

# NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS' APPROACHES TO RESILIENCE PROGRAMMING

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## INTRODUCTION

Resilience is more than the ability of a system (such as a household or community) to bounce back to its predisaster state. Rather, a more integrated and holistic definition suggests that resilience is the ability to withstand (absorb) shocks and stresses, as well as the ability to adapt to dynamic conditions and put in place mechanisms that enable longer-term, systemic responses to the underlying causes of vulnerability.<sup>1</sup> The definition adopted for the purposes of this brief is the one developed by the Resilience Measurement Technical Working Group: "Resilience is the capacity that ensures adverse stressors and shocks do not have long-lasting adverse development consequences."<sup>2</sup>

Over the past five years, considerable work has gone into the development of conceptual frameworks of resilience that help users understand how shocks and stresses affect livelihood strategies and household well-being, and help identify the key leverage points to be used in a theory of change, which in turn informs programming designed to enhance resilience. A resilience framework integrates livelihoods, disaster risk reduction, and climate change adaptation approaches into a single assessment framework. Thinking on resilience has evolved from characteristics-based or outcome-based approaches to a focus on capacities. Building the resilience of individuals, households, communities, or higher-level systems to deal with shocks and stresses requires improving absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities, which are distinct but interrelated, are mutually reinforcing, and exist at multiple levels.

This brief seeks to enhance our understanding of resilience processes, activities, and outcomes by examining initiatives to enhance resilience capacity that are designed and implemented by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). It reviews the theories of change and approaches developed by various NGOs that support their resilience programs and the means by which NGOs are measuring program outcomes and impact. The brief also identifies challenges, potential opportunities, and recommendations for improving resilience programming by NGOs.

## PROGRAMMING

A number of principles from the theoretical literature<sup>3</sup> are embedded in the resilience programming done by many NGOs. The extent to which a given NGO intervention is said to use a resilience perspective to address the challenges of poverty, food insecurity, health, or other well-being outcomes can be judged in relation to these five principles:

- **Focus on shock dynamics:** Efforts to enhance resilience require an understanding of the type of shock(s) *and* the effects of the shock(s).

- **A multidimensional capacity:** Resilience is a multidimensional capacity that draws on human, social, economic, physical, ecological, and programmatic (for example, safety nets) resources, the optimal configuration of which varies by type of shock, level of aggregation, context, and target population.

- **Resilience functions:** Preparing for and responding to a particular type of disturbance or configuration of disturbances may require different types of absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities.

- **Outcome-indexed capacities:** Resilience should be indexed to a given well-being outcome, and the specific capacities drawn upon may vary depending on the outcome of interest (for example, health, food security, poverty).

- **A multilevel and systems-based approach:** Resilience is observed at a given level (such as household or community) but is understood as a multilevel construct. Interventions should be sensitive to nested dependencies between levels (for instance, households and communities, communities and regions).

Other common themes and approaches emerging from NGO initiatives to build resilience capacity include comprehensive risk analysis, integrated and holistic approaches, regional resilience strategies, an emphasis on complementary partnerships and knowledge management within these relationships, and a social capital focus.

NGO approaches to resilience programming are as diverse as the regional, national, and local contexts in which they are implemented, and they typically either focus on a specific vulnerable population and a specific shock or on integrating, sequencing, and layering activities so that they support and protect core programming goals (for example, food and nutrition security, poverty reduction) that contribute to building resilience through improved absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacity. Examples of projects implemented by NGOs and focused on building resilience include these:

- **Pastoralist Areas Resilience Improvement and Market Expansion (PRIME):** A consortium of NGOs led by Mercy Corps implements the PRIME project in Ethiopia, which employs integrated, layered, and sequenced cross-sectoral initiatives (such as nutrition, early warning systems, and skills transfer including literacy and numeracy) that support and protect core programming activities (market linkages) and strengthen

household resilience through their increased absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities.

- **Productive Safety Net Programme Plus / Graduation with Resilience to Achieve Sustainable Development (PSNP Plus / GRAD):** Building on PSNP Plus, a CARE-led consortium of NGOs implements the GRAD program, which is designed to build adaptive capacity by focusing on vulnerability in food-insecure regions that are affected by climate change. Though PSNP Plus predated “resilience” per se, it used integrated, sequenced, and layered cross-sectoral initiatives that focused on underlying structural causes of food insecurity and contributed overall to enhanced resilience capacity.

- **Concern Worldwide:** In the Horn of Africa and the Sahel, Concern is using a five-step process that emphasizes multisector programming to strengthen community resilience to food and nutrition crises.<sup>4</sup> As part of this process, Concern conducts extensive analysis of the key challenges and limitations communities face in achieving food and nutrition security and in protecting themselves from future risk. Concern’s integrated, holistic approach to resilience programming focuses on five key pathways to enhancing absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities.

- **Welthungerhilfe:** Though not designed as a “resilience” program per se, Welthungerhilfe’s project in Haiti is a good example of how long-term, integrated programming that combines addressing the underlying root causes of food and nutrition insecurity with the use of timely and flexible funding mechanisms for emergencies can strengthen the resilience of smallholder farmers to food and nutrition shocks.<sup>5</sup> Welthungerhilfe used a holistic approach to improve the absorptive and adaptive capacities of communities to anticipate and minimize risks and to cope with and recover from natural disasters.

- **Catholic Relief Services (CRS):** CRS’s strategy for building resilience capacity integrates elements of emergency response, disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, and livelihoods approaches to help vulnerable households and communities plan for and cope with shocks. CRS’s approach to resilience programming relies heavily on comprehensive (for instance, multihazard, multisector) analysis of vulnerability to risks and shocks, and it promotes community-managed disaster risk reduction (CM-DRR) to build the absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities of communities.

- **Secure the Future:** World Vision’s Secure the Future project in Tanzania offers a good example of a cross-sectoral, long-term approach to building resilience to economic and climatic shocks that focuses on three critical pillars of rural livelihoods: smallholder farming, natural resource management, and social safety nets. As a whole, the integrated and sequenced activities offer good potential for improving farmers’ absorptive and adaptive capacities.

## MEASUREMENT

The ability to measure the relationship represented by resilience (that is, the relationship between shocks, responses, and future states of well-being) requires that a number of substantive and structural features be present. Substantive features consist of initial- and end-state, disturbance, and capacity measures. Structural and methodological features highlight how data will be collected: the scale of measurement

(individual, household, community, or systems), the temporal aspects of measurement (frequency, specific timing, and duration), and the type of measurement (objective, subjective, qualitative, quantitative). In terms of common practice among NGOs, all of the organizations collect information on the initial and subsequent states (the outcomes of interest) and some collect information on disturbances (but often retrospectively), but few collect information on all the capacities that contribute to resilience. The dominant scale of measurement is the household or community level, rarely the higher systems level.

## CHALLENGES

A number of contextual challenges influence and shape NGO strategies for enhancing resilience capacity at the operational level. NGOs will not be able to transcend a number of these challenges without change on the part of donors, governments, and other high-level stakeholders.

- **Limited ability to facilitate transformational change:** The ability of most NGOs to improve transformative capacity, particularly at a national level, is often limited by external factors beyond their control. Interventions designed to influence transformative capacities often require alteration of systems that are maintained and protected by influential stakeholders.<sup>6</sup> NGO efforts to build transformative capacity at national and regional levels may be greatly enhanced through participation in higher-level task forces that include government, UN actors, and donors (such as the Regional Inter-agency Standing Committee [RIASCO] and the Global Alliance for Resilience Initiative [AGIR]).

- **Funding mechanisms:** Many NGO efforts focus on short-term, stand-alone projects rather than on longer-term programs—those that comprise multiple, integrated, complementary, and often sequential projects, all working toward a cohesive goal. Much of this short-term project focus can be traced to funding mechanisms, which are still geared toward demonstrating impact in the short term. Short funding cycles, such as those that typify humanitarian responses and initiatives focused on disaster risk reduction, often do not allow the time required to effectively promote and improve adaptive and transformative capacities, particularly those that address longer-term enabling conditions necessary to remove structural causes of vulnerability. Resilience programming is best funded through a combination of short-, medium-, and long-term funding streams that allow programs the flexibility to adapt to an evolving risk landscape.

- **Competition among NGOs:** Limited financial resources can result in competition between NGOs and other actors, a situation only made worse by existing difficulties linking humanitarian and development funding mechanisms and activities.<sup>7</sup> Thus, joint donor action in program analysis, planning, and implementation will be required in order to push forward a “resilience agenda that promotes a holistic vision of risk management implemented by actions linked across sectors working in partnership.”<sup>8</sup> By using resilience as a “competitive edge” against each other, NGOs and other stakeholders undermine the need for truly integrated and synergistic programs whose effects are felt across sectors.

- **Top-down processes:** NGO efforts to enhance resilience capacity are, at times, constrained by inflexible donor templates that mandate various elements of project design and

prescribe a menu of key development leverage points that are assumed to be appropriate in all contexts. Effective resilience programming, however, requires in-depth, cross-sectoral assessments that consider all contextual factors affecting resilience for a target population. These comprehensive assessments inform a theory of change that is adaptive, iterative, and nonlinear in its hypothesis of what is needed for resilience goals to be achieved. When donors box in acceptable responses and predetermine the types of initiatives they will fund, it undermines the utility of using a resilience framework to assess current vulnerability and map out an integrated approach to improved resilience.

- **Donor-government relationships:** NGO programs for enhancing resilience capacity are often shaped by donor-government relationships. Donor support is often geographically determined by government priorities, which can limit programming efforts by NGOs. The separation of humanitarian and development efforts into nonoverlapping geographic regions means recurrent humanitarian crises are more likely to occur in highly vulnerable areas, which in turn makes needed private-sector investment less likely to occur. Governments may be hesitant to acknowledge crises (and thereby admit the need to invest in infrastructure, policies, and systems to prevent them). The capacity of governments to develop, implement, coordinate, and monitor resilience programming often needs strengthening and differs at different levels of government. Lower levels of government (local, district) often do not have the capacity or resources to implement national-level strategies for enhancing resilience or reducing risk.

## OPPORTUNITIES

A number of opportunities have the potential to positively influence and shape NGO approaches to enhancing resilience capacity.

- Many donors are committed to new and more flexible funding mechanisms that link humanitarian and development activities to support building resilience (for example, the UK Department for International Development [DFID], the European Commission, the US Agency for International Development [USAID], the International Fund for Agricultural Development [IFAD], and the Rockefeller Foundation).
- Collaborations and partnerships between donors and governments help promote the integration of humanitarian and development strategies—for example, AGIR; RIASCO; and the Intergovernmental Authority for Development’s 2012 conference “Resilience and Growth in the Horn: Enhanced Partnership for Change.”
- Partnering with private interests may prove effective in advocating for infrastructure investment in marginalized or underserved areas that are not being served by government initiatives. The private sector may help reduce competition, particularly between NGOs, for limited donor resources and help facilitate a move toward longer-term programming.
- Learning and knowledge management consortia help NGOs identify and replicate activities that have proven effective in enhancing resilience capacity—for example, the Regional Learning and Advocacy Programme for Vulnerable Dryland Communities (REGLAP); the NGO consortium Africa Climate

Change Resilience Alliance; the Resilience Learning Consortium; and the Regional CM-DRR Learning Alliance.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Examination of initiatives implemented by NGOs to enhance the resilience capacity of the chronically vulnerable provides lessons that can improve implementation and effectiveness of future programming. Recommendations for future NGO resilience capacity-building initiatives include the following:

- **Risk-informed program design:** Effective interventions for addressing resilience require well-designed programs based on a theory of change that identifies appropriate leverage points needed to effect desired outcomes. Good program design for building resilience capacity requires a comprehensive multihazard, multisector assessment of all the contextual factors that affect the system(s) under study.

- **Investment in monitoring and evaluation (M&E) capacity for measuring resilience:** Comprehensive risk analyses are costly, and NGOs often do not have the capacity to conduct such detailed analyses or to design appropriate M&E systems. Pay scales are often inadequate for recruiting and retaining highly qualified staff. Many NGOs also rely heavily on qualitative data and potentially miss important quantitative information found in secondary and other sources. More innovative donor funding mechanisms (such as DFID’s Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters initiative) are needed in order to support NGO capacity to conduct comprehensive risk analysis, develop theories of change, design interventions to address underlying causes of vulnerability and risk, and design effective M&E systems to monitor progress and impact.

- **Implementation of long-term, integrated approaches to resilience programming:** A cross-sectoral approach with a long-term commitment is required in order to improve the absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities of vulnerable populations to shocks and stresses. Programs with an integrated approach for improving cross-sectoral outcomes ensure that partners and sectors work together to address key leverage points and adopt complementary, synergistic strategies to promote resilience. Cross-sectoral programming needs to support and protect core programming that contributes to strengthened resilience. NGOs need to shift from implementing short-term, stand-alone projects to focusing on longer-term programs that involve multiple, integrated, complementary, and often sequential projects all working toward a single, overarching goal.

- **Strategic collaboration to enhance transformative capacity:** NGOs are often limited in their ability to improve transformative capacity at the national level, though they can be effective at the local level. Collaborative efforts, alliances, or high-level task forces that involve donors, UN agencies, governments, and NGOs can more effectively improve transformative capacity at the national or regional levels, greatly enhancing NGO initiatives to improve the resilience capacity of individuals, households, and communities.

- **Development of regional resilience strategies:** The effectiveness and efficiency of NGOs’ resilience programming may be enhanced through use of a regional strategy, which would allow NGOs to align resources, build staff capacity, and

address cross-country themes that require systems thinking and approaches. A regional strategy allows for contextualization of a broader geographic area that contributes to problem analysis and programming at the country level. For example, such a

strategy could help NGOs better determine how regional issues (such as cross-border conflicts, large-scale natural disasters, and transboundary migration) might affect individual country initiatives.

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## NOTES

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