Photo Credit: Uganda/T. Cook

STRESS: STRATEGIC RESILIENCE ASSESSMENT

Guidelines Document

JULY 2017

MERCY CORPS

Acknowledgments

Recommended Citation:

Levine, E., Vaughan, E., & Nicholson, D. (2017). Strategic Resilience Assessment Guidelines. Portland, OR: Mercy Corps.

Table of Contents

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION AND GETTING STARTED

SECTION 2: GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING A STRESS

Phase 4: Strategize 26

Conclusion 28

List of Tables

List of Figures

Purpose of This Document

This is a practitioner's guide to the Strategic Resilience Assessment (STRESS). The opening section outlines the purpose of a STRESS and the conditions under which one may be conducted. The remaining sections provide guidance through the process. This is the external version of an internal Mercy Corps guidelines document that is accompanied by a robust set of tools and resources not included here. Individuals or organizations unaffiliated with Mercy Corps can contact the authors (listed at the end of this document) to learn more about accessing these resources.

While this guide presents best practices based on current knowledge and experience, no two situations are identical and certain contexts may require practitioners to alter the format and sequencing of the activities presented here.

Key Vocabulary

System
An interconnected collection of things (e.g., people, institutions, infrastructure, societal norms, ecosystems), organized in a pattern or structure that changes frequently.

Systems Approach
› The processes of understanding how different things (e.g., people, institutions, infrastructure, societal norms, ecosystems) influence one another within a whole.
› An approach to problem solving that treats a problem as part of an overall, interconnected structure.

Shocks
Sudden onset, high-impact events, usually of a limited duration. These include dangerous natural phenomena, human activities or conditions that may cause loss of life, injury or other health impacts; property damage; loss of livelihoods and services; social and economic disruption; or environmental damage.

Stresses
Slow onset events or changes (e.g., land degradation, erratic rainfall, persistent conflict, price instability) that undermine development outcomes. Stresses are lengthier disruptions that can be high impact (similar to shocks), but generally occur over a longer period.

Communities
A group of people living in close geographic proximity. Examples include neighborhoods in cities, isolated villages in rural landscapes or collections of villages that interact regularly.

Development Trends
Identifiable changes or defining dynamics (e.g., declining educational quality, privatization of public services, shrinking of a natural resource base) within social, ecological and economic contexts that can serve as positive or negative influencing factors.

Development Constraints
Factors that limit, inhibit or reverse positive achievements towards development goals and objectives.

Development Vision
An articulation of the goal development actors seek to achieve, coupled with outcomes and objectives they believe are required to achieve this goal.

Capacities
The various attributes, abilities and resources that people, households and communities need to proactively prepare for, manage and recover from shocks and stresses.

Resilience Theory of Change
A comprehensive description of how resilience capacities will support progress toward development goals and objectives in the face of shocks and stresses.

SECTION 1:
INTRODUCTION AND GETTING STARTED

Mercy Corps is working to ensure practitioners can use resilience thinking to prevent growing ecological, economic and social instability from derailing progress toward humanitarian and development objectives. For Mercy Corps, resilience is a process—a way of thinking, acting and learning.[1] We define resilience as the capacity of communities in complex socio-ecological systems to learn, cope, adapt and transform in the face of shocks and stresses.

Our Strategic Resilience Assessment (STRESS), provides humanitarian and development teams practical guidance through new ways of: 1) analyzing the places they work to understand how the complex, interconnected drivers of instability threaten progress; and 2) designing strategies and interventions that reflect these insights and support communities in achieving long-term well-being outcomes and transformational change. Through STRESS, teams work within a given context to:

❯ Identify and understand important shocks and stresses that impact or undermine well-being outcomes.

❯ Understand the underlying factors that help determine different population subgroups' or geographies' sensitivity and exposure to shocks and stresses.

❯ Understand the resilience capacities people, households, communities and systems need to prepare for, manage and recover from shocks and stresses and reducing vulnerability over time.

❯ Identify the changes in the enabling environment necessary to support increased access to and use of existing and new resilience capacities.

❯ Develop a resilience-focused theory of change for their unique development or humanitarian context, which allows teams to design more robust long-term strategies, targeted interventions and concrete program activities and indicators aimed at building resilience.

Mercy Corps/Sean Sheridan

❯ WHAT IS STRESS?

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

In Niger, STRESS helped the country team challenge commonly held assumptions about food insecurity to build a resilience strategy that reimagined both their interventions and the way they work together.

---

1   To learn more about Mercy Corps' approach Resilience approach visit www.mercycorps.org/resilience.

Though it yields tangible outputs, this process is also essential to team learning, helping shift their thinking and actions to become more: **proactive**—by developing an evidence-based understanding of context; **connected**—by structuring roles and processes to address the interconnections between instability and vulnerability revealed through STRESS; and **adaptive**—by leveraging the resilience framework to test, measure and enhance work over time. After completing a STRESS, practitioners should have a set of outputs—and will have practiced critical skills in systems thinking and complexity—that can be used continuously to improve and adapt their programs during development and implementation. In this way, the STRESS represents the start of an ongoing process, extending beyond the life of any one program.

When Should We Conduct a STRESS?

While STRESS is a foundational process for integrating resilience thinking into practitioners' work, the specific methodology is not appropriate in all circumstances. Use the table below to help evaluate whether STRESS is a good fit.

Appropriate Uses for STRESS	Inappropriate Uses for STRESS
Developing a new country, subnational or regional strategy: Country programs interested in building resilience as part of their long-term development strategy can use STRESS to develop a strategic-level theory of change, for a portfolio of programs, that integrates resilience and development.	**Developing a general development strategy or theory of change:** STRESS is designed specifically for resilience-focused strategies and program design. Some of the tools may be useful for broader strategy processes, but not the methodology as a whole.
Designing large, multi-year (e.g., 5-year) programs that value resilience building: Increasingly, donors are interested in seeing measurable resilience outcomes alongside core development goals. STRESS can help identify the resilience capacities communities need to reach these development goals.	**Conducting community-scale assessments and action planning:** These tasks are better suited for other tools (e.g., Participatory Disaster Risk Assessments—PDRAs).
Mainstreaming resilience outcomes into existing development programs: Major shifts in the social, ecological or economic context in which a team is working, donor strategies or other factors may warrant efforts to integrate resilience outcomes.	**Designing short-term projects:** STRESS should not be used to design short-term (i.e., < 3 years) or smaller scale (i.e., under $5 million) projects.
Informing an inception phase or complex program start-up for multi-year programs: Some complex, multi-disciplinary programs provide space and resources during a start-up phase to develop an in-depth program design, implementation and measurement plan. STRESS can help teams develop a deeper understanding of resilience and the vulnerabilities of the target population to create a theory of change that also helps inform the measurement plan.	**Researching specific questions:** STRESS is a great way to surface gaps and areas for research, but it is not suited to specific research efforts or sector-specific technical studies.
	Replacing sector-specific tools: STRESS should not replace sector-specific assessment and analysis tools (e.g., gender analysis, Emergency Market Mapping Analysis-EMMA, Climate Vulnerability and Capacity Assessments-CVCAs) that practitioners value and use regularly.

TABLE 1: APPROPRIATE AND INAPPROPRIATE APPLICATIONS OF STRESS

Applying a Resilience Lens Through STRESS

The STRESS process is a central component of Mercy Corps' resilience framework, illustrated in Figure 1. Throughout the STRESS process, teams explore a set of guiding questions (pictured in yellow) that frame how they should apply resilience thinking within a given program or portfolio.
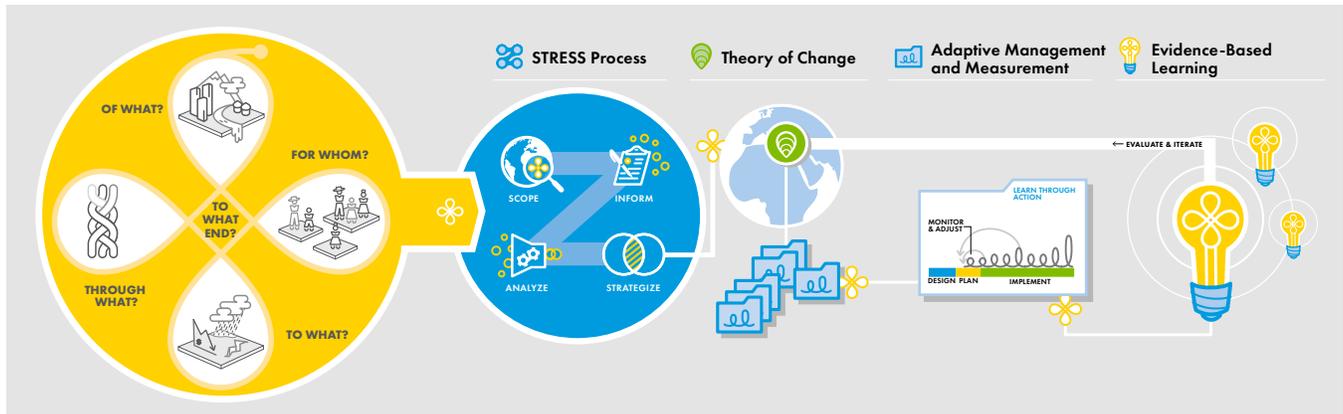
Figure 1: Mercy Corps' Resilience Framework

The process itself plays out in four phases:

1. **Scope**: The team builds a contextual understanding of the system based on the guiding resilience questions, establishes the research focus and prepares research plans and activities.

2. **Inform**: The team employs a mixed-methods approach to collecting the quantitative and qualitative information needed for an informed analysis.

3. **Analyze**: The team evaluates and synthesizes collected information. While the Inform and Analyze Phases are presented here as distinct, they function as iterative cycles of information collection and analysis in practice.

Figure 2: The Four Phases of the STRESS Process

4. **Strategize**: The team develops a theory of change, which includes the key elements required to build resilience.

Because of the central nature these guiding resilience questions play in STRESS, we begin by providing an overview of each and the role they play within the process.

Resilience of What?

Understanding Systems Dynamics: What needs to become more resilient?

This question refers to both the: 1) target geography, and 2) elements of key systems within that geography that relate to the development trends of interest.

1. **Target Geography**: The geography targeted during the process, often defined by ecological boundaries (e.g., a watershed, agro-ecological zone, flood plain), administrative boundaries (e.g., states, districts, cities) or economic boundaries (e.g., market systems). These boundaries may vary significantly in scale and will influence the type and depth of information practitioners are able to collect, making them important to identify early.

2. **Key System Elements**: The overall system within the target geography is broken into social, ecological and economic elements:

   ❯ **Social Systems**: The relationships, behaviors, cultural rules and norms between people, households, communities, institutions and groups, as well as the social services (e.g., health, education) these groups provide. Examples include political or governance networks.

   ❯ **Ecological Systems**: The natural resources and ecosystems services that support the major livelihood strategies and living conditions in the target area.

   ❯ **Economic Systems**: The systems governing the production and consumption of goods and services in the target geography.

The key elements of these three systems interact to influence development progress and resilience capacities.

Resilience to What End?

Articulating a Development Vision: What well-being outcomes and objectives will be achieved and sustained in the face of instability, by building resilience?

Resilience is not an end goal in itself; it is a means to ensuring we maintain—and ideally accelerate—progress toward a specific well-being outcome in the face of shocks and stresses. This question helps identify the development vision for the program or strategy (which is the focus of STRESS) if one does not already exist. A clear development vision is comprised of the following:

   ❯ **A Goal**: A high-level statement regarding what the country or program team wishes to achieve.

   ❯ **Outcomes**: A set of three to five achievements which collectively contribute to meeting the goal.

   ❯ **Objectives**: A set of strategies which contribute to the achievement of each outcome.

These components are displayed visually and are accompanied by a narrative explaining details that may be challenging to convey graphically.

Resilience for Whom?

Developing Vulnerability Profiles: Whose resilience capacity needs to be enhanced? How are different people vulnerable to different shocks and stresses, and why? What unique characteristics influence their exposure, sensitivity and vulnerability to these shocks and stresses?

Vulnerability varies across given areas and social groups. The inequitable distribution of rights, resources and power may make certain individuals, households, communities or groups more sensitive to the impacts of shocks and stresses and less able to access the strategies required to deal with these impacts effectively. By investigating the geographic and social factors driving vulnerability—such as gender, race, ethnicity, cultural practices and age—we can better understand the kinds of threats different groups face, informing teams which populations to target for future interventions, and how.
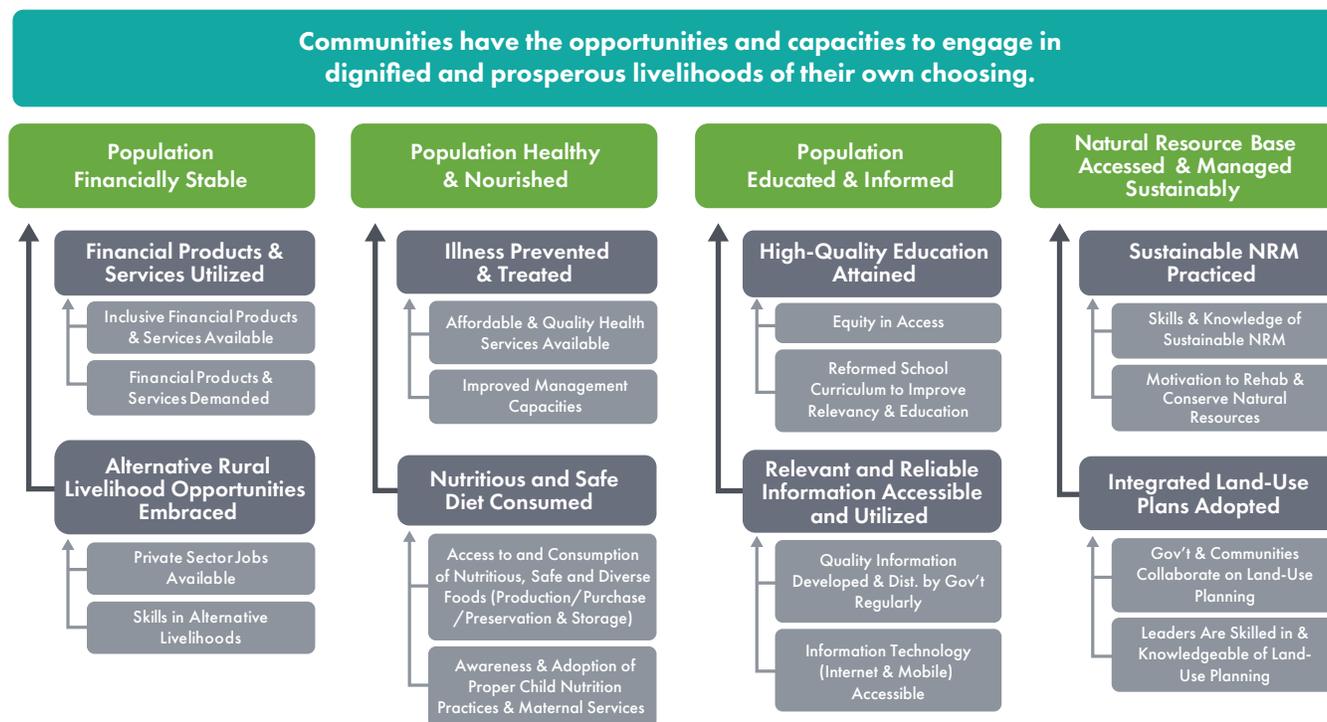
Figure 3: Example of a Simplified Development Vision

Ultimately, this question helps determine both the target population for resilience building, as well as the actors teams will need to engage to support this population, including additional populations, institutions (i.e., private and public) and individuals, among other actors at various scales.

Resilience to What?

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

It is important to prioritize a set of shocks and stresses threatening the target population and describe how they relate to each other. The potential list of disturbances in any context is long; however, teams can prioritize these disturbances based on the likelihood they might occur, the degree to which they hinder the development outcomes of the target populations, or the severity of their impacts on well-being outcomes.

> **Shocks**: Sudden onset, high-impact events usually of a limited duration. These include dangerous natural phenomena, human activities or conditions that may cause loss of life, injury or other health impacts, property damage, loss of livelihoods and services, social and economic disruption or environmental damage.

> **Stresses**: Slow onset events or changes—such as land degradation, erratic rainfall, persistent conflict or price instability—that undermine development outcomes. These lengthier disruptions can be high-impact (similar to shocks), but generally occur over a longer period.

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

Categorizing shocks and stresses across key systems (based on existing knowledge) can help teams understand the full range of disturbances and how they might prioritize them for further investigation. It is important to be as specific as possible when articulating a shock or stress. Teams should avoid general categories of shocks and stresses (e.g., natural disasters, conflict, market disruptions), opting instead for more specific descriptions (e.g., ethnic violence, border closures, price instability, flooding, deforestation). Additionally, teams should avoid conflating shocks and stresses with development constraints, defined as factors that limit, inhibit or reverse positive achievements towards development goals and objectives. Table 2 illustrates the difference between shocks, stresses and development constraints.

System	Shock	Stress	Development Constraint
Social	❭ Cattle raiding ❭ Instances of ethnic violence	❭ Oppression of a certain group as a result of government policy	❭ Inequality ❭ Population growth
Economic	❭ Border closure for imports/exports ❭ Sudden price change or currency devaluation	❭ Currency or price instability ❭ High import tax resulting in high food costs	❭ Poor access to markets ❭ Poor economic policy
Ecological	❭ Flooding ❭ Landslides ❭ Severe storms	❭ Environmental degradation (e.g., deforestation, harmful agricultural practices) ❭ Slow onset drought or shifting rainy seasons	❭ Low quality soil ❭ Poor land-use planning

TABLE 2: Categorization of Specific Shocks and Stresses by Key System

Resilience Through What?

Identifying Resilience Capacities: What specific capacities will increase the ability of individuals, households and communities to prepare for, manage and respond to shocks and stresses over time?

Several factors help determine the role and function of resilience capacities—defined as the various attributes, abilities and resources people, households and communities need to prepare for and respond to shocks and stresses. First, a given ability, resource or attribute may not build resilience in all contexts. For this reason, the context itself—a capacity's relationship to identified shocks and stresses; the way in which this ability, resource or attribute helps manage and recover from shocks and stresses; and how this response ultimately supports well-being outcomes—contributes to a capacity's role and function. For example, the capacity "access to and use of financial services" may not always build resilience, but when used to invest in drought resistant seeds to help mitigate the impacts of drought or variable rains, this capacity could help sustain progress toward food security. Additionally, the structures, terms and conditions of capacities must support the ability of people or communities to respond to shocks and stresses. To revisit our financial services example, the social norms, rules and repayment terms (e.g., fair terms on loans for medical services when a family member becomes seriously ill) around these services must enable people to respond to a shock or stress.

Capacities also must be:

› **Positive**: Improving well-being outcomes in the face of shocks and stresses compared to negative factors, which have adverse impacts and therefore do not contribute to resilience.

› **Predictive**: Serving a predictive role, the effects of which can be observed in connection with desired well-being outcomes.

› **User-based**: Specific to people, households, communities or institutions.

› **Time-sensitive**: Observed within and assigned to a specific point in time, because they change depending on circumstances, use and the prevalence of shocks and stresses.

› **Multidimensional**: Integrating a unique combination of factors and abilities—that can be social, technical or psychological in nature, among other attributes—required by a given context.

› **Multilevel**: Residing with people and groups across multiple levels, from local to international. The ability of target populations to manage, prepare for, or recover from shocks and stresses depends both on the capacities they possess, but also the capacities—some of which may be specific to a given level or shared at multiple scales—of actors at different levels who support these populations.

It is useful to organize capacities into three groupings that reflect different dimensions of resilience.[2] Collectively, these groupings represent the spectrum of change required for resilience—from lower absorptive intensity to higher transformative intensity in terms of required time, effort and investment. For this reason, individuals, households, communities and systems typically build resilience through a combination of these three dimensions, examples of which are illustrated in Table 3.

They include:

› **Absorptive:** The ability to minimize exposure and sensitivity to shocks and stresses through preventative measures and appropriate coping strategies to avoid permanent, negative impacts.

› **Adaptive:** The ability to make informed choices and changes in livelihood and other strategies in response to longer-term social, economic and ecological change.

› **Transformative:** The ability to change the underlying conditions and enabling environment—that limit absorptive and adaptive capacity—to achieve more extensive improvements in well-being despite exposure to shocks and stresses. These include the governance mechanisms, policies and regulations, cultural and gender norms, infrastructure, community networks and formal and informal social protection mechanisms that constitute the enabling environment.

2   Béné, C., Wood, R. G., Newsham, A., & Davies, M. (2012). Resilience: New utopia or new tyranny? Reflection about the potentials and limits of the concept of resilience in relation to vulnerability reduction programmes (IDS Working Papers). Institute of Development Studies, 2012(405), 1-61.

Capacities	Examples for Drought
Absorptive	❭ Crop insurance which reduces financial impact after crop losses from drought ❭ Community disaster response plans, which can reduce loss of life during a drought ❭ Livestock fodder reserves to prevent loss of animals during a drought
Adaptive	❭ Loans to invest in risk reduction technologies to mitigate the impact of drought before the start of an El Niño year ❭ Commercial destocking options to prevent loss of livestock and financial resources prior to drought ❭ Flexible school schedules to prevent students in drought-prone areas from dropping out
Transformative	❭ Shifts in cultural rules to allow women access to loans and savings products ❭ Establishment of land tenure system that reduces conflict and enables investment in risk-reducing land management practices ❭ Government ministries and policies supporting private sector entities that provide services and technologies with risk-reduction benefits

TABLE 3: EXAMPLE CAPACITIES DESIGNED TO HELP BUILD RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF DROUGHT

Navigating This Guide

The four phases of the STRESS process frame the remainder of this guide. For each phase, we provide step-by-step guidance through central questions: What are the objectives? Who is responsible for stewarding this part of the process? How long might this take? How will the outputs created during this phase inform the larger understanding STRESS promises to build? While engagement in this work will vary based on a variety of factors (e.g., context, financial and human resource restrictions), there are design requirements (illustrated in Table 4) that teams must complete to ensure STRESS findings reflect a deeper contextual understanding of the systems in which communities are embedded.

Design and Methodology Requirements	Required Outputs
Teams must: ❭ Design their process around the guiding resilience questions ❭ Complete the participatory scoping workshop ❭ Conduct systemic analysis of development trends and constraints ❭ Use a mixed-methods approach to data collection ❭ Complete the strategize workshop	*Teams must produce:* ❭ An analysis of development trends and constraints ❭ A characterization of shocks and stresses ❭ Vulnerability profiles ❭ A description of current and potential resilience capacities ❭ A resilience theory of change

TABLE 4: FUNDAMENTAL DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY REQUIREMENTS AND REQUIRED OUTPUTS

SECTION 2:
GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING A STRESS

Phase 1: Scope

GOAL: Explore the guiding resilience questions, identify the key research areas, define the research methods and develop a management plan for the following phases.

Teams begin the STRESS by establishing the scope of the process (e.g., rationale, scale, key questions and methods) they will use to deepen contextual understanding through the guiding resilience questions. The key steps required to scope a STRESS are listed below. While our experience suggests this order is most efficient and effective, it is not fixed, and some steps can be completed concurrently.

Step 1: Set the Rationale, Objectives and Deadline

To avoid a process that is too broad or a poor fit for the intended purpose, engage with regional, country or program management staff to determine the team's rationale and objectives in completing a STRESS. This initial conversation can often happen through scheduled phone calls and online conversations. There are a number of reasons for undertaking the process (a full list of appropriate and inappropriate uses of STRESS can be found on page 7). In addition to these primary reasons, teams may have secondary objectives, such as building staff capacity, informing a community of development stakeholders or donor engagement. Articulating all objectives clearly is critical to framing the scope and timeline of the process. Figure 4 lists some factors determining the level of effort required in completing a STRESS.

8-10 WEEKS	8-10 MONTHS
LOW	**HIGH**
• Limited geographic scale	• Broad range of geographies
• Reliance on existing analyses	• Focus on primary data collection and deep technical studies
• Limited field work	• Potential for iterative rounds of field work
• Less detailed theory of change	• Very detailed theory of change
• Lower need for staff capacity building	• Robust knowledge products
	• Higher need for staff capacity building

Figure 4: Range in Level of Effort Required for STRESS

Teams should also identify: 1) the desired end date of the assessment process, 2) when the final products are needed and 3) the budget available for the assessment.

Step 2: Form the STRESS Team

Work with leadership to identify and select participants and process owners for the STRESS. Consider selecting a cohort of participants who collectively: 1) represent a broad set of disciplines, 2) have extensive operational experience, 3) possess an adequate combination of technical expertise and field experience, 4) represent an

appropriate balance of gender and social groups, and 5) represent both the organization and external partners and stakeholders. While there is no one team configuration that befits all contexts, Mercy Corps' experience has validated the following arrangement:

> **Core Team:** This group is comprised of locally based program staff from various relevant disciplines charged with guiding the assessment and providing context and technical support throughout the process. This team should be small (recommendation: 5-10 people). Typically they spend approximately 10% of their time on the STRESS, with low-involvement periods (approximately 5%) and important, but limited, high-involvement periods (approximately 20%).

> **Assessment Lead:** This individual will lead the assessment, ensuring all phases are executed correctly and preparing several written outputs, including the final assessment products. Ideally this person has a background in related research methods, research across sectors and at least some resilience theory. This position requires a high level of involvement—typically 100% of a full-time position. Depending on the timeframe and scope, teams often hire a consultant specifically to fulfill this role.

Mercy Corps: C. Robbins

> **Assessment Coordinator:** This individual will organize and coordinate activities, files and information and directly supervise any field research. Ideally this person has experience coordinating interdisciplinary research and conducting community vulnerability and capacity assessments (or similar participatory appraisal processes). Typically, this individual holds a senior-level position on the team and spends, depending on the timeframe and scope, around 10-25% of their time on STRESS with commitments varying as the process demands.

> ## STRESS in Action: Karamoja

STRESS helped the Uganda team identify a tension between a new set of development policies that encourage agricultural market development and a pressing need to limit increasing expansion on marginal lands. Our analysis revealed unique vulnerabilities for young women and young men resulting from shifts in livelihoods, land-use patterns and associated factors. These findings are fundamentally altering the team and its partners' approaches to market systems development and land-use planning in Karamoja.

Step 3: Kick-off Workshop

Our experience shows that holding a workshop early in the process to facilitate a series of important decisions is the most efficient and effective means of moving the STRESS forward and ensuring the team is able to take full advantage of the process outputs over the long term. The kick-off workshop can also help ensure the process is participatory, while providing opportunities for capacity building—especially among team members new to resilience concepts and approaches.

Consider the following when developing this first workshop:

> **Participants:** This workshop should include the core team, assessment lead and coordinator, as well as necessary senior leadership, and may benefit from external participation in some cases. We recommend it remain small (e.g., 10-15 participants) to allow for deep conversation.

〉 **Timing:** The length of the workshop typically ranges between 1-2 days, depending on the teams' needs and objectives. A longer session allows for more in-depth conversation and potential capacity building exercises. However, if done efficiently, the required outputs could be produced in a single day.

〉 **Workshop Outputs:** The primary output of the kick-off workshop is a first draft of the scoping report, which documents all conversation, decisions and products up to this point.

#	Objective	Reference Section	Brief Description
1	Set a development vision	Resilience to What End? Pg. 9	Determine primary development goal, articulate 2-4 development outcomes critical to achieving the goal and 3-5 objectives critical to achieving each outcome.
2	Decide the geographic context and key systems	Resilience of What? Pg.8	Identify the geographic boundaries and key supporting systems for the assessment.
3	Identify whose resilience needs to be built	Resilience for Whom? Pg. 9	Define the specific population subgroups for the assessment.
4	Prioritize a set of shocks and stresses	Resilience to What? Pg. 10	Prioritize the social, economic and ecological shocks and stresses the assessment will target.
5	Identify background research needs	N/A	Define areas where quick, relatively light research or analysis would help inform the beginning stages of the STRESS process.

TABLE 5: FIVE KEY OBJECTIVES FOR KICK-OFF WORKSHOP

Groups can skip objectives fulfilled through previous conversations or use the group space to reconfirm a decision collectively.

Step 4: Develop a High-level Work Plan and Communications Plan

Directly following the kick-off workshop, it is important to develop a first draft of the work plan and a communications plan. The work plan should illustrate the key steps in the process and when they should take place—including workshops, research processes and other key events—helping ensure all critical STRESS team members can be present. At this stage, it is not necessary to define specific data collection and analysis methods.

A communications plan can help the team understand communication needs and how they sync with the workplan. Teams should consider their intended purpose in undergoing STRESS, as well as the audience, to determine what kinds of communication products they should produce. When targeting external stakeholders, teams should discuss: 1) which specific groups/individuals should be targeted, 2) when they need to receive updates and/or final products, 3) the most effective pathway for disseminating the information, and 4) what physical or digital products the team needs to develop. Many teams default to a long final report summarizing findings. These can be incredibly time-consuming and are not always necessary. Teams should consider the value of producing such a report in addition to the time and effort required to develop, refine and update it.

The following have proven helpful in developing a high-level work plan and communications plan:

> **Participants**: A work plan and communications plan should be developed by the core team and assessment lead, as it will help them agree on the overall steps of the process, when team members need to be available, and how and when deliverables may be due.

> **Timing**: Typically, the initial draft of the work plan and communications plan can be developed over a period of 1-2 weeks. The assessment lead should drive the process, and develop an initial draft to present and discuss with the core team.

Step 5: Conduct and Synthesize Background Research

The following have proven helpful in conducting and synthesizing background research:

> **Participants**: Following the kick-off workshop, the team should undertake the background research they outlined, filling vital information gaps early in the process. This information can be presented during the scoping workshop (see Step 5 below). If time and resources allow, the core team can conduct research. Alternatively, some teams utilize external consultants or internal technical support with the core team providing input and reviewing outputs.

> **Timing**: Depending on the type of research required, human and financial resources available, and access to appropriate knowledge and data products, this step has taken between 2 weeks and 3 months.

> **Outputs**: Our experience shows long reports are not always useful background research outputs. Having team members or consultants focus on alternative, highly synthesized products—such as visual tools—can ensure information is easier to present and digest during the scoping workshop.

Step 6: Scoping Workshop

The culmination of the Scope Phase, the scoping workshop helps teams synthesize existing knowledge, from both participant expertise and background research, that will serve as the structure for the research phase. Facilitators or participants should present the completed background research, which fills the gaps identified during the kick-off workshop, during this workshop.

> **Participants**: At the very least, the core assessment team, the assessment lead and other key local staff should attend. If resources and timing allow, technical advisers, partners, external experts and relevant stakeholders should participate. We recommend the total number of participants remains between 15-30. This number will allow for deep conversation and provide a variety of expertise and backgrounds.

> **Timing**: Depending on the teams' needs and objectives, workshops have lasted between 2-5 days. Longer sessions allow for more in-depth conversation, capacity building and coverage of a wider range of topics or themes.

The scoping workshop has a number of objectives and outputs, which lay the groundwork for data collection and analysis in the coming phases. Here is a brief description of each:

#	Objective	Reference Section	Brief Description	Required Output
1	Confirm development vision	Resilience to What End? Pg. 9	Revisit development vision modifying (if needed) based on findings of the background research and/or the insights and opinions of an expanded set of participants.	1) Notes on suggested modifications to the development vision, and 2) potential research questions
2	Conduct systemic problem analysis	Resilience of What? Pg.8	Flip each identified outcome within development vision into a problem statement and consider the social, ecological and economic drivers contributing to or creating this development challenge, as well as the development trends and constraints surrounding those drivers.	1) Analysis of the drivers of development challenges, 2) identification of the key trends and constraints contributing to the problems, and 3) potential research questions
3	Explore influence and impacts of shocks and stresses	Resilience to What? Pg. 10	Evaluate how the social, ecological and economic shocks and stresses—prioritized during the kick-off workshop—influence the drivers and trends.	1) Analysis of shocks and stresses, 2) conversation notes, and 3) potential research questions
4	Create vulnerability characterization	Resilience for Whom? Pg. 9	Explore how the shocks and stresses impact each of the stakeholder groups defined during the kick-off workshop—and why they are vulnerable.	1) For each stakeholder group, the analysis of exposure/sensitivity to and limitations on their ability to manage and/or prepare for prioritized shocks and stresses, 2) discussion notes, and 3) potential research questions
5	Identify resilience capacities	Resilience Through What? Pg. 11	Explore potential resilience capacities, including those that exist and could be improved on or expanded and/or ideas for future resilience building strategies.	1) List of capacities discussed, 2) discussion notes, and 3) potential research questions

TABLE 6: FIVE KEY OBJECTIVES OF THE SCOPING WORKSHOP

Step 7: Produce the Scoping Report and Finalize the Work Plan, Timeline and Budget

Following the scoping workshop, the team should prepare for the Inform Phase. Start by finalizing the scoping report, updating the content based on workshop findings. Based on these analyses, the team may decide to alter the development vision, modify the list of prioritized shocks and stresses, or reconsider other decisions made during the kick-off workshop.

Next, prepare an assessment work plan, timeline (indicating process owners for each step) and detailed budget. The team should also identify the research methods and begin determining logistical arrangements (see Inform Phase for guidance).

Phase 2: Inform

GOAL: Collect enough information—at different scales and from different perspectives—to fill information gaps and answer the key questions identified during the Scope Phase.

Guided by the scoping workshop outputs, the core team continues to collect and analyze information, filling knowledge gaps. While we formally present the Inform and Analyze Phases as distinct and sequential, teams are likely to complete these phases as iterative cycles of information collection and analysis. This section describes the Inform Phase's three types of information collection efforts and how they inform the Analyze Phase.

Categories of Information

There are several information categories critical to focusing data collection efforts, regardless of the order in which that data is collected or the geography in which teams conduct collection. While teams may have collected some information in previous phases, this section focuses on both filling information gaps and investigating some questions in greater depth. Our experience shows that STRESS processes completed in the context of a complex program start-up may require additional sectoral assessments, though it may be possible to integrate these assessments into a more holistic data collection process.

These information categories include:

> **Development Trends and Constraints:** Development trends are the defining dynamics of the social, ecological and economic contexts. These are identifiable changes that can be positive or negative influencing factors, such as declining quality of education, privatization of public services or a shrinking natural resource base. Development constraints are the limitations that either slow development gains or increase exposure or sensitivity to shocks and stresses. Participants in the scoping workshop should already have prioritized the trends and constraints they will investigate in the Inform and Analyze Phases.

> **Shocks & Stresses:** Notes and mapping analyses conducted during the scoping workshop should focus initial research efforts, though teams should question any assumptions made during the workshop and modify shocks or stresses based on new research efforts.

> **Differentiated Vulnerability:** The Inform Phase presents opportunities to question assumptions about vulnerabilities or verify which shocks and stresses impact each stakeholder group and which factors make them most vulnerable.

> **Resilience Capacities:** Teams can use the Inform Phase to further investigate the initial list of resilience capacities created during the scoping workshop. The workshop outputs should guide, not dictate, research in this phase.

> **Research Questions:** Unique to each STRESS, this category may include research questions identified during the Scope Phase inappropriate for other categories, but that may help inform final products or provide more context.

For an overview of how teams should apply data collection methods (described below) to these categories, see Table 7.

Data Collection Methods

The following sections describe the data collection methods included in the Inform Phase. Please note that within a STRESS process, the term data refers to both qualitative and quantitative data. While each context is different, the process described below has proven efficient in most contexts. Regardless of the collection method, the collected data should correspond to one or more of the categories described in the previous section.

1. Literature and Secondary Data Review

The first step is a formal review of the available literature and relevant data as defined during the Scope Phase. In many cases, teams may have started this work during the Scope Phase's background research step. If so, teams should identify any additional information needs based on the scoping workshop, including information gaps and key research questions. Often compiled through a combination of internet searches, expert interview leads and partner discussions, literature review and secondary data sources vary widely and can provide useful data around such topics as migration, price or climate trends, or relevant social science findings on cultural practices. Common sources of information include: 1) studies and assessments by technical partners, NGOs or donors; 2) published research studies from research institutions (e.g., local and international universities, think tanks, technical institutions); and 3) institutional data (e.g., government agencies, World Bank, NASA).

Mercy Corps: Miguel Samper

> ❭ **STRESS in Action: Nepal**
>
> *In Nepal, the process revealed a need to significantly refocus programming on the transformative capacities that support communities' long-term ability to absorb and adapt to shocks and stresses. The team is using these findings to include less tangible, but often foundational, outcomes relating to governance systems, gender equity and social capital as a starting point for programming.*

2. Expert Interviews

Often teams are unable to identify physical or digital sources for a significant amount of information. To fill these gaps, teams can conduct a series of semi-structured interviews with a range of local experts and key informants across disciplines and at various scales with the goal of: 1) building a more nuanced understanding of the situation on the ground, and 2) understanding community-based perceptions. (These interviews will likely lead to additional sources of secondary data.) For example, these interviews may help build a picture of how local entities implement policies on land use or resource management, what barriers larger commercial actors face or how climate information is shared among government actors.

Targets for interviews include: 1) local staff; 2) other NGOs (both national and international) and development actors (e.g., development banks, donors) with experience in the region; 3) local research institutions and university faculty from relevant sectors; 4) government officials (including retired ones) across local, district and national scale; 5) formal and informal community leaders; and 6) entrepreneurs and business leaders (e.g., chamber of commerce).

3. Community Data Collection

Because vulnerability varies across landscapes and segments of the population, it is important to understand: 1) how shocks and stresses impact different types of communities and sectors of the target population, and 2) what

capacities these communities and sectors employ (or could employ) to manage them. Community data collection can be useful in deepening understanding of these dynamics. However, it might not be necessary to collect new community data. The literature and secondary data review should help teams determine whether they have collected enough community-level data and what level of effort is required to fill any information gaps.

Factors to consider when structuring community data collection efforts include:

> **Number of communities:** The exact number of communities that teams should include in their sample will vary depending on the type and size of the landscape, as defined by the "Resilience of What?" question in the Scope Phase. It is important to remember that STRESS is not intended as an exhaustive analysis of every community. The goal is to identify a sample good enough to understand perceptions on key issues and inform how vulnerability varies across different types of communities.

> **Type of communities:** Teams should collect data across different types of communities. Teams can determine the 3-5 factors affecting sensitivity to shocks and stresses through the primary and secondary data collection. Factors may include: access to specific resources (e.g., proximity to a water source), geographic characteristics (e.g., hillside location vs. flat land) or dominant livelihood strategies (e.g., particular crops vs. pastoralism).

> **Who, within the community:** Focus groups should engage members of each community in accordance with the decisions made in the scoping workshop. The "Resilience for Whom?" question should define how these groups are structured. It may be necessary to separate focus group discussions by vulnerability group (e.g., gender, ethnicity, caste) to ensure the information is unbiased and all groups have the opportunity to contribute.

Additional Data Collection Considerations

Some teams also find it essential to include outside technical expertise, tapping university consultants or other technical institutions to produce various types of analyses. If resources allow, these individuals can add significant value.

Examples where previous processes have engaged consultants include:

> **Niger:** Having prioritized research questions about changes in surface water availability, land cover and land use, the team worked with NASA's Applied Earth Sciences Program to conduct analyses using satellite-collected data and imagery.

> **Mongolia:** In response to questions about financial services availability and structures, the Mongolia team hired a local expert to produce a report framed around their inquiries.

> **Uganda:** To resolve various, and sometimes conflicting, accounts of climate change's influence on natural resources, the Uganda team hired a technical consultant to summarize information on historical trends, recent conditions, climate projections and participatory studies related to climate change and its impacts.

Inform Phase Framework

Table 7 summarizes information collection stages, including their overall objectives and relationship to information categories.

Analysis Area	1. Literature and Secondary Data Review	2. Expert Interviews	3. Community Data Collection
Overall Objective	*Synthesize existing knowledge with a focus on understanding larger-scale trends and connections impacting communities.*	*Harness key experts' knowledge and experience at multiple levels to build a qualitative picture and solicit guidance on additional literature or data sources.*	*Understand variations in resilience between population subgroups and community perceptions of vulnerabilities and resilience capacities.*
Development Trends and Constraints	Provide initial qualitative and quantitative information on: 1) prioritized development trends and their drivers, and 2) the root causes of development constraints.	Contribute additional information sources, expertise and experience related to each of the development trends and constraints being investigated.	Enhance understanding of how development trends have impacted individuals, households and communities, and how they perceive these changes.
Shocks and Stresses	Improve qualitative and quantitative descriptions of shocks and stresses and their impacts by reviewing existing information on their drivers, qualities, impact, geographic variations and trends.	Improve qualitative descriptions of shocks and stresses and their impacts by collecting additional information and perspectives not available via secondary data sources.	Enhance and verify understanding of subgroup-specific shock and stress impacts, adding contextual information critical to comprehending local dynamics and perceptions.
Differentiated Vulnerability	Improve qualitative and quantitative information regarding which shocks and stresses most impact each stakeholder group and system.	Fill information gaps related to the vulnerability of each stakeholder group through additional studies and interviewee expertise and experience.	Enhance and verify understanding of vulnerabilities related to specific groups.
Resilience Capacities	Improve descriptions of capacities in terms of their actual or potential effectiveness in mitigating shock and stress impacts, and the scale at which they are available to, used and controlled by various stakeholder groups.	Fill information gaps, improving qualitative descriptions of capacities, their effectiveness in mitigating shock and stress impacts, and the scale at which they are available, used and controlled.	Provide community type and subgroup-specific information to help rank the effectiveness of resilience capacities and additional contextual information.
Research Questions	Provide quantitative and qualitative information to help inform answers to individual research questions.	Support literature/secondary data findings and bridge gaps by contributing to qualitative and quantitative information.	Provide community-level perspectives on factors relating to research questions.

TABLE 7: THE THREE STEPS OF THE INFORM PHASE

Phase 3: Analyze

GOAL: Analyze and synthesize information collected throughout the Inform Phase to support the development of a resilience theory of change.

The Analyze Phase is organized into six steps, each with defined outputs intended to help teams revise an existing theory of change (ToC) or develop foundational inputs for a new one. Our experience shows reviewing the various analysis outputs prior to starting data collection is helpful.

Teams should budget enough time for the Analysis Phase to ensure they are able to consider all data and information collected thoughtfully and work in an iterative and participatory fashion with the core team to produce the analysis outputs described below. When provided sufficient time, this phase can help teams build a common understanding, approach and capacity on a range of technical areas.

Step 1: Characterize Development Trends and Constraints

The Scope Phase helps teams prioritize a set of development trends and constraints, about which they collect data during the Inform Phase. Using the collected data and information, teams then develop concise characterizations of each trend and constraint, and what factors might be driving them.

> ❭ **Analysis Outputs—Visual Maps and Narrative**: For each development trend, identify and map the contributing drivers and how they are linked. The team can integrate shocks and stresses into these maps where necessary, creating continuity across analysis outputs. These visual studies can help summarize a trend or constraint and the reason it is occurring. Our experience shows it is most effective to produce a separate map for each trend, rather than connecting them in a single document. Teams should then develop a narrative for each map, providing additional context and citing data, information and analyses collected during the Inform Phase.

Step 2: Revise the Development Vision

The team can now revisit the development vision—originally created and revised based on the knowledge and experience of those in the room during the last two workshops—using data, information and analyses produced during the Inform Phase.

> ❭ **Analysis Outputs—Revised Visual for Development Vision and Narrative:** Referencing the trend and constraints analysis and information collected during the Inform Phase, the team can revise the visual representation of the development vision—rewording goal, outcome and objective language by cutting, adding and rearranging outcomes and objectives where needed. They should then develop a narrative for the visual, providing additional analysis and citing critical data and information. When possible, the narrative should reference how this revised vision relates to the development trends and constraints analysis completed in the previous step.

Step 3: Characterize Shocks and Stresses

While both the kick-off and scoping workshops provide initial insights into the primary shocks and stresses, the Analyze Phase provides an opportunity to incorporate additional quantitative and qualitative information into the assessment. Here teams characterize and articulate the interrelationships between the prioritized set of shocks and stresses, based on greater contextual understanding of their frequency, severity, trends, linkages and impacts.

› **Analysis Outputs—Hazard Profiles:** For each key shock and stress, the team should create a hazard profile, describing each threat in terms of its: 1) severity, frequency and duration; 2) impact on each of the key systems identified in the Scope Phase; and 3) impact on relevant outcomes and objectives included in the development vision.

Please note that Step 4 covers individual or stakeholder-level impacts.

Step 4: Create Vulnerability Profiles

Next, the team ensures they understand stakeholder-level impacts, including the factors contributing to vulnerability in each case. As with Steps 1 and 3, the goal of Step 4 is to develop concise narratives that synthesize qualitative and quantitative information collected during the Inform Phase. Any community-level data, including stakeholder groups, will be particularly useful. Without community-level data, secondary data sources (e.g., vulnerability and risks analyses) will be essential.

› **Analysis Outputs—Vulnerability Profiles and Narratives:** Teams should create stakeholder vulnerability profiles—including a narrative—for each stakeholder group. Profiles should avoid broad generalizations about vulnerability, instead identifying and describing: 1) the shocks and stresses impacting the group most, 2) how these shocks and stresses impact the group, 3) the factors and development constraints contributing to the group's vulnerability, including exposure and sensitivity to these shocks and stresses.

Mercy Corps: Miguel Samper

› STRESS in Action: Niger

The STRESS process uncovered an opportunity to proactively address the looming water scarcity challenge in Niger's already resource-stressed environment. The team is now complementing its work on water point (e.g., well) rehabilitation and on-farm water management through efforts to inform and build the technical capacity of national water management institutions to use satellite-based earth observation technology.

Step 5: Identify and Characterize Resilience Capacities

The team then explores existing and potential resilience capacities, refining those identified during the scoping workshop using primary and secondary data. First consider the range of the capacities identified, cutting those no longer relevant and identifying new ones. Then consider the stakeholder vulnerability profiles and systems- level impacts identified in Step 3 to help prioritize the resilience capacities. With a reprioritized list, teams can describe the critical components of each resilience capacity.

› **Analysis Outputs—Capacity Analysis:** Teams should be able to articulate the necessary characteristics of each prioritized capacity. These include: 1) capacity description, 2) capacity user, 3) timing of use, 4) capacity effect, 5) current barriers to access/use, and 6) enabling conditions—those required to ensure stakeholders can access/use a given capacity.

Step 6: Summarize Responses to Research Questions

Here teams ensure they have responded to all research questions articulated during the Scope Phase. Teams can focus on creating concise, summarized answers for those research questions addressed during the literature and secondary data review or by an external consultant hired to perform technical analysis.

❯ **Analysis Outputs:**

- **Research Summaries:** These summaries should provide concise answers to each question based on the information collected during the Inform Phase. The team should also incorporate these findings, where appropriate, into the analysis products of Steps 1-5.

- **External Analysis Summaries:** The team should collaborate with any consultants to produce short, easy to interpret products—in contrast to longer reports with harder to digest content (e.g., maps, charts, graphs)—that all participants can discuss during the strategize workshop.

Phase 4: Strategize

GOAL: Utilize Analyze Phase outputs to develop a measurable and context-specific theory of change for resilience, which will serve as the foundation for developing or adapting programs or country or regional strategies and associated measurement plans.

In a two-step process, the team develops a resilience-building strategy in the form of a measurable theory of change (ToC), beginning with the strategy workshop and finishing with the development of the set of products comprising the ToC.

Step 1: Strategy Workshop

The strategize workshop allows a broader set of participants an opportunity to weigh in on analysis findings. Internal and external experts have a final chance to reflect on the data and preliminary analysis and provide input on draft problem analyses and existing capacities. The core team can also seek buy-in from important internal and external stakeholders.

Consider the following when preparing for the strategize workshop:

› **Participants:** This workshop should include the entire STRESS team and critical members of senior leadership. Discussions often benefit from external participation as well. We recommend limiting the workshop to 15-25 participants to allow for deep conversation.

› **Timing:** Depending on the number of participants, the objectives of the workshop and the ideal depth of conversation, the workshop can last between 1-3 days. Longer sessions allow for more in-depth conversation, often characteristic of these workshops, as well as potential capacity building exercises.

› **Outputs:** Updated analysis products, including increased detailing and prioritization of resilience capacities.

Prior to the workshop, teams should ensure all steps in the Inform and Analysis Phases are complete, and participants should receive the key findings of these processes. Table 8 describes the strategize workshop's five key objectives and required outputs.

#	Objective	Required Output
1	Solicit feedback on development vision	Notes documenting ideas and suggestions for finalizing the development vision
2	Discuss hazard profiles	Notes documenting changes to the hazard profiles, including new sources
3	Discuss vulnerability profiles	Notes documenting changes to the vulnerability profiles, including new sources
4	Analyze, modify and prioritize capacities	Updated set of resilience capacities
5	Identify strategic entry points	Discussion notes outlining the beginning existing and potential development strategies and programs and their connections to the development vision and the identified capacities

TABLE 8: FIVE KEY OBJECTIVES OF THE STRATEGIZE WORKSHOP

Step 2: Develop Final Analysis Outputs

After the workshop, the team should document necessary changes to final analysis outputs based on workshop discussions and complete them as soon as possible. While participant input may encourage teams to undertake additional research, keep in mind the STRESS process cannot provide clarity regarding every issue. Teams should prioritize critical changes and outline additional research for follow-up activities to ensure they can finish the STRESS process in a timely manner.

Step 3: Develop the Final Theory of Change

While traditionally represented as a single graphic, Mercy Corps' resilience theories of change (ToCs) are comprised of three distinct products described in detail below. Many of these products can be pulled directly from analysis outputs and refined through the strategize workshop. The desired audience may dictate how refined these products should be.

> **Context Narrative**: This describes the conditions (e.g., changing vs. static) in which resilience-building efforts will take place. The narrative should summarize: 1) key development trends and constraints characterizing the context, and 2) vulnerability profiles, indicating the shocks and stresses to which each group is most vulnerable and how the development trends and constraints contribute to these vulnerabilities. Graphic or narrative means may be helpful in further articulating this information.

> **Development Vision:** Teams should ensure the refined development vision graphic is clear, concise and includes a narrative describing the details that cannot be included in the graphic. The development vision should also articulate— through the narrative or visually—which prioritized shocks and stresses impact outcomes and objectives most.

> **Resilience Capacities:** The final component of the ToC is a description of the resilience capacities, drawing heavily from the capacity analysis table. Graphic or narrative means may be helpful in further articulating this information.

Mercy Corps: Miguel Samper

> **STRESS in Action: Myanmar**

STRESS helped identify a need to measure the use of capacities in response to shocks and stresses more effectively, leading the Myanmar team to develop an innovative monitoring system. Immediately following shocks and stresses, the team now deploys members to conduct focus group discussions and key informant interviews to determine exactly how and when communities use the resilience capacities to prepare for, respond to and learn from their experiences. This new monitoring system is transforming the team's ability to hone the capacities, strategies and programming critical to building resilience and achieving development goals.

Step 4: Develop Final Communication Documents

When the team completes the analysis outputs, they should develop and/or finalize the communications materials articulated in the communications plan (developed during the Scope Phase). Our experience shows this step is often under-prioritized. Teams should revisit the communications strategy and clearly articulate roles and responsibilities for product dissemination, adapting the targets and media as necessary.

Conclusion

Mercy Corps designed the STRESS process to deepen teams' understanding of their humanitarian or development contexts and provide them the tools to develop robust and effective strategies for applying resilience thinking. But completing a STRESS is just the beginning. Mercy Corps encourages teams to consider the following when determining how to maximize their investment in STRESS:

> **Measure, evaluate and refine resilience capacities and strategies:** The theory of change and resilience capacities developed through STRESS are theoretical and should be treated as such. At this stage, the capacities in particular are informed guesses about the resources and abilities that might build resilience. As teams translate these capacities into development and humanitarian strategies, they should consider methods and opportunities for evaluating and improving their effectiveness.

> **Revisit STRESS as circumstances change:** The STRESS products represent a snapshot in time, and all development and humanitarian practitioners work in dynamic places: political regimes will change overnight, ecological conditions will vary as climate change intensifies, gender roles and responsibilities will transition with time. Teams must acknowledge these consistent and often rapid changes and develop plans to revisit and update their analyses. STRESS products can support these conversations.

> **Commit to long-term learning:** STRESS is a learning process, helping teams practice the resilience thinking that can benefit the work they do and the way they work together. Practice begins with the assessment, but should extend well beyond—successful resilience programming will require teams to assess their dynamic contexts regularly, test their assumptions about what strategies are effective and adapt accordingly.

CONTACT

DAVID NICHOLSON
Senior Director
Environment, Energy and Climate Technical Support Unit
dnicholson@mercycorps.org

ELIOT LEVINE
Deputy Director
Environment, Energy and Climate Technical Support Unit
elevine@mercycorps.org

ERIC VAUGHAN
Sr. Technical Adviser
Environment, Energy and Climate Technical Support Unit
evaughan@mercycorps.org

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

MERCY CORPS

45 SW Ankeny Street
Portland, Oregon 97204
888.842.0842

mercycorps.org