



RESILIENCE RAPID LEARNING BRIEF

ROLE OF MARKETS IN STRENGTHENING
SOCIAL RESILIENCE CAPACITIES IN
NORTHEAST NIGERIA



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ABOUT THE RESILIENCE RAPID LEARNING SERIES

LESSONS FOR BUILDING RESILIENCE IN PROTRACTED CRISES AND CONFLICT-AFFECTED SETTINGS

REAL's Resilience Rapid Learning Series is designed to provide the practitioner and donor community with insights and emerging evidence on how to build resilience in protracted crises and conflict-affected settings. The series documents promising program approaches and contextual insights through rapid research, case studies, and technical analysis. This series was inspired by a Conflict and Resilience Roundtable in June 2020, organized by the REAL Award and the USAID Center for Resilience, and framed by Mercy Corps' paper *Towards Resilience: Advancing Collective Impact in Protracted Crises*. This paper calls for humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development action to align behind a resilience agenda to protect current and future well-being in conflict settings.

Research questions for each brief in this series align with the framework presented in the *Towards Resilience* paper, calling for collective action around three practice areas to drive resilience:

1. Rapid, real-time analysis of risk factors that drive and perpetuate fragility.
2. Support to local market and social systems to strengthen sources of resilience to the shocks and stresses defining protracted crises.
3. Short-term violence prevention paired with efforts to transform the structural drivers of conflict.

The roundtable discussion validated a desire for practitioner and donor communities to work differently at the intersection of peacebuilding, humanitarian aid, and development, and to include resilience perspectives in program design and implementation. To further this agenda, participants called for documentation of promising program practices for building resilience among conflict-affected communities through rapid (light-touch) learning briefs.

This brief documents how a combination of livelihood support and economic collectives like village savings and loan associations (VSLAs) can develop financial and social sources of resilience (i.e., agency and confidence in the future) in crisis contexts.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In protracted crises, where the state has limited capacity or lacks the political will to provide for and protect its citizens, people rely on markets and social connections for protection, information, and economic resources. Resilience capacities such as agency and confidence in the future are equally important. **But how might aid interventions in protracted crises develop these important sources of resilience?** Early evidence from two economic recovery interventions in Northeast (NE) Nigeria found that a combination of livelihood-support and economic collectives such as VSLAs helped develop financial and social sources of resilience for participants and nonparticipants. This finding aligns with evidence from a review of Self Help Groups suggesting that women who are part of Self Help Groups gain more psychosocial benefits such as social capital and women's empowerment.¹

The effects of market interventions on both economic and social sources of resilience occurred through three pathways.

1. Livelihood support and VSLAs in conflict settings contributed to women's self-esteem, confidence, and agency, and shifted men's perceptions about women's roles.

How? Income from livelihoods increased women's economic contributions to the household; the financial freedom from VSLAs enabled women to become self-reliant in meeting their household and livelihood needs. Men recognized women's potential and engaged them in important household and financial decisions.

2. Interventions increased participants' confidence in their capacity to deal with future shocks.

How? Increased skills and practical knowledge from livelihood technical training increased participants' confidence to be able to restart a livelihood even in the event of displacement; knowledge and practice of a reliable savings and loans mechanism (VSLAs) increased participants' confidence in their ability to access financial resources to deal with future shocks.

3. Market-based livelihood interventions and VSLAs helped to strengthen and diversify social connections, catalyze economic activity, and promote psychosocial well-being.

How? Increased income and assets from livelihoods became important sharing resources to maintain and strengthen reciprocal support networks. VSLA participation fostered new and beneficial economic collaboration; group meetings promoted an exchange of economic and emotional guidance.

Being aware of these pathways helps practitioners understand why and how people are using these economic and social sources of resilience, which is important for effective program design. These insights, coupled with observations of program implementation challenges, led to the following programmatic recommendations:

- Invest in interventions that encourage participation in markets and further economic activity.
- Design programs that support resilience through investments in financial inclusion.
- Layer economic interventions with activities that strengthen social networks.

¹ Cabot et al. (2021)

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CONTEXT

Research shows that markets² and social networks³—family, friends, and neighbors—are critical sources of resilience in protracted crises, where formal governance is largely weak or absent altogether. We are also learning that self-efficacy, agency, and confidence in the future are important predictors of an individual's or household's ability to escape and remain out of poverty in the face of shocks.⁴ This evidence begs the question: **How do we strengthen these important sources of resilience in protracted crises?** This learning brief sheds light on this question through a case study of two market-based programs in northeast (NE) Nigeria. We find that livelihood interventions paired with economic collectives⁵ are effective at strengthening resilience capacities such as reciprocal social connections, empowering women, and improving psychosocial well-being, specifically perceptions of one's own agency and confidence in the future. In this brief we share three key pathways through which this combination of interventions has a positive impact on social and psychosocial sources of resilience, and where we can go next with these findings.



Figure 1: Map of NE Nigeria

NE Nigeria is slowly turning the page after nearly ten years of Boko Haram insurgency. The insurgency destroyed physical infrastructure such as roads and marketplaces, people were uprooted from familiar social networks, and conflict-related trauma is widespread—over 2,000 women and girls were abducted at the height of the insurgency.⁶ Trust-based informal savings groups, which were common pre-insurgency, disintegrated during displacement.⁷ However, the conflict's impact and households' own resilience capacities is not homogeneous.⁸ Mercy Corps' NE Nigeria programs, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (PDR) and the European Commission (MAIDA), harnessed pockets of stability to implement a resilience intervention to improve livelihoods and informal financial services for conflict-affected internally displaced persons (IDPs) and host communities. Interventions were initially piloted in more stable contexts and learning from this helped the teams expand into insecure areas.

2 Howe et al. (2018)

3 Kim et al. (2020)

4 USAID (2018)

5 Collectives that save and lend money. These include VSLAs, Savings Groups, and Self-Help Groups.

6 MAIDA program proposal (internal documents, unpublished)

7 Goeldner et al. (2017)

8 FAO (2019)

OVERVIEW: PDR & MAIDA

The Poultry Development and Resettlement (PDR) and the Borno Maida Early Recovery (MAIDA, which means “recovery” in the Hausa language) programs chose their primary livelihood inputs based on value chain assessments for poultry (PDR) and cereal crops (MAIDA). Building on pre-existing capacities such as access to social networks for cash and information, teams mobilized participants into VSLA groups to provide a reliable channel for informal savings and loans. To diversify participants’ sources of cash loans, the teams facilitated linkages between the participants, government banks, and relevant ministries to provide information on the Government of Nigeria’s soft loan options.¹

PDR identified lead agents to supply local poultry growers (small and medium-sized enterprises) with a hybrid “Noiler” chicken variety and to provide business training and market linkages for program participants with veterinary and allied services. The lead agents were extremely capable trainers and had pre-existing relationships with market actors in the target locations. PDR participants invested a small amount of their own capital to purchase their first stock of chickens from poultry growers in a “buy-one, get-one-free” promotion. (Mercy Corps paid for the “free” chickens.) **MAIDA** selected their lead agent for cereals and bio-fertilizers through an open procurement. The lead agent provided seeds and inputs, and technical and business skills training. Program teams worked with existing (and new) farmer cooperatives and provided vouchers to redeem with locally identified seed suppliers.

¹ Development Finance Department Central Bank of Nigeria (2016)

DATA AND METHODS

This brief is based on 24 qualitative discussions with participants in Jere, a semi-urban location in Borno State with relatively good infrastructure. Program teams selected interview participants, which may reflect a bias toward people who saw greater benefits from the interventions. Findings are hence not representative of the full spectrum of participants’ experiences or contextual variations. Program teams report similar effects in other, more rural and insecure locations, however, these could not be independently ascertained. Finally, interviews were conducted in March 2020 just as the economic and social disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic were being experienced across the world. The findings’ methodological and temporal limitations highlight areas for additional research, relevant for NE Nigeria and programs operating in similar fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

KEY INSIGHTS

This section highlights the main findings, and related conceptual framework, that highlight how investments in markets, livelihoods, and financial inclusion led to gains in social connections, increased agency, and psycho-social well-being among crisis-affected households. Participants’ own narratives were complex and reflect the reality of how resilience interventions unfold in conflict-affected contexts. The conceptual framework below attempts to map these out.

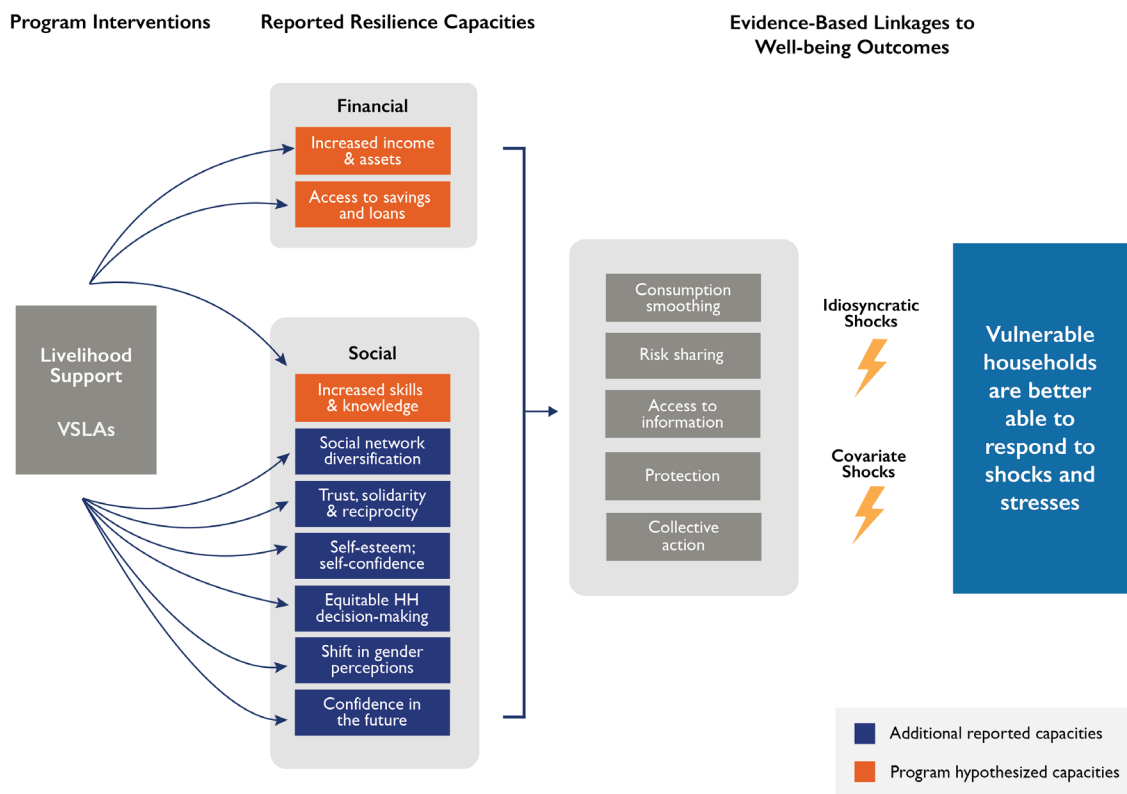


Figure 2: Conceptual framework of reported resilience capacities

FINDING 1: THE FINANCIAL FREEDOM PROVIDED THROUGH LIVELIHOOD ACTIVITIES AND VSLA PARTICIPATION CONTRIBUTED TO WOMEN'S SELF-ESTEEM, CONFIDENCE, AND AGENCY, AND SHIFTED MEN'S PERCEPTIONS ABOUT WOMEN'S ROLE WITHIN THE HOUSEHOLD AND IN THE ECONOMIC SPHERE.

Women indicated increased self-esteem and dignity because [they] had a job to do and from being able to borrow from their VSLA groups to meet emergent household or livelihood needs. Engaging in a profitable livelihood activity increased women's financial capacity to make meaningful contributions to their household's food and cash needs. Similarly, VSLA groups were a reliable source of cash and capital. As noted earlier, women face considerable constraints in accessing cash loans. Women's lack of engagement in a profitable livelihood meant that potential lenders would often ask them: "How can you repay when you are not doing anything?" This greatly limited their opportunities to expand or diversify their income sources. VSLAs, on the other hand, were a "shame-free" source through which some women reported saving considerable sums of money, while others reported taking out loans to increase their livelihood investment by tenfold.

The financial agency that these two interventions provided increased women's self-confidence. One program participant said: "Before, [when] I was not doing anything, I would be very angry, sad. But now I know the money will come because I have [a livelihood]." Aspirations also improved. "From the proceeds of my poultry sales, I have expanded into selling fabric; now I am working on buying a fridge so I can sell cold drinks and water," said another program participant.



A woman prepares to dry maize in front of her home in Borno State, Nigeria. Tom Saater/Mercy Corps 2016.

Excerpts from interviews with male and female farmers from the MAIDA program to understand what has changed as a result of men and women working together.

Male farmer 1: *“Before, we thought a woman’s job was at home, just cooking.” And now? “We discovered that women too can do things, even better than what men used to do.”*

Male farmer 2: *“Before, I used to only farm onions. But I saw the women farmers planting other vegetables like tomatoes, so I learned from them.”*

Female farmer 1: *“Before, men would see this as a sort of incapacity on their part [to ask women for help]. The program has created a joy and oneness in coming together.”*

Male farmer 2: *“I don’t fear anymore like I used to about home needs, because I know the woman is capable of handling this.”*

Participants also reported they had earned the respect of their peers. “My friends call me *Hajija*—someone of a higher class,” said one participant. All of these interventions had reinforcing empowerment benefits for women. Program staff noted that women were now “demanding [better] quality inputs, and information and services from market actors on how to raise healthier chickens.”

A critical aspect of women’s empowerment was a shift in men’s perceptions of women’s role and capacity within the household and in the economic sphere.⁹ Male and female participants across both programs reported this shift. In the PDR program, one woman noted that when she was previously engaged in a petty trade in the marketplace, her husband perceived her to be simply “whiling away her time.” However, with her involvement in a profitable livelihood, there was a marked difference in spousal communications and more equitable financial decision-making. Another woman noted that men in her community now cite her economic success with their own wives, saying “She is doing something [perceived as economically valuable].” In the MAIDA program where interventions focused on mixed-gender

⁹ Shifts in gender perceptions were not solely a result of program participation. Participants noted that the conflict related economic hardships since the start of the Boko Haram insurgency meant that many men were encouraging women to engage in income-generation to support household needs.

activities, male farmers stated that working alongside women in cereal crop farming increased their respect for women because, according to a staff member, “they discovered that the women, too, can [do things] even better than what the men used to do.” For some male farmers, this increased recognition of women’s capacity also translated into a shift in how they perceived and interacted with their own wives. Women farmers in the MAIDA program perceived that, as a result of this shift, many women from the wider community were now approaching them for guidance on engaging in an income-generating activity.

Mariam,* married with two children, was a primary school teacher in 2011. During the insurgency, she, like many teachers, lost her job.

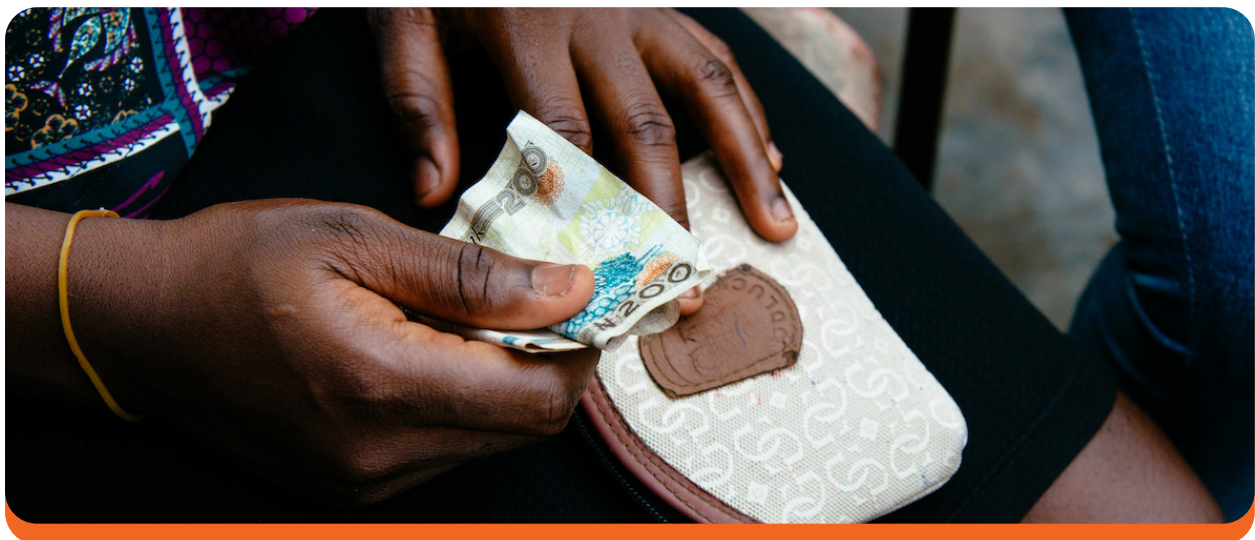
“I joined the VSLA group when the program introduced this [VSLA]. Initially, saving was difficult for me. But I managed to save 18,000 NGN. Now, I am happy. I don’t need to ask my husband for money every time I need something. Every week my husband asks me, ‘Are you not going to the VSLA meeting to save? Here, let me also support you [with some money].’ Sometimes when he needs money, he asks me for it. When he recovers the money, we sit down and advise ourselves on how to use it.”

“Now he [husband] even helps with cleaning the bird cages,” Mariam notes, which is something different. She said, “[...] it was a long time before we saw any money, but now we drink from this [business], we eat from it, we make money from it. So he [husband] also wants to gain experience of the poultry business.”

A program team member later elaborates, “Poultry-rearing is primarily considered a woman’s job.”

**Fictitious name. Interviews were anonymous.*

KEY TAKEAWAY: Livelihood interventions and VSLAs can provide a foundation for women’s empowerment, even in crisis contexts. This finding is predicated on the economic feasibility and viability of the underlying livelihoods and financial freedom to save, borrow, and expand or diversify livelihoods, as well as the gender composition of groups. Interventions that foster egalitarian gender practices and empower women are important in *all* contexts, and more so in conflict settings.



A woman participant from a VSLA in Lagos, Nigeria. Corinna Robbins/Mercy Corps, 2016.

FINDING 2: TECHNICAL SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE - AS WELL AS RELIABLE ACCESS TO CASH AND CAPITAL - IMPROVED PARTICIPANTS' CONFIDENCE IN THE FUTURE.

Participants from both programs noted they felt better prepared to deal with future shocks. They attributed this increased confidence to the technical skills and knowledge gained in the program, and the ability to rely on VSLAs for loans. Male and female farmers noted that while farming has been their primary occupation for many generations, their information sources were limited to knowledge that had been passed on from their parents or observations of others. They valued the technical training on the use of biofertilizers as opposed to chemicals, since this information was new to them and had the added benefits of protecting their health and improving their yield. Women cereal farmers were able to provide concrete examples of the utility of the training. One cereal farmer said, "Before I would carry my [farm] produce on my head to sell in the marketplace; now I invite buyers to my farm to buy all of it." For women poultry farmers, the diversity of information channels appeared to be important. One poultry farmer said, "[Now] even if the NGOs are gone we will use what we have been taught to get information [...] we will use media or from within the community." Increased knowledge translated to confidence for another poultry farmer who said, "Wherever I go I know that I can **stand** [emphasis], I can start a poultry farm and do it without any issue or problem."

Access to cash through VSLAs was equally important in men's and women's confidence in dealing with current consumption needs. "There are no shocks [now];" and "there is no fear of it" in the future, said one VSLA participant. Participants from both programs said they valued the program-facilitated linkages with formal banks for loans. One female farmer reported that since she now had the contact information for the bank, she had called to inquire about "trader business loans." Farmer groups and VSLA groups reported registering as formal cooperatives with the Ministry of Poverty Alleviation, a prerequisite to obtaining government loans. That said, for many participants, informal financial services through VSLAs or trust-based social networks seemed to be a preferred option. One woman farmer summarized, "Before, we didn't have anywhere to go for [cash] but now we are enjoying the savings, we are enjoying the bonding that we are doing." While these findings do not reflect an uptake of formal financial services, participants' trust, physical proximity, and perceptions of VSLAs' reliability are important to consider in the design and delivery of formal financial services.

KEY TAKEAWAY: Skills, knowledge, and an increased understanding of the diverse channels through which to access information appear to be important sources for participants' confidence in dealing with future shocks. This suggests that, in conflict contexts where the risk of multiple displacements are high, information and knowledge can be important transferable assets to help participants deal with future shocks.

CHALLENGES: MARKET-BASED PROGRAMMING IN CRISIS CONTEXTS

Lack of cash or social connections for investments

While PDR's "buy-one, get-one-free" promotional model gave program participants a sense of ownership over the poultry and encouraged continued economic engagement, the model posed a financial barrier for some newly displaced individuals and women-headed households. A lack of cash or social connections to borrow from for investments, along with gender constraints to women's borrowing in NE Nigeria proved a disadvantage.

Lack of operational capacity and pre-existing relationships

Lead agents in the MAIDA program lacked the operational capacity and pre-existing relationships in the intervention locations to make meaningful linkages between farmers and the local market seed suppliers. While participants did not reference this, narratives of market actor linkages were conspicuously absent in discussions with MAIDA farmers.

FINDING 3: MARKET-BASED LIVELIHOOD INTERVENTIONS AND VSLAS FACILITATED THE RECIPROCAL EXCHANGE OF ECONOMIC AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT, HELPING TO STRENGTHEN AND DIVERSIFY SOCIAL CONNECTIONS, CATALYZE ECONOMIC ACTIVITY, AND PROMOTE PSYCHOSOCIAL WELL-BEING.

Livelihood interventions enabled participants to share material resources with both family and non-kin—friends or neighbours in the community—or forge new economic connections in the community. Women poultry farmers shared produce such as eggs or meat from their poultry to help extended family members, friends, or neighbours cope with food shortages in their homes. In another instance, a woman used a part of her income from selling poultry to diversify into a shared livelihood activity with relatives in other parts of NE Nigeria. Similarly, women cereal producers noted giving their farm produce to women in the wider community to sell at the marketplace, enabling these women to also "take a little profit from it."

For program participants, the shared livelihood (poultry or agriculture) facilitated new social connections, which were further strengthened through information exchange during weekly VSLA meetings. Importantly, multiple VSLA group participants noted that their (self-developed) VSLA constitution specified that loans were primarily for livelihood expansion or diversification. Given this clause, VSLA meetings appeared to become a natural space for experiential learning of the program-provided livelihood. One participant said, "Everyone keeps bringing the experience from their side concerning the poultry;" VSLA meetings were also a space to discuss new business ideas. "I am teaching some of my [VSLA] group participants how to get into the 'selling caps'¹⁰ business," said another participant. Program staff encouraged these discussions, asking women with business ideas to share them with the group as a source of motivation and inspiration. Women's narratives indicate that they sincerely valued these interactions. One VSLA participant said, "I have gained advice on new business." Another female participant stated that she never missed her VSLA meetings;

¹⁰ Traditional headgear worn by men in NE Nigeria. Many women engage in selling caps as a primary or supplemental income source.

“socializing with other women gives me a lot of joy and more opportunities to access information [...] if any women have any experience to share I will lose out if I do not participate.”

Suwaiba*, interviewed at her home in Mairi with her three-year-old son, described her experience in the poultry program.

“I really enjoy rearing these birds. They give me a sense of belonging.”

How?

“The poultry is a big gift for women. Rearing poultry is like raising children. You have to feed them on time and take care of them. It gives women something to do [...] helped us to forget about the past. Now this is all women talk about. In our VSLA group meetings every [woman] brings experience [of rearing poultry] from their side. Even when we meet outside, some women say, ‘we plan to buy 100 chickens,’ others say they will buy a bigger cage in the next [poultry-buying] cycle.”

“I am the treasurer for Amaha 1 [VSLA group]. Tomorrow we are starting Amaha 2. Many women are interested in forming VSLA groups now.”

Why?

“Because the women feel a sense of togetherness. For example if someone had a baby, all the other women in that group will go to the new mother’s home to ‘greet her’ [...] to help her with her household chores. They give one another gifts and there is a bond. Before I myself did not know a lot of women in the community. But now I go to their homes, women get advice from one another and there is a bond. So other women are seeing this is bringing women together and they too want this.”

**Fictitious name. Interviews were anonymous.*

The space created by VSLAs for economic information exchange provided a sense of camaraderie among women, which developed into relationships of trust. Women noted that during VSLA meetings they sought each other’s guidance on personal topics such as breastfeeding or maternal health. A staff member commented, “Some women didn’t know about natural family planning; [now] they ask themselves about this.” Sharing these personal experiences helped women “get to know” one another, get over any past differences and created a “sense of togetherness.”

Women continued to deepen these bonds of solidarity and reciprocal support, both within and outside the VSLA structure, by simply “being there” for one another. This “being there” was both economic—deciding to donate the VSLA social funds to a woman member in need, for example—or emotional support—like collectively going to the home of a new mother bearing gifts or simply with offers to support her with domestic chores. These continuing relationships helped women diversify their social connections. “Before, [I] did not know a lot of women in the community. But now I go to their homes, women get advice from one another and there is a bond;” said one VSLA participant.



A savings group meets in Gombe. The group was established as part of a humanitarian response to the crisis in NE Nigeria. Corinna Robbins/Mercy Corps, 2016.

Importantly, the bonds these social connections fostered promoted psychosocial well-being among women, and the well-being narratives cut across displacement divides. A program staff member elaborated on the psychosocial impact for displaced women:

“She is now happy that she came into this society, she [feels] integrated. She has met new people, made new friends [...] she has forgotten all about the past trauma. When she is feeling sick or feeling down there are people who **care for her** [emphasis], when she has a celebration or a ceremony there are people who are there for her. This gave her a sense of belonging and has helped her to forget about her past trauma.”

Equally, host community women noted the joy they derived from simply meeting other women during VSLA meetings. One community member said: “On the day of their meeting, they go, they get dressed, they laugh, they joke, they buy their shares and save money towards their social fund which they use to help one another in times of need.”

Strengthened social networks fueled further economic activity and, in some cases, helped diversify social networks and sources of economic support for program participants *and* nonparticipants. On the PDR program, one woman noted that when women from her community asked if she could buy some chickens on their behalf, she helped facilitate direct linkages with the poultry growers instead, saying “Let’s go there together [...] you can buy these for yourself.” In another example, one woman poultry farmer linked a VSLA group member to her sister in Kaduna State so they could start a business together. In the MAIDA program, the trust that male and female farmers built from joint livelihood activities and VSLA group interactions helped some women farmers access personal loans from men’s social networks.¹¹

KEY TAKEAWAY: Investments in protracted crises should broaden the application of market-based livelihood and VSLA interventions to strengthen social sources of resilience too. This will require deliberate attention to and monitoring of how market-based livelihood interventions and VSLAs strengthen and diversify social connections, build bonds of trust, and improve psychosocial well-being in a crisis setting.

The narratives from NE Nigeria suggest that economic interventions can augment individuals’ capacity to generate underlying “shared” resources, reinforce information channels, and strengthen these sources of social resilience.

¹¹ For more on the important differences between men and women’s social networks and why these matter for women’s livelihoods, see also: World Bank Group (2019). “Profiting from Parity: Unlocking the Potential of Women’s Business in Africa.” World Bank, Washington, DC.

Observations from VSLA group meetings Amaha 1 and Amaha 2, which took place at the same time in one communal space, under a tree.

Many women have their children with them. The children are playing, running around, and one falls down and starts crying. Women are listening to the discussion, some are sewing caps and shushing the children. Most women seem to know each other. There is considerable laughter and joking until the chairperson calls the meeting to order. Every time a woman saves money, the others clap. One single thunderous clap.

“One of my birds is sick,” says one. “You should isolate them from the others,” says another. Another lady chimes in, “Yes, and light some coal and place it under their cage. It will keep them warm.”

LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These findings demonstrate that even within protracted crises, it is feasible to incorporate a resilience lens into a wide range of programs and interventions. Taking a phased implementation approach starting with relatively stable contexts can provide a proof of concept on if and how interventions facilitate a range of resilience capacities, contribute to well-being outcomes, and for whom. These findings, along with understanding implementation challenges, can inform decisions on how to tweak, replicate, and expand interventions for insecure locations.

INVEST IN INTERVENTIONS THAT ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION IN MARKETS AND FURTHER ECONOMIC ACTIVITY.

In protracted crises, a combination of livelihood support and VSLAs that build financial *and* social resilience capacities to bounce back from recurrent shocks may provide the most benefit for marginalized groups such as women, women-headed households, or newly displaced individuals. Yet, these individuals may lack the economic resources to participate in the interventions. Humanitarian cash transfers can help households stabilize basic needs, invest in small productive assets, and participate in savings groups or VSLAs to provide pathways towards economic recovery.¹²

DESIGN PROGRAMS THAT SUPPORT RESILIENCE THROUGH INVESTMENTS IN FINANCIAL INCLUSION.

These programs bolster economic resilience capacities such as access to functioning markets and ownership of productive assets and social resilience capacities, including the role of trust and social connections in helping households cope and/or access protection or livelihood-related information. Program assessments help explain if and how these capacities vary based on age, sex, or displacement status. Understanding local sources of resilience can ground interventions by building on these capacities and providing safe pathways to challenge social and gender norms that inhibit program participation.

APPLY AN INTEGRATED PROGRAM APPROACH BY LAYERING ECONOMIC INTERVENTIONS WITH ACTIVITIES THAT STRENGTHEN SOCIAL SYSTEMS TO BUILD PROGRAM MOMENTUM AND THE CAPACITY OF INDIVIDUALS TO ADAPT AND TRANSFORM IN THE FACE OF RECURRENT CRISES.

The relationship between economic interventions, social resilience capacities, and psychosocial well-being appear to be

¹² Mercy Corps and Causal Design (2015)

complex and multidirectional. Recognizing that shocks are recurrent and vary in scale, magnitude, and impact is equally important for the well-being of conflict-affected populations.



A young woman in Biu, Nigeria who saves income from her small sugar business in a VSLA. Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps, 2018.

IMPLICATIONS

In addition to the findings and recommendations presented, a key lesson for practitioners and policy makers is not to wait for periods of stability to implement resilience interventions. The impacts of conflict on households' resilience capacities are not homogeneous, and individuals' priorities often do not align with practitioners' linear phased approaches.

This research has also surfaced opportunities for further probing, such as the differences in relatively stable areas versus more insecure areas within crisis contexts, how financial dimensions of resilience (assets) and social dimensions of resilience (social networks) interact and co-develop, how economic interventions in crisis contexts strengthen trust and diversify social connections among and across different lines of division (i.e., ethnic, tribal, political allegiances), and whether this has an impact on peacebuilding outcomes.¹³ Other areas to explore are the uptake of formal financial services and how it is affected by displacement risks, the disintegration of trust-based VSLAs, and covariate shocks, such as the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹³ Dawop et al. (2019)

DEFINITIONS

Protracted crises: Defined as contexts where a significant portion of the population is “acutely vulnerable to death, disease and disruption of livelihoods over prolonged periods of time.” These contexts share a few common features—natural disasters and/or conflict are recurrent; livelihood systems break down, which in turn contributes to malnutrition and mortality and can fuel conflict over resources; and the state has limited capacity or lacks the political will to support and protect its citizens.¹⁴

Formal governance: Refers to state institutions. The length and recurrence of crises may erode the state’s capacity and resources to provide for the basic needs of its citizens.¹⁵ The reverse is also true. The political vacuum left by the state may also fuel conflict and/or further reduce individuals’ capacities to cope and recover. In some countries, such as South Sudan, there are informal governance structures with their own rules and norms, but these may continue to erode as the crisis prolongs or only work for a few elite groups.

Social connections: The sum of people’s social linkages: the social networks they can draw on, the extent and strength of those networks and the resources available within them, the nature of obligation that such networks carry, and the reciprocity presumed in terms of collective risk and mutual support.¹⁶ Importantly, greater social connectedness is not always a “positive” thing. An individual’s social connectedness is inherently linked to social hierarchy, power dynamics, and inequity.

Mercy Corps measures six dimensions of social connectedness to capture the complexity noted above.¹⁷ It is not just the number of people that an individual or household can call on in times of need, but also how diverse these connections are (*diversity*); an individual’s—or households’ confidence in their ability to mobilize resources from their connections (*reliability*); and if these forms of support are reciprocal (*reciprocity*) i.e., individuals or households not only receive support from their connections, but equally are called on to provide support.

Social capacities: Social capacities refer to sources of resilience linked to social systems. These include dimensions of social connections noted above and psychosocial resilience capacities — self-efficacy, agency, and confidence in the future.¹⁸

¹⁴ FAO (2010)

¹⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁶ Maxwell et al. (2016)

¹⁷ For the other dimensions and their definitions see Kim et al. (2020) “The Currency of Connections” p 14.

¹⁸ Lombardini et al. (2017)

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