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CASE 2: NIGER
RISK AND RESILIENCE ASSESSMENT CASE STUDY SERIES

USING RISK AND RESILIENCE ASSESSMENT
TO INFORM A COUNTRY-LEVEL
STRATEGY

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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Front cover: Sean Sheridan for Mercy Corps A woman carries water buckets in Maradi region, Niger (2014).

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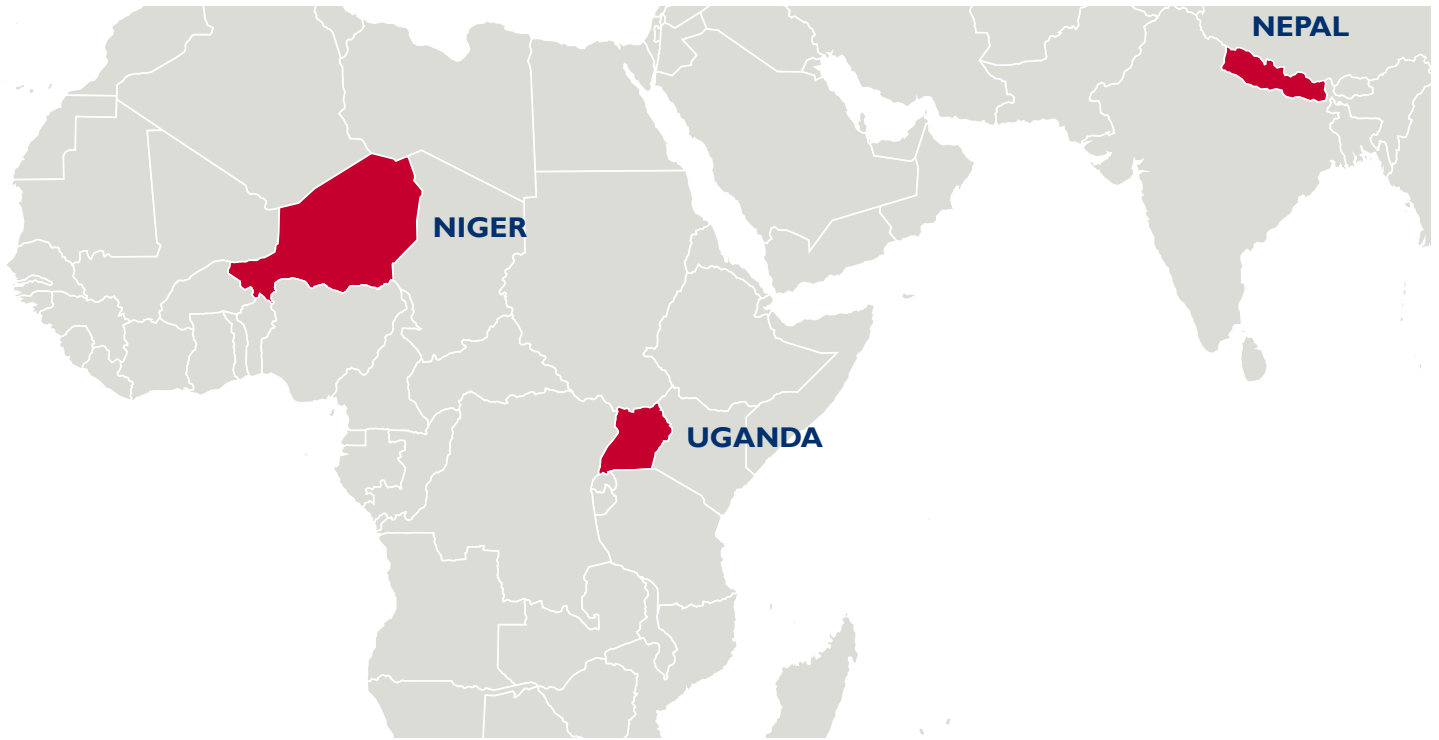
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A CLOSER LOOK AT RISK AND RESILIENCE ASSESSMENTS

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 NIGER'S COUNTRY STRATEGY?

Across Niger, farmers and herders are struggling to feed one of the world's fastest growing populations. One of the poorest countries in the world, Niger ranks second to last on the Human Development Index.¹ Over the past 30 years, the country has experienced seven drought episodes, each resulting in food crises.² As the country's population of young people grows (70% of Nigeriens are under the age of 25), demand for cultivable land and social services is outpacing supply. And while Niger has maintained a fragile peace, new conflicts are crossing the country's borders, displacing communities, and disrupting livelihoods. These critical issues continue to trap Nigeriens in cycles of dependence, hunger and malnutrition.³

In 2015, Mercy Corps Niger was no stranger to these challenges. During their ten years of operation, the country team had made significant progress toward food security but recurring shocks and stresses would often undermine their gains. Primed to create a new country-level strategy, the team felt it was time to reexamine its approach to Niger's persistent food security challenges.

"There was an idea that we had to find a different way of looking at food security in Niger," one team member reflected. "We and other agencies had been doing some of the same activities for some time. Were they working? What were we missing? Are we on the right track for programming in this context?"

With a newly hired Regional Resilience Advisor for support and a growing agency-wide focus on resilience, Mercy Corps Niger's leadership decided to use the Strategic Resilience Assessment (STRESS) to gain a deeper understanding of the social, ecological, and economic systems upon which communities rely. The assessment included identifying the shocks and stresses that impact these systems; how vulnerability differs across groups; and the capacities critical to ensuring communities can cope, adapt, and transform in the face of shocks and stresses. The team hoped a resilience-informed country-level strategy would help them articulate how to strategically support communities in breaking cycles of dependence, hunger, and malnutrition and achieving long-term food security impacts.



In 2015, after working for a decade in Niger, Mercy Corps conducted a risk and resilience assessment, our Strategic Resilience Assessment (STRESS), to inform a new country strategy—the first application of its kind. The team collaborated with a diverse cohort of partners to unpack the structural causes of persistent food insecurity and the resilience capacities vulnerable groups would need to overcome the recurring shocks and stresses that had undermined past progress. Mercy Corps Niger also used STRESS findings to refine several activities within Sawki, a USAID Food for Peace development food security activity (formerly development food aid program). This new application of STRESS to inform a country-level strategy yielded important lessons for Mercy Corps. Key among them are the importance of: engaging senior-level leadership in cultivating team enthusiasm and commitment; developing a robust internal and external communications strategy which sets clear expectations around purpose, scope, and intensity of the process; and establishing administrative and operational structures capable of implementing resilience findings.

¹ UNDP Human Development Report, 2016

² PRP, Mars 2015

³ World Food Program, <http://www1.wfp.org/countries/niger>

THE ASSESSMENT

LAYING THE FOUNDATION: WHAT CONDITIONS FACILITATE TRUE RESILIENCE LEARNING?

In August 2015, STRESS facilitators and members of Mercy Corps' technical support unit joined the Niger leadership team to kick off what would become an eight-month risk and resilience assessment. In addition to informing the country strategy, the leadership believed STRESS would be critical to strengthening the team's capacity to adopt a resilience approach both in the work they did and how they worked together. STRESS had the potential to influence current programming, namely Mercy Corps Niger's USAID-funded Food for Peace development food security activity (formerly development food aid program) Sawki, and inform the agency's global resilience learning agenda. This was an ambitious set of objectives, especially given the team's existing responsibilities. To be successful, Niger's country director knew he needed the full support of his staff.

His message was clear and came early—we need you on board to make this work. In consulting with staff supervisors, the country director made clear that staff needed both the support and time necessary to contribute to the process and the energy to engage in its capacity strengthening elements. In a follow-up email, he clearly articulated participants' roles and responsibilities and his expectation that “everyone will be responsible for understanding the results and applying them to our work and programs.” These communications set the tone for the process, demonstrating to the team that the STRESS was an important commitment and priority for the agency.

Senior leadership also anticipated that shifting Mercy Corps Niger's approach and thinking toward resilience would require the support of a diverse set of government, local, and international partners with expertise across sectors. The country director had a motto: **If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.**

Again, he let the team know that greater collective intelligence coupled with increased ownership could lay the foundation for future partnerships. The core STRESS team (including the regional resilience advisor, STRESS facilitators, and a small group of Nigerien technical experts) invested heavily in designing a collaborative and participatory process, ultimately recruiting 12 local, regional, and international organizations, including the United States' National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

Mercy Corps Niger's senior management team began engaging members early in the resilience learning process, encouraging them to invest wholeheartedly in both the process outcomes and their own learning. Team members across the organization suggested senior management's leadership and modeling consistently helped them invest in STRESS.



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

With the assessment team in place, the process officially began. Members of Mercy Corps' technical support unit with backgrounds in environment, climate change, gender, conflict, and resilience facilitated the workshop alongside the country director and regional resilience advisor. The first activity, a scoping workshop, laid a foundation for resilience and systems thinking among team members. Two activities were crucial in facilitating these paradigm shifts. The first was a game, which challenged team members to understand variations in vulnerability and inequity. The technical support unit adapted the game—which was originally created to demonstrate gender inequities—for the resilience context.

The second activity engaged the team in mapping the broader systems where vulnerabilities might manifest. Participants huddled around maps, visualizing the complex ways in which Niger's major shocks and stresses impact food security. Here too the country director catalyzed learning, challenging underlying assumptions and asking provocative questions. His curiosity and inquisitiveness were contagious. One participant recalled, "He would push, push, push people to think differently. That, complemented with a range of deep technical expertise in the room, led to so many light bulb moments."

Participants began exploring the possibility of a very different future for Niger, one in which agriculture might play a less central role and women would have the greater voice they deserved in government. Most importantly, the exercises helped the team reveal both what they knew and the critical knowledge gaps they would need to fill through the remainder of the process. They would need to investigate high-level shifts and trends across Niger, including the evolving nature of agropastoralism, challenges around variable climatic and ecological conditions, and the effects of international and domestic conflicts on peace in the region.

FILLING THE GAPS:

WHAT LEVEL OF RESEARCH IS A BEST FIT FOR INFORMING A COUNTRY STRATEGY?

Over the next six weeks, the team would complete an extensive desk review and travel to communities across Niger, collecting data through key informant interviews and focus groups discussions. The final distance traveled during this Inform Phase would equal half of Earth's circumference. Seven technical staff led the process and oversaw the team of enumerators who conducted 63 focus group discussions in 21 villages. Through these community conversations, the team learned how shocks and stresses varied across the country and how men, women, boys, and girls relied on a range of resources and techniques to cope and adapt. The geographical breadth of their efforts would ensure the team had a strategy that accounted for the multitude of factors influencing resilience in each region.

For example, the team learned that in Maradi divorce was a major shock for women who often lost their possessions and faced community stigmatization. These challenges deepened their vulnerability to future shocks. Another team member recalled visiting an agro-pastoralist region in the North and learning how Tuareg women often preferred small ruminants, like goats, which they could own, over the larger livestock (e.g., cows, bulls) their husbands owned. Women's ownership of resources was critical because they could choose to sell them for other necessities in times of shocks and stresses. "We visited pastoralist areas and nomadic areas and rural and urban areas, and we talked to women and men in all the states—North, West, East and South—and there are different strategies in all of them," one of the technical staff leads recalled. "We found other crises and shocks than we had imagined."

For many, both these findings and the exercises themselves were novel and challenging. Many had never engaged in such rigorous research or writing, but felt compelled to continue given the high profile nature of the process. Interviewees recalled feelings of excitement and prestige having been selected to play critical roles in STRESS and contribute so meaningfully to what would become their country strategy.

But soon a new tension emerged: the team felt conflicted about just how broadly the research should span or how deeply into a specific sector it should dive. These tensions betrayed a larger confusion about the purpose of the Inform Phase: to glean a broad strategic understanding capable of building a country strategy, whether information revealed new finding and connections or confirmed existing assumptions with new evidence. The facilitators had some idea of the level of research required, but they had never used STRESS to inform a country strategy, and they struggled to articulate that detailed sectoral information often fell outside of the scope of the STRESS process.

During data collection, many traveled to regions they had never visited. After a trip to Diffa, where Boko Haram presents an emerging security threat, one team member recalled his surprise at learning how different and difficult life was there—particularly for women who faced strict dress codes and restricted movement. These experiences expanded the teams' sense of what mattered for building resilience, emphasizing how social and cultural practices around gender shaped food security in the country.



“This was a first attempt to get an understanding of the context in a different way. This wasn't the end-all be-all research that would answer all the questions,” one facilitator recalled. “We didn't have the leisure of going that deep into some topics because we had to cover everything, but for a country strategy that was the point. Several veteran staff felt that where STRESS research did not reveal new information, it should have built more effectively on existing knowledge. Facilitators and the STRESS core team worked hard to reinforce that confirming assumptions and revealing new connections at a general level was the original goal, but this was harder to convey after the fact. This yielded a very important lesson in the evolution of STRESS: **determining and clearly communicating concrete expectations regarding the breadth and depth of a risk and resilience assessment is essential.**

MAKING SENSE OF THE DATA AND DEVELOPING A THEORY OF CHANGE: HOW CAN TEAMS TRANSLATE RICH RESILIENCE DATA INTO A COUNTRY-LEVEL THEORY OF CHANGE?

As the team entered the Analyze Phase, they reconvened a cross-section of institutionally diverse partners to make sense of the extensive data gathered. This was a challenging feat given the confusion regarding research breadth and depth during the Inform Phase, as well as the sheer amount of data collected without strong analysis tools. During the analysis workshop, participants characterized shocks and stresses by their intensity, location, impacts on different sub-groups and occurrences during the seasonal calendar. New connections became clear immediately. Examining trends together helped shift the group's collective understanding of the connections between shocks and stresses, and how they impact both resilience and food security.

For example, local voices represented through data collection combined with larger data trends helped the STRESS participants see how climate change, poor farming practices, and population growth were making it increasingly difficult for families to earn a living. These trends increased social and financial pressures on vulnerable households, driving families to marry off young girls at increasingly younger ages. Early marriage, in turn, contributed to the country's rising birth rates, lower health outcomes, and environmental degradation, accelerating a vicious cycle of food insecurity that could entrap Nigeriens for generations.

"Climate challenges, water challenges, and the future of adolescent girls are all really linked. Those were all issues Mercy Corps was working on, but now we could see the connections between them," one facilitator recalled. "The STRESS helped to really make this evident. It's not just one sector that's going to be able to address this, it'll take a multifaceted approach." Having the space to explore these interconnections and underlying drivers together helped paint a more comprehensive picture of the country's food security challenges. These insights reinforced the importance of ensuring program design and implementation strategies were tailored to the nuances of each context, and underlined the necessity of developing integrated interventions that cut across multiple sectors.

Activities were designed to feed this learning directly into a new theory of change, which would inform the country strategy, but participants often found it challenging to disentangle regular development approaches from the capacities needed to manage shocks and stresses.

As the team transitioned into the Strategize Phase, there was a reflection that what was being articulated as resilience capacities were development strategies, and more needed to be done to articulate how these helped households and communities mitigate specific shocks and stresses. This was the tension with a country-level stress—" [there was this feeling that] everything needs to be in there. We hadn't done a good job of articulating what's good development and what's resilience," one facilitator remarked. "It wasn't clear what about the capacities deals

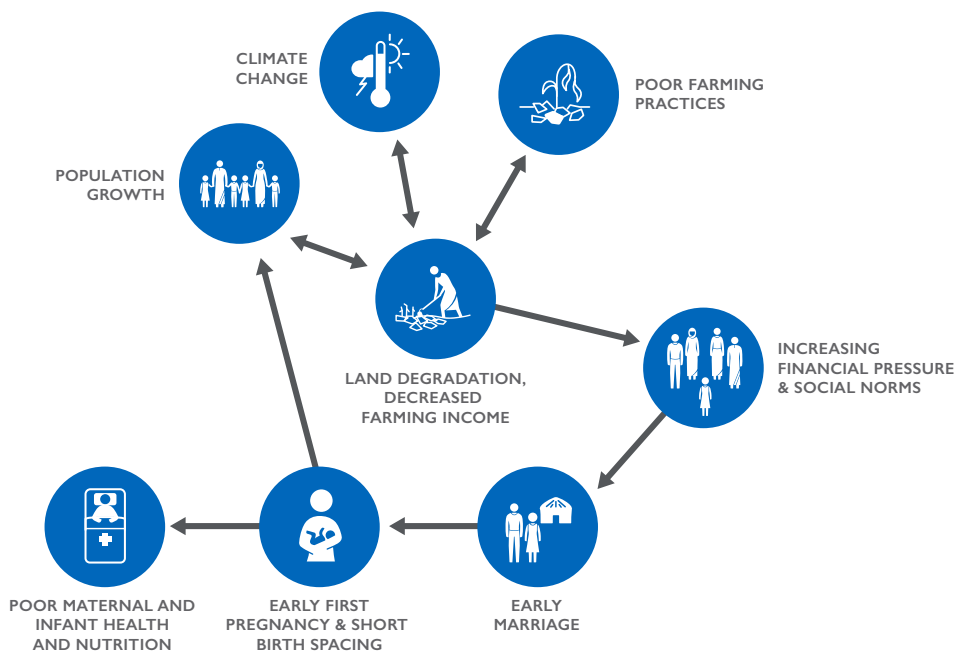


FIGURE 1: A FEEDBACK LOOP IDENTIFIED THROUGH THE STRESS PROCESS, ILLUSTRATING CYCLICAL DRIVERS OF FOOD INSECURITY IN ONE CONTEXT.

shocks and stresses." The core STRESS team continued to work with a small group of internal and external partners to synthesize the research findings and workshop discussions, and to articulate a theory of change that better integrated the key capacities that built resilience to shocks and stresses. Specifically, they worked intentionally to ensure that resilience capacities were layered on top of a development vision for the country, and that capacities were connected to specific shocks and stresses that undermine development.

In future STRESS processes, Mercy Corps developed new tools and approaches that made a clear distinction between development strategies and resilience capacities, articulating how we describe resilience capacities as the resources and strategies individuals, households, or communities use to mitigate risk. This included the

development of a new guiding question “Resilience to what end?” that challenged teams to build and clarify a development vision—an end goal that resilience capacities would enable communities to achieve. With a development vision in place, teams could layer shocks and stresses over them, extrapolating how each could threaten progress. A third layer of resilience capacities would articulate what individuals, households, communities, and systems would need to learn, cope, adapt, and transform in the face of these shocks and stresses, maintaining progress toward that original development vision.

The realization alone helped them narrow down and clarify the list to eight critical resilience capacities, which linked to specific sub-groups, shocks and stresses, and activities.

TRANSLATING STRESS FINDINGS INTO ACTION

DEVELOPING A RESILIENCE-INFORMED COUNTRY STRATEGY: HOW DO STRESS FINDINGS TRANSLATE INTO A COUNTRY STRATEGY?

“The strategy was really built on the recommendations of the STRESS report. The shocks, stresses, resilience capacities from the STRESS are now the key driving things in the strategy. You’ll see new activities that are different from what we were doing before the STRESS.”

-Mercy Corps Niger Senior Leader

Two years after beginning the STRESS, participants reiterated how critical it was to have the space, time, and resources to reexamine their work, and resilience provided an important new framing. Despite the challenges around the breadth and depth of research and the lack of a clear development vision, the team deepened their understanding of the underlying drivers of food security and the nature of risks, vulnerabilities, and capacities across the country. “We had some idea of this before,” one STRESS participant noted. “But we didn’t have all the knowledge about the different types of capacities. We didn’t know before about the many differences between communities and response to shocks.”

As the team transitioned into creating their country strategy, they relied heavily on the STRESS findings for both content and structure. Here are some critical ways in which STRESS influenced the development and implementation of the country strategy:

- **Structure: Drawing on contextual analysis and linking strategic objectives directly to resilience capacities.** The strategy begins with a country analysis that draws directly from the STRESS process’ extensive research to ensure the approach is relevant, contextualized, responsive to community needs, and complementary to the Government of Niger and partners’ existing strategies. Additionally, each of the country strategy’s five key objectives is tethered to one or more resilience capacities identified through STRESS. For instance, through its first objective, increasing agro-pastoralist and pastoralist revenue, the team will initiate activities that build three resilience capacities: improved access to financial services, better access to rural and urban employment for vulnerable groups, and increased productivity and access to regional markets for pastoralists and agro-pastoralists.
- **Content: Expanding strategic objectives to encompass newly identified shocks, stresses, and resilience capacities.** In several instances, the STRESS findings expanded the overall scope of the strategy. For instance, STRESS helped the team identify the rise of Boko Haram as a growing driver of food insecurity, prompting them to name social cohesion as a resilience capacity. Accordingly, the country strategy pursues new pathways for reinforcing social cohesion and stability, with a focus on building resilience

to violent extremist groups. Soon after the inclusion of social cohesion in the strategy, the team undertook a research project called the Vulnerability and Resilience Assessment Initiative (VRAI). Through the research, they examined the risk factors and vulnerabilities of individuals likely to support violent extremism in two at-risk regions. This information will help to inform the development of targeted and integrated programs aimed at building the resilience capacities these individuals would need to avoid violent extremism.

- **Partnerships: Shifting their scale and nature.** Translating findings into strategy has also provided opportunities to expand partnerships strengthened or formed through STRESS, or build new relationships.

Often these collaborations have challenged Mercy Corps Niger to shift the scale of their work as well. For instance, the country strategy's third strategic objective (an outcome of STRESS) focuses on increasing the capacity of women to influence decisions in formal and informal governance structures from the local to the national level. That objective will require the team to expand into new government partnerships encouraging institutions to enforce laws on the rights of women and girls. Similarly, STRESS discussions with farmers and an analysis of ecological trend data, which revealed how climatic and ecological conditions would soon make rain-fed agriculture unviable, informed a strategic shift. The country strategy now calls for working with national scale institutions to influence policy and decision making around groundwater, including building on new partnerships with NASA forged through STRESS to pilot an approach for modeling and forecasting groundwater dynamics throughout Niger.

- **Staff attitudes: Embodying core resilience concepts.** Staff who participated in STRESS seem to have retained and continue to use core resilience concepts to implement the country strategy. "Now it's stuck with the team," one supervisor noted. "The team is always asking the questions: To what? For whom?" This critical shift in systems thinking has been evident in subsequent program design efforts, all of which advance the strategy's objectives. Following a recent design workshop in Niamey, one technical advisor from headquarters noted how STRESS core team members were uniquely confident in identifying the program elements necessary for building resilience capacities, and drove the conversation around cross-sector interventions, the nuances of community vulnerabilities, and the necessity of sustainable, locally-owned initiatives. These reflections confirm the important role of risk and resilience assessments in capacity strengthening.
- **Team collaboration: Training field agents to work across sectors.** The connections identified through STRESS changed the way the Niger team visualized their work together, emphasizing the need to collaborate across sectors and tailor their approaches to nuances in the social and cultural context. As discussed in the next section, the Swaki staff began cross-sector trainings for its traditionally single-sector staff (e.g., agriculture agents, health workers) to ensure all team members were able to identify, respond to, and report missed opportunities for addressing food security and resilience across integrated programming.

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS & BUY-IN AROUND THE COUNTRY STRATEGY

After STRESS, the Mercy Corps Niger team convened donors, peer NGOs, and members of the government, private sector and civil society in Niamey for workshops aimed at building new and solidifying existing relationships. These partnerships would serve as the foundation for implementing the sustainable, locally-owned interventions to which the country strategy aspired. Some agencies suggested these efforts were effective in raising Mercy Corps' profile as a resilience leader. As one partner at a government institution in Niamey noted, "Mercy Corps is advanced relatively likely because of the STRESS process that helps people think outside of the box and look at different dimensions that are not yet looked at in various projects."

While these strong examples of the team's ability to translate findings into the country strategy signal the STRESS process itself was successful, several challenges also emerged, among them:

- **Clearly communicating expectations regarding the purpose and scope of STRESS:** During preliminary presentation of results and feedback sessions in communities where STRESS data collection occurred, several team members expressed disappointment to leadership that the process did not engage local community members, field agents, and institutions frequently enough. Visiting the community more often, they believed, might have added new insights and produced a stronger country strategy. Other staff recalled that sharing the country strategy raised challenging expectations among community partners that Mercy Corps would provide the funds and resources to implement activities or strategies relevant to the findings discussed. "When you present the results, partners may assume you will do all the things you talk about, that you will provide money and follow up," one team member recalled. "This is a country strategy. Mercy Corps is saying here are the eight big capacities we need to build as a group to enhance Niger resilience." In retrospect, several Mercy Corps headquarters and Niger staff suggested the team might have curbed some of these issues with a stronger internal and external communication strategy that engaged staff and community members in what resilience is, why it matters, and what the team hoped to accomplish through the process. This, coupled with a better facilitated internal and external learning process, might have strengthened relationships along the way, supporting the implementation of a country strategy.
- **Weathering staff turnover and short program cycles:** Maintaining lessons learned in the face of short programming cycles and staff turnover has been challenging and could undermine country strategy implementation when new members lack background or training in resilience concepts. Some of the original STRESS participants have left Mercy Corps, others may require follow-up training to reinforce concepts and ensure they do not fall back on business as usual development practices. Among leadership, the call for ongoing training was clear, "For all managers in the field, it's important to look at how we're supporting them in understanding resilience; they're closest to the work being done and need to really understand resilience theory and application."

TANGIBLE CHANGES TO PROGRAMMING

HOW DID STRESS FINDINGS BENEFIT EXISTING PROGRAMMING?

Many members of the core STRESS team were technical advisors and managers for Sawki, a USAID-funded Food for Peace development food security activity that Mercy Corps has been implementing since 2012 with Helen Keller International. Because Mercy Corps designed Sawki early in its resilience initiative, the program did not reap the full benefits of the subsequent evolution in agency thinking about resilience. The Sawki technical advisors and managers who also participated in STRESS quickly looked for opportunities to translate the findings into programmatic shifts, effectively advancing their country strategy in the process. Key among these shifts were team efforts to:

- **Respond to big picture trends:** Sawki's agricultural team was already aware of climate-related issues, but the STRESS process' inclusion of two resilience capacities—increasing agricultural productivity and sustainably managing natural resources—and their subsequent integration into the country strategy provided a new sense of urgency. The team developed climate resilient agricultural training modules for the program's farmer field schools, demonstrating how to efficiently use water and soil in fields or inputs like short-maturing seeds, among other strategies. Sawki also worked with farmers and field agents to facilitate off-season production through permagardening, a set of techniques participants said greatly improved yields, allowing them to share with vulnerable neighbors.

- **Reemphasize gender inequity as an underlying driver of food security:** Informed by STRESS findings, the country strategy's focus on socio-cultural norms limiting women and girls' decision-making as underlying constraints to food security prompted the Sawki team to work more closely with Building Resilience through the Integration of Gender and Empowerment (BRIGE). BRIGE engages women and men in behavior change activities emphasizing equitable decision-making, shared household and farm work, and shared resources. As one Sawki manager and STRESS participant noted, "Resilience isn't just in the agricultural work, it's also in the social relations between men and women, and the decisions made after production—who controls money, who makes decisions for the household. This is what affects food security." These activities complement Sawki's husband schools, where men learn about issues such as maternal and child health, and safe space activities, which engage adolescent girls in discussions around family planning, early marriage, and the importance of education and financial literacy. Sawki now also teaches adolescent girls and women to manage goats so they can use them as resources (e.g., for household consumption or selling to purchase other necessities) when they face shocks or stresses.
- **Train staff across sectors to support integrated food security and resilience programming:** The STRESS process' capacity strengthening in systems thinking helped the Sawki team see their program's field agent structure differently: while field agents visited Sawki's communities most frequently, they received training in only one sector. For example, a community health agent might miss opportunities to identify and respond to cross-sector situations affecting resilience and food security that an agricultural agent would not. In response, the team developed trainings to strengthen field agents' capacity to recognize issues outside of their sectors and support food security and resilience more cohesively. As a result, this same community health agent would be more aware if, for instance, communities are drying their hay improperly. Vice versa, an agricultural agent would notice if community members are not washing their hands regularly. Both would be able to provide better guidance and signal program shortfalls (outside of their sectors) to the appropriate staff.
- **Ensure administrative and operational processes facilitate and support resilience programming:** Following the STRESS process, the regional resilience advisor held adaptive management workshops with Sawki and the wider team to reflect on the barriers and critical resources needed to implement the findings and strategy. Participants expressed a need for the agency to shift how it hired and trained staff. "You have to be able to think in systems and be a curious manager who promotes reflections and an adaptive spirit in your team," one respondent reflected. Following the workshop, the team developed a human resources and recruitment improvement plan that would support its resilience agenda and country strategy. More generally, these conversations highlighted the importance of prioritizing modifications to operational and administrative structures, policies, procedures, and staff engagement that match the larger desired paradigm shifts in systems thinking and resilience within programs. After reflection, one facilitator regretted that operational and administrative staff had not played a larger role in STRESS.

LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The central question of this case is whether STRESS achieved its goal of informing a country-strategy for Niger. This final section synthesizes both the successes and stumbling blocks the team encountered into major lessons and recommendations for practitioners pursuing risk and resilience assessments. Here, we separate these lessons learned and recommendations into: 1) the structure, mechanics, and content; and 2) capacity strengthening.

STRUCTURE, MECHANICS, AND CONTENT

As a resilience learning process, STRESS benefited from the leadership of a high-level champion who could set clear expectations, maintain team enthusiasm, and translate findings into action. In Niger, the country director and his senior leadership team prioritized staff time and resources to support STRESS. His efforts challenging the Mercy Corps Niger team and partners to question their assumptions and expand their thinking during STRESS were central to the development of a fundamentally different and innovative country strategy. The success of STRESS, as one facilitator noted, “was a big credit not to STRESS or anyone on the technical support unit, but is reflective of [the country director’s] work and leadership. He had created a team that was empowered and rallied around this effort. [He] is a huge champion, and we’ve learned strong country director leadership is an absolute requirement to a successful STRESS.”

Engaging diverse partners in resilience learning laid the foundation for strong partnerships in and an external commitment to implementing process findings. Risk and resilience assessments provide unique opportunities for **convening multidisciplinary stakeholders** around a common issue. Mercy Corps Niger’s partnership with NASA during STRESS laid the foundation for an innovative new partnership around the country’s groundwater challenges, a critical component of the new country strategy. “We learned together,” one senior leader reflected. “This STRESS was highly participatory and sector-neutral. This helps to ensure we’re getting the whole picture. It means it took longer, but these efforts help move us toward collaboration.”

Failure to clearly define and communicate the scope and intensity required at each stage of a risk and resilience assessment can create confusion and undermine staff trust and commitment. In undertaking the first national-level STRESS, the Niger team struggled to determine the correct level of detail for informing a high-level country strategy, which resulted in some confusion and tension among staff about the true purpose of the process and expectations for research outcomes. If the team had defined its boundaries and better communicated that research would not (and should not) answer all their questions, staff investment in the country strategy may have been stronger. This—coupled with the uncertainty about the purpose of STRESS and lack of differentiation between good development practices and the resilience approach and capacities—signaled the need for a strong internal and external communications plan that ensures all parties (e.g., communities, staff at all levels, external partners) know where they are going and why at all times.

CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

Niger’s STRESS process yielded new insights that fundamentally shifted both what teams do and how they work together, but translating findings into action often required ongoing training and support. The Niger STRESS was fundamentally a local staff-led process. From data collection to report writing and analysis, the team assumed responsibility for its success. Staff who participated in the STRESS retained the ability to identify and apply resilience capacities in ongoing and upcoming program strategy and design. This required a series of **follow-up workshops to translate high-level findings into actionable outcomes**. Staff turnover exacerbated these gaps, signaling an ongoing need for resilience staff capacity strengthening among existing and new employees. Staff noted that the STRESS report alone, absent of intentional training on resilience concepts, is unlikely to be useful in addressing this gap.

Implementing STRESS findings required changes to Mercy Corps Niger’s administrative and operational structures. Realizing the country strategy will require a highly motivated and inquisitive team that can think critically, embrace complexity, and manage adaptively, the team now believes it may have been beneficial to engage administrative and operational staff actively (e.g., human resources) in the STRESS process to discuss how their structures, policies, and procedures might shift to accommodate resilience and systems thinking.

THE REAL RISK AND RESILIENCE ASSESSMENT CASE STUDY SERIES

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

RESILIENCE EVALUATION, ANALYSIS AND LEARNING

The Resilience Evaluation, Analysis and Learning (REAL) Associate Award is a consortium-led effort funded by the USAID Center for Resilience. It was established to respond to growing demand among USAID Missions, host governments, implementing organizations, and other key stakeholders for rigorous, yet practical, monitoring, evaluation, strategic analysis, and capacity building support.

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