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**A SERIES OVERVIEW**  
**RISK AND RESILIENCE ASSESSMENT CASE**  
**STUDY SERIES**

REFLECTIONS ON THE USE  
AND IMPACT OF RISK AND  
RESILIENCE ASSESSMENTS

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## ABOUT THE RESILIENCE EVALUATION, ANALYSIS AND LEARNING (REAL)

### ASSOCIATE AWARD:

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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### DISCLAIMER:

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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.

### WHAT IS A RISK AND RESILIENCE ASSESSMENT?

A risk and resilience assessment is any process aimed at deepening understanding of risk and vulnerability within a given context.

Mercy Corps has developed a risk and resilience assessment called the [Strategic Resilience Assessment \(STRESS\)](#). STRESS is an intensive methodology for developing a resilience theory of change to inform the design of a large, complex resilience program; development of a regional or country-level strategy; the mainstreaming of resilience principles into an existing program; or the inception or refinement stage of any program that values resilience.

Increasingly, the world's most vulnerable communities find themselves at the intersection of multiple intense and interconnected shocks and stresses: climate change-fueled drought and its impacts on livelihoods put pressure on Nigerien families to marry their girls young; monsoon season compounds the vulnerability of the nearly 700,000 Rohingya who fled conflict to live in Bangladesh's refugee camps; a new outbreak of Ebola coupled with ongoing conflict and political instability in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) threatens to deepen food insecurity in the region. In the last decade, the international development community has committed significant resources to addressing these complex problems systematically. Some of the first innovations within this resilience imperative rightly focused on robustly assessing the connections between (and differential vulnerability around) social, ecological, and economic risks. Today, understanding systems within a given context—through these risk and resilience assessments—has become foundational to our work as resilience practitioners. But, as the drivers of risk and vulnerability intensify, so too does the urgency to do our work better and faster. With our deepening experience assessing risk and resilience, it is just as vital to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the process itself to ensure we are able to learn and adapt as quickly as contexts are changing.



*"In 2016 the number of chronically undernourished people in the world is estimated to have increased to 815 million, up from 777 million in 2015... After a prolonged decline, this recent increase could signal a reversal of trends. The food security situation has worsened in particular in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, South-Eastern Asia and Western Asia, and deteriorations have been observed most notably in situations of conflict combined with droughts or floods."*

**United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, 2017: The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World**

## STRESS - PROVIDING A ROADMAP AND STRENGTHENING CAPACITY

### WHAT IS STRESS AND WHAT ROLE DOES IT PLAY IN OUR LARGER RESILIENCE WORK?

As a concept, resilience requires us to change the way we think and act, but what exactly should this look like in practice? When Mercy Corps established an overarching framework for resilience thinking built on five guiding questions, they realized teams needed a concrete methodology for applying this thinking.<sup>1</sup> Their risk and resilience assessments, STRESS, emerged as the first real process for doing so, enabling practitioners to:

- **Deepen their understanding of the complex systems in which they work:** Framed by the guiding resilience questions, STRESS provides a roadmap for analyzing each unique context to assess: 1) how complex, interconnected drivers of instability and recurrent crises threaten progress; 2) how these drivers impact groups differently and why; and 3) what specific resilience abilities and resources these

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the STRESS process, teams explore a set of five guiding questions that frame how they should apply resilience thinking within a given program or portfolio. These include: Resilience to what end? Resilience of what? Resilience to what? Resilience for whom? Resilience through what?

groups need to learn, cope, adapt, and transform in the face of growing shocks and stresses.

- **Design a contextualized resilience theory of change based on this understanding:** The resulting analysis allows teams to create more robust strategies and targeted interventions that support communities in achieving long-term well-being outcomes and transformational change.

Most importantly, the assessment itself becomes a capacity strengthening tool for teams. More than ten distinct applications of STRESS (and many more pre-STRESS assessment iterations) confirm that thorough contextual analysis often requires a paradigm shift in team members' thinking and actions. The activities staged over four phases (i.e., Scope, Inform, Analyze, and Strategize) aim to catalyze this shift incrementally. The interconnected nature of shocks, stresses, and instability often requires a restructuring of roles, working relationships, and organizational processes to support communities in meaningfully building their resilience. For example, resilience often requires team members to transcend sectors and design and implement activities in an integrated way. But, administrative and operational processes must facilitate, not hinder, this kind of systems-level, integrated collaboration. Ultimately, when it works best, STRESS helps teams apply systems thinking to their work, ensuring they can reframe and reimagine both what they do and how they work together.

However, as these case studies reveal, this is very challenging in practice. Strengthening staff capacity in resilience, assessing risk and resilience, and yielding high quality findings from one's assessment can often be competing priorities. And, existing requirements in certain contexts—like the start-up or refinement of a large, complex program—may already be so rigorous that the addition of a risk and resilience assessment can feel burdensome. There is also the uncharted territory that lies beyond a theory of change: what does resilience require us to do differently when moving from strategy and design to implementation, monitoring, and evaluation, and adaptive management?

Each step in the evolution of STRESS has provided opportunities for contending with and addressing these core challenges. Here, we explore the impacts of these risk and resilience assessments and offer reflections on how their design and implementation can affect a team's ability to strengthen staff's capacity to apply resilience-related thinking during the process, yield quality findings, and apply these findings to program-level action.

When STRESS functions best, it yields critical findings about the social, ecological, and economic systems communities rely on, while serving as an invaluable capacity strengthening activity for teams engaged in resilience work.



PHOTO CREDIT: JEAN SHERIDAN FOR MERCY CORPS (2012).  
MERCY CORPS PARTNER FROM THE "CENTRE D'ECOUTE" EXPLAINS COMMUNITY BANKS TO A COMMUNITY IN BANGASSOU, CAR.

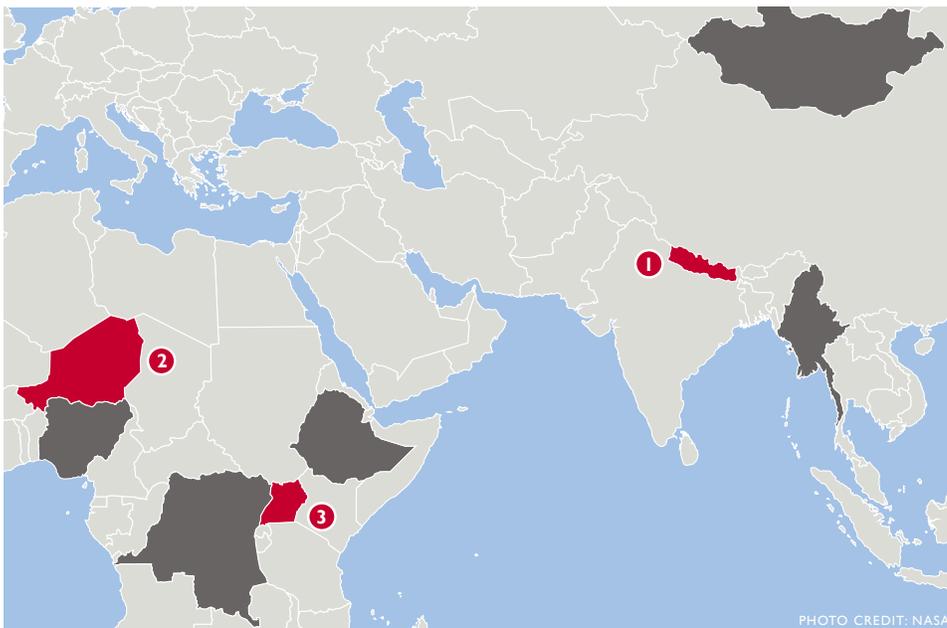
# THE CASE STUDIES

## WHY STUDY THESE RISK AND RESILIENCE ASSESSMENTS?

In selecting case studies for this series, we considered the following factors:

- **Diversity of application:** How can we increase the relevance of the series by illustrating the use of a risk and resilience assessment for a variety of purposes (e.g., informing a country strategy, designing a complex resilience program)?
- **Diversity of contexts:** How can we increase the relevance of the findings by examining the use of a risk and resilience assessment in very different contexts (e.g., different regions; social, ecological, and economic contexts)?
- **Milestones within the evolution of STRESS:** How might certain cases showcase major milestones in the evolution of STRESS, helping illustrate the most critical lessons learned?

Based on these factors, multiple cases emerged as compelling stand-alone narratives, while contributing to a broader understanding of Mercy Corps' experience with and learning from risk and resilience assessments. As illustrated in Figure 1, these include: Mid and Far West Nepal, Niger, and Karamoja in Northern Uganda. Conducted at different scales, each for a different purpose in a different context, these cases provide a comprehensive look at STRESS over time.



### 1. MID WEST & FAR WEST NEPAL

**A complex food security program start-up:** Informing Promoting Agriculture, Health and Alternative Livelihoods (PAHAL)

### 2. NIGER

**A country strategy:** Focused primarily on achieving resilient food security in Niger

### 3. KARAMOJA, UGANDA

**A regional strategy:** Referred to as the Vision for an Empowered Karamoja

FIGURE 1: MERCY CORPS HAS APPLIED STRESS IN VARIOUS CONTEXTS. THESE THREE CASES IN NEPAL, UGANDA AND NIGER (IN RED) ARE DIVERSE IN TERMS OF APPLICATION, CONTEXT AND GEOGRAPHY.

# LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In developing the recommendations below, we synthesized takeaways across the three completed cases to illustrate broader understandings about what works when conducting risk and resilience assessments. Individual cases provide more detailed findings, some tailored more specifically to a given context. In both this framing document and the cases, we packaged recommendations for a wide range of practitioners, including those with extensive experience conducting risk and resilience assessments and those who have never completed one.

Ultimately, the work of this series is ongoing. We look forward to revisiting and enhancing our findings with new evidence and a stronger collective narrative about the impacts of risk and resilience assessments.

## THE RECOMMENDATIONS

**Adaptive management is critical to the success of a risk and resilience assessment.** Because the systems communities rely on are constantly changing, teams must also be reflecting, learning, and adapting in parallel. For this reason, Mercy Corps has long recognized adaptive management as an essential practice in operationalizing resilience and utilizing findings, and this review reinforced a similar need within risk and resilience assessments. As a risk and resilience assessment, STRESS is already iterative in its design, establishing foundational knowledge and then incrementally providing nuance and data to support, refine, or adapt findings. When it functions best, STRESS is also a capacity strengthening exercise, enabling teams to practice and internalize this work of reflecting, learning, and adapting repeatedly, for example, as new challenges emerge, tasks are completed, or data are collected. This not only yields strong assessment findings, but also builds the necessary skills for adapting as program contexts change.

**Risk and resilience assessments benefit significantly from strong leaders who can set clear goals and expectations, generate and maintain enthusiasm among staff, and facilitate the translation of findings into action.** Engaging staff in deeper contextual learning through a risk and resilience assessment can fundamentally challenge the work staff does and norms in the way they work together. Navigating these programmatic and operational paradigm shifts requires engagement, enthusiasm, and a willingness and ability to adapt. These cases revealed that strong, committed senior leaders are critical to creating an environment that enables staff to adapt during the assessment and beyond. This includes leaders communicating with and motivating staff at all levels around goals and time and resource expectations. It is also critical that leaders help staff manage their workloads to accommodate the assessment and new responsibilities identified during the process, in addition to administrative or operational shifts required to incorporate larger resilience principles into the program or strategy. This is especially true for teams simultaneously navigating the rigorous demands of a program start-up or refinement phase.

**Developing and implementing a learning and mentoring plan, alongside risk and resilience assessments is critical to implementing its findings.** Lessons from these cases revealed that translating findings from risk and resilience assessment into robust, risk-informed program action requires consistent mentoring and strong systems that foster reflection and integration. The nature of support can also be an adaptive process. It might begin with a draft learning plan that scopes pedagogical and curricular needs within a risk and resilience assessment. Then, based on staff experiences within this process, teams might build out more extensive plans articulating the need for resources, ongoing technical support, training, and other guidance aimed at preparing staff to apply assessment findings. Because efforts to operationalize resilience are still so new, the capacities teams need to complete assessments and implement their findings may not be clear. However, planning for and implementing processes for staff reflection and learning is essential in leveraging the assets staff bring to processes and strengthening their capacities where needed. Mercy Corps has adapted its approach to reflect a better understanding of what skills

teams need to translate learning into action, and to ensure we have the tools, guidance and examples required for teams to understand how to move from theory to practice.

**Strong internal and external communications and knowledge management systems help maximize the value and impact of risk and resilience assessments.** Since risk and resilience assessments—and resilience in general—require adaptation and strong learning plans, strong knowledge management practices and internal and external communications systems are just as critical. Across all of the cases, there was room to facilitate stronger knowledge sharing, and communicate findings internally. These are the systems critical to fostering learning through adaptation, sharing ongoing achievements and innovations, and ultimately maximizing resilience investments. Plans for knowledge management and communications should identify engagement strategies for assessment participants and other stakeholders (e.g., donors, potential partner organizations); establish clear timelines and processes for sharing and reinforcing new learning; and articulate the range of materials (e.g., slide decks, briefs, videos, posters) needed to communicate with different audiences.

**Practitioners should leverage risk and resilience assessments as rich opportunities for establishing new partnerships and strengthening existing ones.** Because risk and resilience assessment help teams unpack shocks, stresses, and vulnerability throughout social, ecological, and economic systems, findings often call for capacity strengthening that is beyond the expertise or bandwidth of a single implementing organization. Strong partnerships with public, private, and civil society actors can help ensure all capacities are addressed. Across all cases, having diverse external partners (at multiple scales) in the room during the assessment deepened expertise and contextual knowledge, reinforced partnerships and coalitions, provided opportunities for capacity strengthening, revealed new potential for collaboration, and built ownership over assessment findings and a collective sense of responsibility for implementing them. Dedicating the time and resources necessary to recruit these stakeholders and ensure the process is inclusive, accessible, and collaborative for all actors leads to lasting payoffs.

## THE REAL RISK AND RESILIENCE ASSESSMENT CASE STUDY SERIES

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