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CASE 3: KARAMOJA, UGANDA
RISK AND RESILIENCE ASSESSMENT CASE STUDY SERIES

USING A RISK AND RESILIENCE
ASSESSMENT TO INFORM A NEW
DEVELOPMENT VISION

MARCH 2019



ABOUT THE RESILIENCE EVALUATION, ANALYSIS AND LEARNING (REAL)

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REAL 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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This report is made possible by the generous support and contribution of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents of the materials produced through the REAL Award do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

This publication was produced for review by USAID Center for Resilience. It was prepared by Kristin Lambert, with support from Emilie Rex, and with contributions from Sean Granville-Ross and David Nicholson (Mercy Corps), Tracy Mitchell (formerly Mercy Corps), and Tiffany Griffin (USAID Center for Resilience). We would like to thank the following USAID-funded Growth, Health, Governance (GHG) staff for their support and contributions to the case: Sylvia Alaso, Oguti Athanasius, Alex Bekunda, Selena Haeny, James Loberon, Nur Lomwar, Margaret McLoughlin, Emmy Moorhouse, Simon Nangiro, Frederich Ochen Ronald Okuraja, David Okutu, Jerome Olowo, Moses Opio, Leslie Otto, Miji Park and Elizabeth Valone. Staff from the Karamoja Resilience Support Unit (KRSU) also provided input. Finally, the case benefited from essential background provided by Cathy Bergman, Alder Kovaric, Eliot Levine, Nate Oetting, and Melaku Yirga (Mercy Corps) and Eric Vaughan and Thea Anderson (both formerly Mercy Corps).

PHOTO CREDITS:

Front cover: Corinna Robbins for Mercy Corps. Dodoth man in the bush, Kalapata Kraal, Karamoja, Uganda (2014).

RECOMMENDED CITATION:

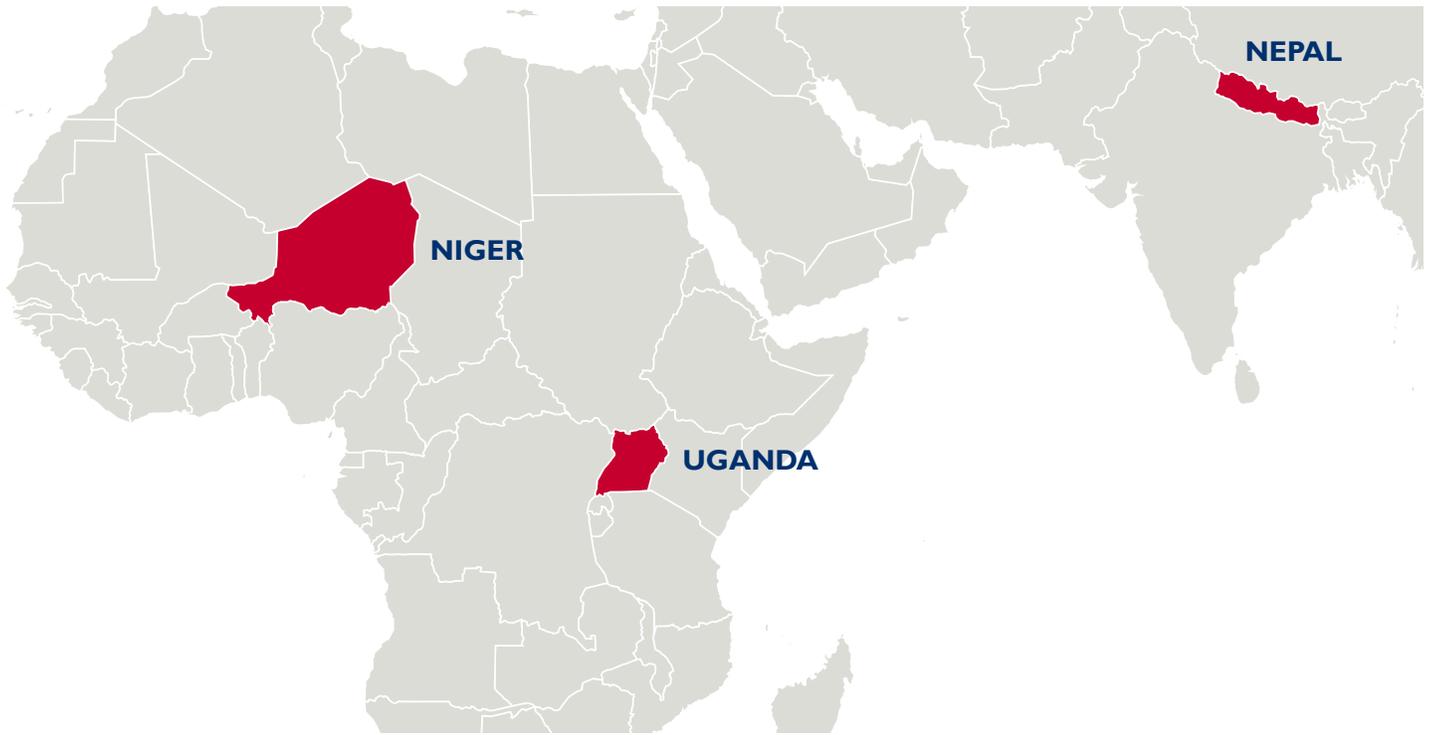
Lambert, K. et al (2019). *Risk and Resilience Assessment Case Study Series: Uganda*. Produced by Mercy Corps as part of the Resilience Evaluation, Analysis and Learning (REAL) Associate Award.

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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 and vulnerability 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/or 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, the [Strategic Resilience Assessment \(STRESS\)](#). We end with lessons learned and recommendations for humanitarian and development practitioners who are considering conducting a risk and resilience assessment.

WHY USE A RISK AND RESILIENCE ASSESSMENT TO INFORM A NEW DEVELOPMENT VISION?

Framed by Uganda's northeast border with Kenya and South Sudan, Karamoja is a region characterized by unpredictable rains and long dry periods. Traditionally, pastoralism has been central to the Karamojong's livelihoods, allowing communities to move as seasonal rains make pasture lands available. However, violent armed conflict and frequent cattle raids have plagued the region for decades. In 2006, the government launched its most recent disarmament campaign. Though the region has been relatively stable since, it has also witnessed a catastrophic decline in the livestock population that communities have traditionally depended upon for food, income, and collective identity. To support their families, many Karamojong are relying increasingly on unsustainable natural resource extraction, urban migration, and farming.

These shifts have amplified exposure to a range of existing and new shocks and stresses, such as variable rainfall, land degradation, gender-based violence, and alcoholism. Yet, with 80% of the population below the poverty line, and nearly three in four people in Uganda under the age of 25, a diversified economy and sustained peace could provide communities across Karamoja with vital opportunities to develop and grow.¹

In light of Karamoja's complex and shifting environment, Mercy Corps and its partners saw the need to craft a new, comprehensive development vision for the region that articulated the emerging risks and vulnerabilities that might threaten this vision and undermine communities' progress toward building the capacities needed to sustain long-term progress. The team undertook a Strategic Resilience Assessment (STRESS) to provide the scaffolding and evidence base for developing this vision, inform partners' strategies, and strengthen staff capacity to integrate resilience across a set of often overlapping programs. Ultimately, with a shared vision for Karamoja, the team hoped all actors in the region could move away from their current siloed interventions toward more cohesive programming that supported and built upon each other's efforts.



In 2015, Mercy Corps and its partners in Karamoja saw the region's intense period of economic, social, and ecological transition as a critical moment for reflection. Addressing both the challenges and opportunities inherent to these shifts required a new development vision for the region—one which accounted for the risks threatening that fragile progress and helped ensure the most vulnerable were not left behind. Mercy Corps' evolving Strategic Resilience Assessment (STRESS) served as the scaffolding for this new vision, deepening the team's understanding of resilience in a changing context. By collectively identifying the existing and emerging threats, differences in vulnerability, and resilience capacities needed to achieve a development vision, these diverse stakeholders also developed a shared language for resilience that spanned the many systems communities relied upon, building a foundation for future collaborations. Among other findings, this case suggests that risk and resilience assessments like STRESS benefit when teams understand the time and resources required to complete the process upfront; strong systems exist for integrating resilience findings into workplans; and the process includes a robust internal and external communications strategy.

¹ Burns, J., Bekele, G., Akabwai, D. (2013). Livelihood dynamics in northern Karamoja: A participatory baseline study for the Growth, Health, and Governance program. Washington, DC: USAID.

THE ASSESSMENT

LAYING THE FOUNDATION: WHAT CONDITIONS FACILITATE RESILIENCE LEARNING?

By 2016, STRESS had evolved into one of Mercy Corps' most powerful tools for relationship building, and the Uganda team knew they would be unable to implement a vision for the entire region without strong partnerships. In addition to building a foundation for future collaborations and ensuring the results were carried forward, integrating external partners in the learning journey would be an important way to gain critical new perspectives. Intense recruitment efforts resulted in a diverse crew of government, private sector, and civil society partners who would join Mercy Corps Uganda staff, colleagues from headquarters' technical support unit (TSU), and a consultant for a three-day scoping workshop to map Karamoja's dynamic systems.

The many feedback loops driving food insecurity and economic and social instability came into full view almost immediately. The teams drew lines between Karamoja's social, political, and ecological systems, illustrating a tangled web of interconnected shocks and stresses. Healthy debates among participants helped the group transcend sectors and see how impacts reverberated. "That session was really powerful for the team," one facilitator recalled. "It made [resilience] visual, tangible. People could start seeing the whole concept of systems and the interrelationships."

It became clear, for example, how the decline in livestock and lack of financial services were driving households toward new livelihoods like agriculture, brewing, or mining. These shifts impacted groups very differently. The dissolution of pastoralism had stripped men and boys of much of their traditional work, and women and girls, who were often responsible for farming and brewing, had quickly become even more time-poor. And, because more Karamojong were farming, families were moving deeper into arid, rural areas where they had limited access to social services and where variable rains made it hard to grow crops reliably. With these interdependences in plain sight, the participants could see how easily families were slipping into cyclical poverty and food insecurity.

Everyone agreed: these staff-led moments were critical to strengthening capacity. Yet, even in the beginning this goal felt at odds with the urgency senior leadership felt to develop a vision quickly and not overburden staff. The planning team had already enlisted the technical support of three consultants, but decided the remainder of the process would be staff-led. But even as the team refined their research approach and fleshed out new questions—probing how urbanization alters vulnerability to drought and gender-based violence or whether there was a relationship between education and natural resource management—the team remained unclear about how much of their time and resources would be required to support the process. This lack of clarity and communication had the potential to complicate their work later.

FILLING THE GAPS AND MAKING SENSE OF THE DATA: HOW DOES DATA TRANSLATE INTO LARGER TRENDS?

The mapping exercises during the Scope Phase sourced both what the team knew and what they hoped to learn. These discussions informed the development of a research plan. A team of local technical specialists from Mercy Corps Uganda and its partners, many of whom worked together on the Growth, Health and Governance (GHG) Food for Peace development food security activity, moved quickly into the Inform Phase, digging into existing literature and reaching out to experts to provide a foundation for the fieldwork to come. Soon after, the team set out for seven districts across the region to conduct focus group discussions and key informant interviewees with community members. The discussions revealed a range of perceptions about Karamoja's changing landscape, how vulnerability differed across sub-groups, and the resilience capacities communities were already using to cope with shocks and stresses.

The team learned, for instance, how youth were building their own resilience by joining social organizations such as gardening and lending groups. Causal pathways also became clearer as communities drew connections between shocks and stresses. For example, gender and social norms dictated that most of the work outside of rapidly declining pastoralism should be completed by women. Women were becoming both time poor and extremely vulnerable as men and boys experienced a loss of identity and increasingly engaged in alcohol abuse and gender-based violence. Interviews and focus group discussions helped clarify how these shocks and stresses were connected and how they were compounding food insecurity.

Despite gaining new insights, some staff and managers were already experiencing the crunch of participating in STRESS while juggling their regular day-to-day work. Report writing was especially challenging, and in some cases, managers would step in to help. As the Inform Phase crept into month two, participants sent colleagues to workshops as their proxies. The lack of continuity threatened to disrupt the capacity strengthening elements of the process, begging larger questions: Which elements of STRESS are most critical for capacity strengthening, and how do you ensure staff have the time and flexibility to be present for these activities? When staff were overburdened with other work, was it more important to ensure the process yielded high-quality results that could inform a strong strategy, even if consultants completed this work? Was it too time intensive to train staff to complete the more technical aspects, when consultants could do this more efficiently? In essence, was STRESS now the primary instructional tool for teams to understand resilience, or was that too great a burden to place on the process and the team?

Previous STRESS processes suggested that national staff-led efforts were most effective in strengthening staff capacity to understand and apply resilience concepts; however, several country team leaders felt the STRESS should focus foremost on informing the resilience vision and could be consultant-led. The leadership team had settled on a staff-led process with consultant support but had not established the precise amount of time or level of staff engagement required to complete the process. This lack of clarity laid the foundation for problems that reemerged later.

As the team transitioned into analyzing the collected data, they drew on their foundation of systems thinking to identify emerging trends. Team members often recalled this as a critical step in their learning, allowing them to approach the development context beyond any individual program and critically examine the big picture shifts across the region. At the same time that the decline in pastoralism was driving increases in agriculture, many individuals and families were moving to urban areas or migrating to find work. In these new spaces, Karamojong were often exposed to new threats from HIV, trafficking, and labor exploitation. While the Uganda team and its partners were already aware of many of these trends, STRESS helped contextualize them within larger systems, illustrating how they intersected to disrupt progress toward long-term, resilient food security and development. These findings made it clear the team would have to change the way they worked: short-term, siloed programming was unlikely to make a dent in the face of these complex challenges.

CREATING A THEORY OF CHANGE: HOW CAN A THEORY OF CHANGE HELP INFORM A GREATER DEVELOPMENT VISION?

When the team reconvened for the final Strategize Phase, they began by articulating the future they envisioned for an empowered Karamoja. Having learned from pitfalls in previous STRESS processes, facilitators (i.e., a team comprised of both consultants and members of Mercy Corps' TSU) led participants through a process that would first clearly outline their development strategy. They then overlaid this framework with the newly articulated web of shocks and stresses that could undermine each goal. Finally, the team added a third layer of resilience capacities—the tools, resources, and abilities that individuals, households, communities and institutions would need to prepare for, manage, and quickly recover from the impacts of these disturbances.

Seeing these three layers together was profound for many participants. “Developing the theory of change, and putting the shocks and stresses on top, was a powerful visual, demonstrating the development pathway we keep deriding from,” one team member recalled. “It helped the team to see resilience as something different. **Resilience is not the outcome of good development, but rather an ability that allows development to continue on a positive trajectory in spite of disruption.**”

As the workshop neared an end, the team was still unpacking these resilience capacities, but limited staff time and fatigue cut their task short. Over the coming weeks, the technical team worked with Uganda leadership to synthesize what they had learned and hone a tighter list of key capacities, ultimately landing on six—ranging from strengthened natural resource management to better cope with the effects of climate and ecological shocks, to improved access to products and services to help mitigate shock impacts on livelihoods—that would ensure development investments were sustainable.

The gap between the unfinished list they remembered from the workshop and this final grouping caused confusion among some over why the report prioritized some capacities over others. “We got to the capacities at the tail end and didn’t do it justice,” one STRESS participant remarked. “Are these the right capacities? Are there others? There are shocks and stresses in the reports that aren’t then mentioned in the capacities. Why?” The competing demands of program implementation challenged continuous collaboration in the final stretch, and left some field team members feeling the list of capacities and theory of change were incomplete. This disconnect reiterated the ongoing tension between the imperative to strengthen staff capacity in resilience-thinking and action, and the need to produce findings within a limited timeframe.

When an assessment has multiple objectives, team members will assess which is the priority and allocate the staff time and resources necessary to achieve that primary objective, helping avoid misalignment between staff expectations and the resources required for a successful process. Ultimately, to better ensure the activity fosters both internal learning and capacity strengthening, the team considers the following questions: Will supervisors give staff the dedicated time to attend and support all required activities? Who will meet ongoing program needs? What role should outside consultants play? Mercy Corps has since placed a greater emphasis on internal communications and guidance to ensure managers can better understand the range of objectives and implementation options available for a risk and resilience assessment and choose the most appropriate pathway based on their context.

TRANSLATING FINDINGS INTO ACTION

ENGAGING PARTNERS IN THE NEW VISION FOR AN EMPOWERED KARAMOJA: CAN A RESILIENCE-INFORMED DEVELOPMENT VISION DEEPEN RESILIENCE INVESTMENT ACROSS A REGION?

With a new resilience-informed development vision in hand, Mercy Corps Uganda now had a strategic roadmap for operationalizing resilience in Karamoja that was long-term, rooted in systems thinking, and addressed cross-sectoral challenges. A broad external communications effort ensured the final report and vision were shared widely throughout the region. The team now hoped their investments in partnerships through STRESS would expand these stakeholders’ visions of how their current and future work could contribute to this larger resilience-building effort. The region desperately needed to transition from siloed, disjointed interventions towards more integrated programming that promoted long-term change.

For evidence, the Uganda team looked to see whether other agencies adopted the shared language for resilience they had developed collectively through the STRESS process and cemented in the vision statement. Soon after the report

was released, partner non-governmental organizations began integrating resilience strategies in their implementation approaches, and several referenced the STRESS findings in subsequent program designs. And, in interactions with partner agencies, Mercy Corps Uganda leadership found the STRESS provided a shared language for organizations to communicate in concrete, practical terms about how they might apply resilience concepts on the ground. One local partner and STRESS participant recalled, **“STRESS gave birth to the idea that there needs to be a shared vision for Karamoja that applies these capacities in concert.”**

The new vision seemed to resonate with donors as well. In late 2016 after having interacted heavily with the STRESS process, the USAID Uganda mission replaced its traditional country strategy with a systems-focused development approach—its first development objective devoted to resilience. In envisioning the GHG follow-on project, USAID issued a clear call for partners to push beyond the typical interventions and use a systems-focused approach to food security that emphasizes resilience capacities. The STRESS findings and development vision provided essential scaffolding and a rich partner network critical for responding to this call. Mercy Corps’ proposal, based upon a clear, resilience-focused approach to food security, was well received by USAID and ultimately successful.

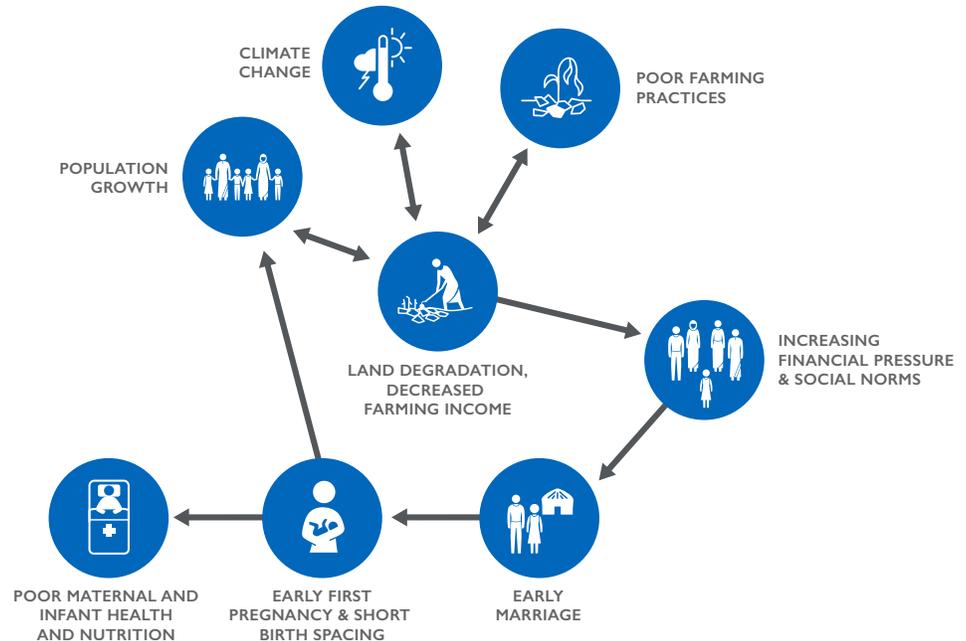


FIGURE 1: A FEEDBACK LOOP IDENTIFIED THROUGH THE STRESS PROCESS, ILLUSTRATING CYCLICAL DRIVERS OF FOOD INSECURITY IN ONE CONTEXT.

SHIFTING EXISTING PROGRAMMING: CAN A NEW, RESILIENCE-INFORMED DEVELOPMENT VISION INFLUENCE EXISTING PROGRAMMING?

The iterative nature and structure of STRESS was important for providing the team with an essential way to practice resilience concepts in a collaborative environment. Importantly, the STRESS first built upon the participants’ collective existing knowledge, then introduced activities—including a systems mapping exercise and data collection process and analysis—that challenged them to synthesize and contextualize their knowledge in new ways. In the process, the team began to see how abstract resilience concepts had concrete relevance for their interventions. This was particularly true for members of the Growth, Health and Governance (GHG) Food for Peace development food security activity (known previously as a development food aid program), which Mercy Corps had been leading in Northern Karamoja since 2012.

Although GHG was more than halfway through its project cycle, the team adapted several of its activities in response to STRESS findings, helping enhance resilience to food security shocks. These adaptations involved:

- **Responding to big picture trends:** Through the STRESS analysis, the team gained a deeper understanding of regional-scale shifts that were hard to recognize within an individual program. “My team leader sat down and said, ‘Where can we intervene to address the shocks?’” One STRESS participant and GHG team member remarked, “STRESS helped us in developing our workplan for the whole year by quarter since our workplan was all about addressing the shocks.” Trends toward rural expansion helped the agriculture team realize there was a growing population of farmers outside their service area, motivating them to expand their network of extension agents. The GHG health team also learned HIV rates were climbing in urbanizing areas far more quickly than they had previously thought. In response, the team began integrating HIV messaging within its existing programming around women decision-making, domestic violence, and antenatal care.
- **Integrating programming across sectors:** After practicing systems thinking during the STRESS process, GHG’s Chief of Party saw the program’s structure in a new light—she realized program sectors were isolated and could be more effective working in concert. As a result, Mercy Corps began layering interventions, introducing village savings and loans associations into different beneficiary groups (e.g., mother care groups, livestock trader groups). With access to savings, members of these groups could better prepare and respond to household shocks. Mother care group members could purchase medicine when a family member fell ill, and livestock traders could afford vaccines to protect their cattle from disease. Other STRESS participants felt a similar sense of urgency about layered programming after the process. One such respondent recalled, “If we hadn’t done STRESS, we wouldn’t have fully understood the integration. There would have been just siloed strategic objectives.”
- **Renewing the program’s emphasis on shocks:** The systems mapping exercise, coupled with community-level research, gave the team a deeper understanding of how certain shocks reverberated through the system and how severely they impacted households. Although GHG was aware of rising alcoholism in Karamoja, discussions with communities drew a direct, previously unidentified link to food insecurity. As one GHG staff member recalled, “We saw how alcoholism really impacts us at every turn.” The program began working with youth groups and male change agents to warn community members about the dangers of alcohol abuse, advocate to local government officials for the enforcement of laws that restricted the sale of alcohol, and encourage men and women to work together on farming and household tasks so everyone could have more to eat. In recent discussions, communities attested to the changing mindsets about alcohol and gender roles. One woman shared, “Before, men’s money was for drinking, now they support children’s education, help in the garden, and share cost of school fees.”
- **Shifting understanding of livelihoods and conflict:** At the time of the STRESS, Mercy Corps had started planning for a livestock pilot program aimed at increasing the productivity and health of the Karamoja livestock sector. The STRESS findings helped to elevate the importance and urgency of this intervention demonstrating that pastoralism remained a critical—yet threatened—livelihood. Proper investments in veterinary services, disease control, and livestock markets were necessary for building a more resilient Karamoja. With the additional evidence gathered during STRESS, Mercy Corps was able to garner USAID’s support for the initiative. STRESS research and analysis also shifted the team’s understanding of conflict from a focus on cattle raiding to emerging tensions around land and grazing rights. Since conducting the STRESS, Mercy Corps has increased its involvement in land use and land management through several activities such as mapping grazing land use and patterns, facilitating the development of a livestock master plan, and supporting the establishment of a land management committee.

Despite these accomplishments, STRESS participants also noted a number of opportunities for further improving program action. Lessons suggested that on-going team mentoring and capacity-building **were needed to ensure that resilience concepts translated into program tactics that helped communities take the right measures**

when faced with shocks. For instance, faced with an army worm outbreak that was devastating their crops, members of a GHG-supported village savings and loan association were not using the money they had saved to purchase pesticides to control the pests. This may be a result of how the team communicated the utility of village savings and loan associations, focusing on the use of loans to start small businesses rather than cope with household-level shocks. This suggests the important role community engagement must play in a resilience program. Risk awareness and behavior change are necessary to help individuals realize the full potential of activities to build resilience capacities in the face of a shock or stress. These findings also suggest the need to couple STRESS with a fuller resilience capacity-strengthening plan, tailored to the roles and responsibilities of different team members.

Timing, existing commitments, some circumstances beyond the control of the program, and the need to regularly connect teams across sectors and offices also complicated the translation of STRESS learning into programmatic shifts. GHG was already deep into a program cycle and some team members felt the demands on their time were already too high. Because the efforts to translate STRESS findings into work plans were not systematized across the program, activities overseen by particularly motivated team members and supervisors likely benefitted more. Senior managers dove back into the rigorous demands and priorities of programming in a challenging environment, and the long process exhausted some staff. “We’re putting out fires every day. **Lessons aren’t incorporated because we have to deal with logistics,**” one team member shared. “Too many chiefs of party don’t have time to think strategically.”

“The STRESS process makes people learn what resilience really is and because of the practicality of it, it makes people question what they’re really doing. It makes them say—we were calling this resilience but I don’t know if I’m really doing it that way,” one STRESS participant recalled. “The STRESS process provided more knowledge to the program team to be more intentional. Program teams couldn’t distinguish before if they were doing resilience. This was a game changer. Staff now examine and question about resilience.”



LESSONS FOR RISK AND RESILIENCE ASSESSMENTS

This case focuses on the use of a risk and resilience assessment, Mercy Corps’ STRESS process, in a particular context; Karamoja. However, in asking the central question of whether the activity fulfilled its purpose of informing a resilience-based development vision for the region, this case (along with the others in the series) includes a series of recommendations for other implementing organizations looking to conduct risk and resilience assessments. Here, we separate these lessons into: 1) structure, mechanics, and content and 2) opportunities for capacity strengthening.

STRUCTURE, MECHANICS, AND CONTENT

Establish clear expectations for the time and resources required for an impactful risk and resilience assessment, given that assessments draw on the time of team members fully engaged in programs. During the Karamoja STRESS, the scope of the process led to fatigue and tension with leadership when staff struggled to meet the demands of the process in addition to fulfilling their other responsibilities. This experience highlighted a core tension: while ideally the capacity strengthening and information-gathering objectives of a risk and resilience assessment should be mutually reinforcing, they can be competing priorities that require compromises and proper planning. Despite the time pressures, many STRESS participants expressed that their engagement in the process was a critical learning opportunity that changed the way they work and improved their program actions.

Translating the findings from risk and resilience assessments into action requires an intentional process and clear guidance. While the STRESS identified the key resilience capacities, it was not automatically clear to many team members what these findings meant for their own work plans and how they might shift their approach. In the absence of consistent mentoring and a facilitated process for critically reexamining their work, some interviewees felt that there were missed opportunities to better integrate resilience findings into strategy and programming. When the translation of STRESS findings did occur, it was driven by particularly motivated team members and supervisors who carved out the time to do so, but was not systematized across program processes. This experience suggests that those leading a risk and resilience assessment need to build in the time and support required to help participants make the leap between resilience findings and translation into tangible action within resilience programming and strategy, particularly in complex environments where expectations are already high.

An internal and external communications plan is a critical component of any risk and resilience assessment. As the STRESS concluded, the Uganda leadership team began preparing for a number of conferences and meetings to share the results with donors and external partners. While investing in these opportunities was critical to strengthening partnerships and garnering support for the development vision, some internal STRESS participants felt overlooked in the process. A stronger internal roll out and communications strategy, tailored to the needs of both internal and external audiences, is essential to maximizing the application of rich assessment findings in resilience practice.

CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

Planning adequate time for staff capacity strengthening alongside the application of a risk and resilience assessment is essential to avoid competing priorities. Before the start of a risk and resilience assessment, practitioners must determine the capacities staff will need—what they should know and be able to do—to complete an assessment and apply its findings to strategy or programming. Interviews with GHG staff and beneficiary communities identified a number of instances in which communities have not fully realized the potential of activities in building resilience to shocks or stresses. These findings suggest that complicated, systems-based concepts like resilience require reinforcement, clear pathways and tools for application in their own work, and ongoing training and reflection to avoid team members falling back into regular development practices.

Practitioners should consider leveraging risk and resilience assessments as an opportunity to establish new partnerships and strengthen capacity within partner organizations. The Karamoja STRESS was a collaborative learning experience for Mercy Corps and its partners. Through the process, they gained a common understanding and way of speaking about resilience in the Karamoja context and contributed to a new, shared development vision about how they might work together in the future. Other practitioners are likely to find that translating risk and resilience assessment findings into action will require a range of stakeholders working in concert. Integrating external partners and donors in the learning journey is an important way to gain new perspectives while also building resilience capacity within these organizations as a foundation for future collaborations.

THE REAL RISK AND RESILIENCE ASSESSMENT CASE STUDY SERIES

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