



TECHNICAL BRIEF

BUILDING RESILIENCE IN FRAGILE OR CONFLICT-AFFECTED ENVIRONMENTS

October 2014 | DCHA/CMM

Armed conflict is a major threat to societal resilience. The unparalleled destructive impact of civil war erodes resilience in people and communities, leaving them more vulnerable to the stresses of any future shocks. Resilience deficits are more likely in fragile and conflict-affected (FCA) environments because fragility and armed conflict directly undercut resilience. The key, therefore, to strengthening resilience in FCA environments is to explicitly address conflict and fragility dynamics and draw upon existing USAID resources for conflict management and peacebuilding.

Armed conflict is a major threat to community resilience. Conflict restricts or blocks people's access to assets and resources—physical, natural, human, financial, social, and political. During conflict, civilians are not only at risk of being killed or injured, but also of having their livelihoods deliberately undermined. Episodes of armed conflict erode physical and economic security of households and communities, as well as their formal and informal social support networks. The destructive impacts of conflict—reversing economic growth, damaging public health systems, shutting children out from education, and degrading the physical environment—combine to erode resiliencies in people and communities that leave them more vulnerable to the stresses of any future shocks.

Attacking community coping mechanisms by destroying livelihoods can in fact be a strategy of armed groups in conflict. In Mali in the 1960s, for example, the Government in Bamako poisoned water wells commonly used by Tuareg nomads as a tactic in its confrontation with separatists. Such tactics can push food- and water-stressed communities to the brink of survival. In that way, armed conflict can induce a vicious circle in which violence undercuts resilience which, in turn, bolsters grievances among some societal groups that could lead to more violence.

Fragility, armed conflict, and resilience deficits are linked. State-society relations that produce outcomes considered illegitimate or ineffective are dubbed *fragile*. Fragility can both contribute to and be a consequence of armed conflict. Fragility is associated with a limited willingness and/or capacity by the state to address a wide range of public policy and governance challenges, which means that such governments are less likely to proactively take steps to mitigate risks of future shocks and stresses. This could range from a reluctance to confront bandits or armed groups

operating within its territory to an inability to provide a social safety net to citizens negatively affected by drought.

Resilience deficits are more likely in FCA environments. In conditions of fragility and armed conflict, trust within society is lacking, information about risk is often misinterpreted or not responded to effectively, and essential resources are not allocated fairly or widely available for relief efforts. For example, many countries of the Sahel exhibit at least pockets of fragility where the state is unable to provide services, police its borders, or otherwise uphold the rule of law. In some cases, the citizens living at the peripheries of society (geographically or figuratively) do not feel the state represents them or can be trusted to work in their interests. As a consequence, when these marginalized communities suffer a shock, they are less able to access support from the state—and by extension others in their extended national and regional community. Moreover, to the extent that resilience is also about the capacity to harness opportunities amid challenges, leaders are often preoccupied with political or conflict-related matters. These features of FCA environments impede progress toward building resilience in households and in communities.

Strengthening state-society relations is central to tackling fragility and creating the circumstances for building resilience. An effective and strong social compact between the state and society enables more effective governance and policy formation for disaster risk management, investment in livelihoods, resource management and improvements in social and economic conditions of vulnerable populations. These are all important building blocks for strengthening coping and adaptive capacities of communities and fostering resilience.

A self-reinforcing relationship exists in which the way people cope with shocks, manage stresses and variability, and change over time

influences the performance of institutions (i.e. the rules of the game in the social compact). This in turn affects the community's adaptive capacities and resources. Supporting the development of effective and legitimate institutions should therefore be a core goal of efforts to build resilience in FCA environments.

Investments to build peace can also bolster resilience.

Activities that strengthen conflict resolution mechanisms should be a central component of programming that aims to strengthen rural and pastoral livelihoods and drought resilience in conflict-affected environments. The results from a recent project completed by Mercy Corps illustrate how strengthening conflict resolution mechanisms can bolster resilience.¹ The project explored the links between conflict and drought resilience among pastoralists in Southern Ethiopia. The research provides evidence of the contributions of peacebuilding programming to pastoralists' abilities to productively cope with and adapt to the recent drought. The findings showed that the improvements to freedom of movement and access to water, pasture, and other natural resources brought about by the Mercy Corps programs were key contributing factors to households' drought resilience. The study sheds light on how peacebuilding programming can be done in a way that helps mitigate the effects of severe drought among pastoralists, and likely speed their recovery from them.

The displays of resilience in FCA environments are not always normatively positive. It is possible to have a resilient autocratic state that derives its staying power through suppression and manipulation of the population. Conversely, communities in war-torn countries often exhibit remarkable resilience developed to cope with shocks and stresses of conflict that could have been prevented. And yet, that resilience may include reliance on illicit or patronage-based networks that in the long run impede a return to normalization or sustainable development. Resilience of communities to the effects of violence (e.g. coping capacities) is different from the resilience of communities to the incentives to engage in violence (e.g. social cohesion and institutional legitimacy).

International assistance to build resilience becomes part of the conflict context in which it is provided. By supporting some groups or systems and not others, assistance interacts with the context's dynamics of conflict and fragility—for good or ill. In FCA states, systems of exchange, livelihoods, and

governance are generally not only weakened, but also often perceived to be utilized to the benefit of particular groups. They are bound up in politicized dynamics of conflict. Strengthening one element of the system therefore can unintentionally reinforce negative perceptions, grievances, and patterns of inequality and abuse. When analyzing the resilience of a community, it is important to simultaneously account for and analyze the dynamics of conflict and fragility in order to ensure effectiveness and reduce potential negative externalities. This reflective process is called being “conflict sensitive.”

Conclusion: USAID's approach to resilience should draw upon existing resources in conflict management and peacebuilding practice. Conflict analysis is always the first step. Transitioning out of fragility by building effectiveness and legitimacy in the state-society relationship should be a key consideration and over-arching objective. From there, program models exist to leverage peacebuilding tools to build resilience of livelihoods, generally by changing attitudes and behaviors relevant to communities' adaptive capacities. Tools also exist to help other resilience-building activities—from livelihoods to natural resource management to community-based development—to be more conflict sensitive and do no harm. These tools can be used to inform project design. During implementation, programs should monitor the conflict dynamics and resilience-related activities' interactions with those conflict dynamics, including by tracking key indicators disaggregated by conflict lines (e.g. identity groups, geography). Lastly, evaluations of activities should seek to assess whether projects adhered to best practices for engagement in fragile and conflict-affected environments, as well as whether and how projects contributed to reducing the risk of future shocks and stresses associated with armed conflict and fragility.

Notes

¹ Jon Kurtz and Greg Scarborough. “From Conflict to Coping: Evidence from Southern Ethiopia on the Contributions of Peacebuilding to Drought Resilience among Pastoralist Groups.” Published by Mercy Corps (February 2012). http://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/from_conflict_to_coping_-_final.pdf

About this Technical Brief

This technical brief has been developed by the Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation in USAID's Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance. For discussion purposes only, it is meant to highlight a series of general considerations to inform engagement to enhance resilience in fragile or conflict-affected environments.