



The STRESS Process at Mercy Corps



What is a STRESS?

A Strategic Resilience Assessment (STRESS) is a methodology for applying a resilience lens to strategy development or long-term program design. It builds an understanding of the dynamic social, ecological and economic systems within which communities are embedded.

Using STRESS, Mercy Corps teams, partners and stakeholders learn to analyze their socio-ecological contexts in order to design and develop long-term, measurable resilience strategies.

Through a series of STRESS workshops and collaboration with a wide range of actors, Mercy Corps creates a cohesive strategy for the places where we are engaged and established measurable

theories of change that become guidelines for the implementation of interconnected programs.

Mercy Corps is using STRESS to develop resilience focused country strategies, design new long-term programs, and re-energize existing programs using a resilience lens.

STRESS: Myanmar Dry-Zone

The agricultural situation in Myanmar's central dry land zone is dire. Highly variable rainfall continuously threatens yields and crop quality. Land is degrading because of deforestation, erosion and salinization. Combined with erratic rainfall, the region is quickly turning into a desert. Farmers have poor access to good quality seed, fertilizer, pesticide and labor. And government policies have focused on paddy crops at the expense of potentially lucrative crops like corn.

Combined, these factors have created a deepening cycle of debt for agricultural communities in the dry zone. A good agricultural program focused on one sole aspect of this challenge, such as market access for seeds, would likely fail over time and not adequately prepare communities for inevitable and uncertain shocks and stresses.

Faced with contexts like those in Myanmar, Mercy Corps recognized that in order to build resilience there is the need for a process for understanding some of the complexity and identifying the key intervention points that could help build resilience to shocks and stresses the region will suffer in an uncertain future. This led to the development of a process called STRESS, short for "Strategic Resilience Assessment."

"Going through the STRESS process gave our team a clear understanding of resilience, while developing a forward thinking resilience strategy for the region, one which is measurable, and is comprised of interconnected programs."

- Nilan Fernando, Country Director, Mercy Corps Myanmar





What is STRESS?

Resilience is a way of thinking and acting. At Mercy Corps, resilience thinking provides us with a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic places in which we work.

It demands greater upfront analysis and continuous learning across local, regional and national scales.

STRESS puts resilience thinking into action. Strategic resilience assessments (STRESS) are the critical first phase in developing a resilience-based portfolio of programs.

STRESS leads to a TOC by taking a systems approach to collecting and analyzing data across scales and sectors. STRESS informs country-level strategy development and complex program design by helping teams develop a measurable TOC – a theory of change that clearly articulates how programs build resilience in support of humanitarian and development goals.

The process delivers a TOC that is built on (1) the right set of supportive resilience capacities- characteristics that equip individuals, households, communities and systems to prepare for and manage risk over time-and (2) a systems-level understanding of the context of a region or country.

STRESS outputs are iterated and used repeatedly. STRESS develops a set of products, including the TOC, systems maps, and stakeholder maps that can be continuously used by teams and stakeholders to improve and adapt as programs are developed and implemented.

STRESS has 4 objectives. The specific objectives of STRESS are to:

- Identify and analyze drivers and root causes of shocks and stresses across local, regional, and national scales, that have impact or undermine wider development outcomes.
- Define the impacts of shocks and stresses on different population sub-groups or geographies and the underlying factors that worsen them.
- Understand the capacity or opportunities for people, households, communities and systems to absorb, adapt and transform in the face of identified shocks and stresses.
- Develop the program team's capacity to understand complexity and build resilience.

Teams use a variety of resources to arrive at a strategy.

STRESS combines qualitative local and expert knowledge with quantitative objective data across a range of sectors and scales. It takes a multi-scale approach, because resilience requires understanding the root causes of development challenges, many of which are linked to factors outside of the boundaries of the communities seek to engage.

STRESS ignites the learning process.

At Mercy Corps, STRESS is only the beginning of the learning process. Complex systems are understood primarily through adaptive management that supports ongoing learning and revision based on new knowledge and experience.

STRESS makes teams proactive and adaptive.

STRESS gets teams **proactive** by establishing an evidence-based understanding of the socio-ecological context and associated enabling environment. It also makes teams **adaptive** by developing resilience strategies that are tested, measured and enhanced through experience.

STRESS Principles

Embrace Complexity and multiple sectors through systematic analysis of social, ecological and economic context.

Develop Capacity to build proactive resilience strategies and adaptively manage them throughout the program cycle.

Foster “Good Enough” mentality for continuous, rapid and iterative learning.

Fill Knowledge Gaps by capitalizing on accessible secondary information and data





Our Guiding Questions for Resilience Thinking

STRESS taps the experience and knowledge of a diverse set of team members and stakeholders. It is essentially a sequence of participatory steps to capture existing knowledge, identify key knowledge gaps, conduct targeted research, and develop or refine a measurable theory of change for resilience in the chosen context. The process is structured around four key resilience questions that define and focus the entire STRESS process.



Resilience of What?

Define the context and boundaries of the assessment. Identify both the target geography and the relevant elements of social, economic and ecological systems within that geography that relate to resilience.



Resilience for Whom?

Investigate how vulnerability varies across a given geography and across social groups. Gender, race, ethnicity and age are examples of key factors that may serve to differentiate vulnerability.



Resilience to What?

Identify and characterize the specific shocks and stresses that threaten the various population groups, at multiple geographic and temporal scales and across social, economic and ecological systems.



Resilience Through What?

Identify and characterize absorptive, adaptive and transformative capacities. Broadly, resilience capacity refers to the characteristics that equip individuals, households, communities and systems to prepare for and manage risk over time.



The STRESS Process



STRESS PHASE 1

Scope

You can't navigate effectively if you don't know where you are. A systems mapping workshop is the core and culmination of the scoping phase. System mapping results in a visual representation of the dynamic relationships between people and the complex systems in which they exist. This workshop brings together local team members, technical advisers, partners and other key stakeholders – people who hold the critical knowledge of local context and relevant technical issues.

Throughout the Scope phase, team members establish an assessment process and develop context using the four guiding resilience questions. They reveal critical knowledge gaps, identify key capacities for building resilience and craft workplans for the ensuing phases.

The scoping phase establishes:

1. **Context.** Articulate the rationale and objectives; identify an initial understanding of geography, target populations, shocks and stresses, and resilience capacities; identify critical knowledge gaps and formulate key lines of inquiry.
2. **Mapping.** Establish an initial understanding of the social, economic and ecological context through systems mapping.
3. **Methods.** Design the research methods, sampling methodologies and logistical needs.
4. **Process.** Establish an Assessment Team, draft an initial workplan and build a detailed budget.



STRESS Systems Mapping Process

Systems mapping engages teams in a participatory process to understand the complexity of the social, ecological and economic context within which they are working.

This iterative process starts with the “big picture.” It progressively layers in the interconnections and causal relationships between resources, relationships and shocks and stresses across scales and sectors. This allows stakeholders to collaboratively explore patterns, trends and uncertainty.



The STRESS Process



STRESS PHASE 2 Inform

Following the scoping phase, the team begins to collect and analyze data. This work is divided into two distinct sections: **Inform** and **Analyze**. In practice, these phases are likely to run simultaneously.

The Inform phase is comprised of three types of information collection efforts that look across national, regional and local scales. Literature reviews and expert interviews provide the assessment with a baseline understanding of the issues. Secondary data provides quantitative evidence for analysis. Sources for literature and secondary information include existing studies, reports and analyses. These sources help teams conserve time during primary data collection by quickly uncovering information that is already known and eliminating redundancies.

Primary data sources include community-based focus groups, interviews with key informants (experts, local stakeholders) and participatory rural appraisal methods. This information provides a deeper understanding of the perceptions of different population groups and helps teams understand how vulnerability is differentiated.



STRESS PHASE 3 Analyze

In the Analyze phase, the information collected during the Inform phase is used to respond to research questions. The phase culminates in an Analysis Workshop that brings together local team members, technical advisers, partners and other stakeholders with knowledge of the local context or relevant technical issues. This is an opportunity for the team to get buy-in from important stakeholders (internal and external). Standardized steps of the Analyze phase are adapted to the unique context of each assessment.

The specific objectives for the Inform and Analyze phases are:

1. **Deepen** the combined understanding of key trends and conditions related to the underlying drivers of vulnerability as well as shocks and stresses. Seek to understand how conditions differ across the target region, over time and within various population groups.
2. **Evaluate** the critical resilience capacities identified during the Scope phase. Understand how these capacities can be accessed and used and, if so, ensure that they can be utilized in a way that helps households and communities cope with shocks and stresses.
3. **Determine** what changes need to be implemented in the enabling environment in order to build long-term resilience. Resilience is systematically limited by a lack of transformative capacity, or existing “rules of the game,” which are largely dictated by cultural norms, learning mechanisms and the functionality and responsiveness of government.



The STRESS Process



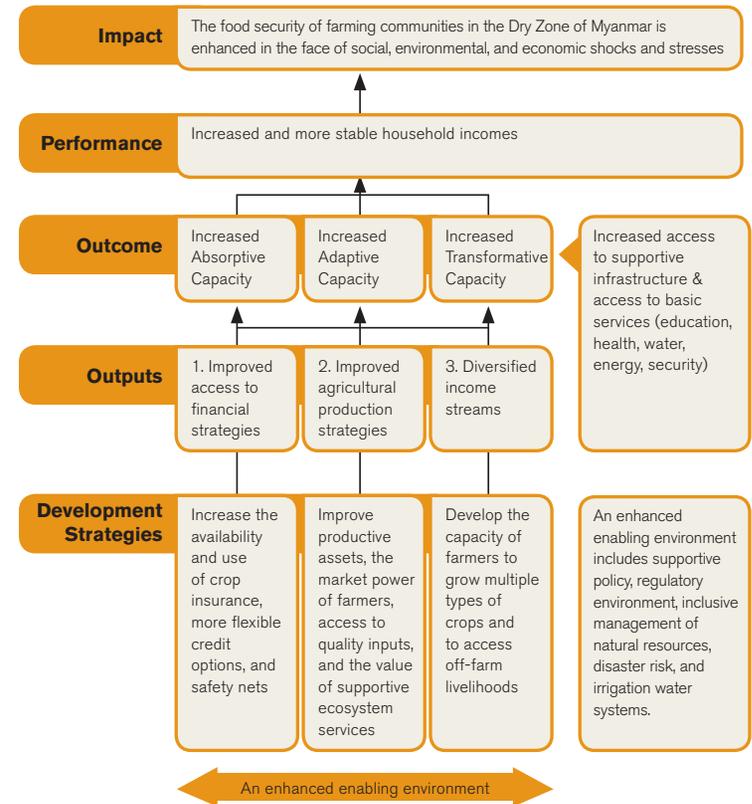
STRESS PHASE 4:

Strategize

In the Strategize phase, teams draft, refine and finalize their theories of change. Final outputs are then prepared to document the outcome and results of STRESS.

Specific objectives of this final phase of STRESS are:

1. **Formulate** a Theory of Change that aims to build resilience in an integrated and targeted manner. This includes causal relationships between development strategies, resilience capacities, outcomes, shocks, stresses and impacts.
2. **Establish** indicators that are linked to key resilience capacities, shocks, stresses, outcomes and impacts in order to integrate resilience into desired M&E systems (program, portfolio or country level, as appropriate).
3. **Articulate** the appropriate sequencing for how resilience building strategies should be implemented. This should include both the timing of development strategies as well as the necessary partnerships based on technical proficiencies and capacity-building requirements.



A summary of a TOC developed through a STRESS for the Dry Zone of Myanmar

Since our efforts in Myanmar, the STRESS process has been used to launch new initiatives in Nepal, Northern Uganda, Niger and Mongolia.

This experience and knowledge is continuously improving the STRESS process. Which means we are continually developing better resilience strategies for greater impact.

Diverse sources. Broader scales. Seeing Connections. STRESS helps our teams bring it all together to help foster lasting capacity in more resilient communities.

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