

For instance, to translate resilience terminology for a protracted crisis, the team kept an open mind and gained new insights from participatory approaches. Overall, the STRESS team embodied a sentiment that all learning is positive, and that it is critical to continuously pause and reflect, acknowledge successes and challenges, and adapt the course of the assessment accordingly. *For example, the team purposefully created space and routines around regular reflection during assessment design, before and after workshops, fieldwork trainings and assessment deployments. These pause and reflect sessions created space for team members to self-evaluate and talk with participants in order to understand how to best improve the tools, process, communication and participatory learning styles.*

Embrace that adaptive management is key, and empower deep field staff to manage adaptively.

The STRESS team must manage adaptively, and to do this, they must be part of an organization that is also designed to be as flexible as possible in fast-moving, constantly changing environments. In particular, organizations need to create space and mechanisms where staff closest to programming are empowered to experiment with creative and flexible approaches. Pivoting from humanitarian assistance to resilience strengthening requires empowering deep field staff—those with critical community-level skills and expertise—to learn how resilience dynamics are changing within communities. Field staff, particularly local staff, should specifically be empowered through more decentralized communication and operational platforms that facilitate flexible adaptive management and perhaps even innovation funds. These funds could enable teams to respond even more efficiently to the shocks and stresses affecting communities or pursue resilience-strengthening opportunities. Beyond deep field empowerment, organizations should also improve operational and financial systems so that they are equipped for emergency preparedness and contingency planning.

Integrate conflict sensitivity at all levels.

The STRESS team made a point to hire diverse facilitators, seek diverse key informants, and otherwise practice conflict sensitivity throughout the STRESS process. *For example, the team leveraged and built on gaps in other humanitarian assessments to reduce survey fatigue, and ensured the assessment was done in unassessed areas, with underserved populations and through a participatory pro-IDP/pro-community empowerment approach that no other actors were using. The team also engaged the peace and conflict team heavily in the STRESS, and worked to ensure those team members were integrated with their humanitarian and early recovery counterparts, to facilitate cross-team learning and creation of ideas to analyze and propose solutions to the complex challenges encountered during the STRESS.*

Seek and triangulate local knowledge through creative approaches and all means necessary.

To manage the lack of accurate and sufficient data for Borno State, the STRESS team pursued a range of innovative ideas: they identified and collaborated with new stakeholders that had access to important data, held roundtables to generate and validate data, and otherwise triangulated their findings across many sources. Working with local enumerators improved the interpretation and application of the assessment tools, grounding them in local culture and religion, and also improved the team's access to areas otherwise inaccessible to INGOs. In addition, several uses for earth observation were identified at the outset of the STRESS, such as climate and environment trends (resource degradation, available services); shocks/stresses hazard maps (concentrating on hotspots); identifying population density and migration trends; and identifying key markets, livelihoods and infrastructure damages in relation to high/low conflict exposure areas. Additional local, national, regional and international technical, governance and advocacy partners can also fill gaps in technical breadth and context through engagement in workshops, interviews and research partnership.

Ensure that STRESS findings are then taken up in programming and action.

Finally, there is also a need to **support program practitioners to incorporate resilience assessment findings in the short, mid- and long-term and across the wider portfolio—spanning humanitarian, early recovery and development programming**. Recognizing that recovery varies by individual, household and community, approaches will look different and some programs will be in a better position than others to incorporate or address different findings. Institutional prioritization of the STRESS process, findings, and embracing a resilience approach writ large by leadership is key for STRESS uptake in programming and action. Humanitarian actors could embrace STRESS uptake by assessing how ongoing interventions could support better shock and stress management, conducting a Strategic

Planning workshop to engage staff in the review of the STRESS findings, and brainstorming a new Resilience Theory of Change to flesh out how to integrate findings into programming long-term. They could also look for opportunities to develop resilience attributes in programming, such as situational awareness, preparedness and autonomy. And last but not least, efforts to improve staff recruitment and retention as well as institutional efficiency can all support STRESS uptake as well. Doing so includes improving the culture and practice of human resources, but also investing in engaging staff in the assessment process, and fostering ongoing capacity-strengthening in resilience learning and adaptive management.

THE REAL RISK AND RESILIENCE ASSESSMENT CASE STUDY SERIES

This series takes a closer look at risk and resilience assessments to reflect on where and how these processes have positively impacted strategy and programs. A series of cases, representing very different applications, explore central questions for practitioners interested in conducting a risk and resilience assessment. Each case ends with lessons learned and recommendations for humanitarian and development practitioners who are considering conducting a risk and resilience assessment.

RESILIENCE EVALUATION, ANALYSIS AND LEARNING

The Resilience Evaluation, Analysis and Learning (REAL) Associate Award is a consortium-led effort funded by the USAID Center for Resilience. It was established to respond to growing demand among USAID Missions, host governments, implementing organizations, and other key stakeholders for rigorous, yet practical, monitoring, evaluation, strategic analysis, and capacity building support. Led by Save the Children, REAL draws on the expertise of its partners: Food for the Hungry, Mercy Corps, and TANGO International.



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