

Household Economics & Resilience

For nearly 100 years, Save the Children has worked with the most vulnerable populations around the world, seeking to achieve real and lasting change for children. As a dual mandate organization we work both to foster long term development and to respond to emergencies. Real and lasting change can only be achieved if there is a strong link between both aspects of this work. Emergency response must meet the needs of vulnerable populations before, during and after a crisis to ensure that those we reach not only survive but go on to thrive. In non-emergency development situations it is crucial to ensure that households are becoming less vulnerable so that the progress they make won't be wiped away in the next crisis.

Save the Children is pleased to see the emerging commitment of donors, governments and other non-governmental organizations to connect emergency and development work in order to build resilience as a means to achieving real and lasting change for those most vulnerable in chronic crisis areas, such as the Sahel and Horn of Africa. In December 2012, Save the Children welcomed the U.S. government's timely launch of its whole-of-government strategy on resilience, which seeks to "layer, integrate, and sequence" humanitarian relief and development assistance,¹ with a focus on chronic crisis areas where risk and unexpected shocks are the norm.

RESILIENCE FOR FOOD SECURITY

Resilience, according to USAID, is the ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth. Building resilience is at the heart of our work in food security. Using integrated multi-sectoral approaches we target the chronically vulnerable whose lives are shock-prone. These families exist on a knife's edge, stretching budgets and resources on a day to day basis as they struggle to gain and hold onto the assets and income needed to consistently and nutritiously feed themselves and their children. This economic footing is what enables families to ensure that children are safe, healthy, educated and able to attain their rights; it is key to their resilience in the face of disaster.

HOUSEHOLD ECONOMICS – THE FOUNDATION

Definitions of resilience are broad out of necessity; there is not one silver bullet answer to developing resilience in crisis prone areas. However, the broad lens can also make it challenging to translate resilience into concrete actions. The key to operationalizing resilience is to start by understanding the pattern and causes of vulnerability. We work with the populations in the area to understand their exposure to and their ability to cope with and recover from shocks and stresses. We ask what makes some people vulnerable. Do they have little to no savings? Is their asset base exposed to risk? Do they bear a high debt burden? For farmers, do they produce diversified foods, use irrigation, have access to markets or farmers' groups and reliable, locally-appropriate seeds? These are the tools and assets that make some people secure, and are directly linked to a family's ability to purchase nutritious food. Having worked in many chronic crisis areas for a decade or more, we draw on our relations and understanding of the community structure to help develop the most appropriate strategies of support to provide.

For Save the Children’s food security responses, many of these core questions focus on household economics. Assessing household economics gives us a consistent framework for analysis across varied contexts. While environmental, climatic or livelihoods situations change, we conduct our assessments with a consistent focus on factors that affect economic well-being - including savings and assets, loans capacities and burdens, market access, and exposure to risk – in order to identify strategies that will successfully build resilience to shocks and stresses.

The hard reality of building resilience in chronic crisis areas is that those who are most vulnerable to changes are the same ones who are least able to take the risk of doing things differently to protect or adapt their family’s livelihood strategy. For many families, one delayed rain or one poorly timed illness can be a setback that reverberates for years – making them more vulnerable to the next setback. Without a focus on building resilience over the long-term, any gains that may have been acquired previously can be quickly erased. Once that happens recovery for these families is either incredibly challenging or just out of reach as they have poor access to the economic, social and political capital needed to overcome hardships.

Resilience is about creating a cushion that helps families build some economic stability in the face of change so they are not as exposed to the risk of a shock, and better able to cope when it comes. That not only helps families provide for their children, but also builds communities and countries that can minimize the impact of crises today and hopefully reduce the impact of crises in the future.

RESILIENCE IN ACTION

In 2011, Save the Children implemented a strategic response program in the drought-stricken Somali region of Ethiopia that improved food security and protected the livelihoods of some of the most vulnerable households by leveraging market and climate information. For the majority of Somali households their livelihoods depend almost exclusively on livestock. Animals are the main asset base for these families, serving the dual purpose of savings and income generation. Though livestock ownership has high returns in the region they are particularly vulnerable to drought. Loss of livestock during a drought can decimate a family’s economic security and is highly correlated with rising levels of food insecurity.

During the 2011 drought in the Somali region, Save the Children’s emergency response allowed for the purchase of weak but healthy animals from vulnerable pastoralists for immediate slaughter, and distributed the meat to the neediest families in the community. This project enabled pastoralists to earn income from selling livestock that would otherwise have been lost to the drought while ensuring that poor families were able to provide nutritious food their children. Additionally, for core breeding animals, such as pregnant and lactating cattle, Save the Children provided supplementary feeding to help protect these animals until they could graze again. Together these initiatives helped protect family’s economic base, averting the harmful loss of assets.

¹ USAID. “Building Resilience to Recurrent Crisis,” Dec. 2012.
<http://transition.usaid.gov/resilience/USAIDResiliencePolicyGuidanceDocument.pdf>