



Resilience in action

Two approaches to make better programme decisions



Introduction

This document has been developed as a product of the second webinar which took place on 29.October 2025, under the [Resilience Learning lab](#) under the [Agriculture & Food Systems network](#) of SDC, and led by [ODI](#).

In this document you will find a description of two approaches to think about resilience in your programmes, with templates available in annex for each of these approaches :

- 1) Capacity-based resilience assessment
- 2) Scenario-Based Resilience Inquiry

Please bear in mind that:

- a. **Resilience lens tells you what questions to ask, not what answers to find:** The value isn't in becoming "resilience experts" but in systematically examining who gets left behind and why.
- b. **Different approaches serve different purposes:** Capacity-based assessment quantifies resilience levels; scenario-based inquiry explores system dynamics and power structures. Both reveal critical insights.
- c. **Trade-offs and accountability aren't unique to resilience** – they are characteristics of all systems: Resilience lens makes visible the trade-offs that exist anyway, allowing you to manage them more consciously.
- d. **The approaches are complementary:** Capacity assessment tells you WHO. Scenario inquiry tells you WHY and WHAT IF. Use both for comprehensive understanding.



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1. Capacity-based resilience assessment:

a. What is it?

The approach looks at resilience as understanding different dimensions of household and community capacities that enable people to anticipate, withstand and recover from shocks.

The core framework includes 4 capacities: Anticipatory, Absorptive, Adaptive, and Transformative.

Capacity	What to look for?
Anticipatory Capacity is the ability to anticipate future threats or shocks and to prepare for them, to avoid them or to reduce their impact	- Do people have access to reliable seasonal weather forecasts that help them know what crops to plant? - Can they access economic information to avoid risky investments? - Are there early warning systems they can understand and act upon? - Do they have connections to information networks?
Absorptive Capacity is the ability to moderate or buffer the impacts of shocks on livelihoods and basic needs.	- Do people have savings and assets they can draw on during crisis? - Are there social safety nets and community support systems they can access? - Do they maintain food reserves and emergency supplies? - Have they diversified income sources to provide buffers?
Adaptive Capacity is the capacity to adjust and learn from experience, maintaining system structure and function.	- Do people have access to information and opportunities to learn? - Can they flexibly change livelihood strategies when conditions shift? - Do they have social networks that provide options and alternatives? - Have they developed skills and knowledge for innovation?
Transformative Capacity is the capacity to create a fundamentally new system when conditions make the existing system untenable.	- Do people have access to alternative livelihood pathways? - Do they have political voice and agency to drive systemic change? - Can they access resources to invest in fundamental shifts? - Are there collective action capabilities in their communities?



b. How it works in practice

The four-lens framework helps us understand resilience by examining different dimensions of how people prepare for, cope with, and recover from shocks. Rather than measuring resilience with a single score, we look through each lens to understand what to examine:

1. Assets and resources: What do people have access to? (land, livestock, housing, savings)
2. Access to services: Can they reach schools, health facilities, markets, information?
3. Social connections: What formal and informal support systems exist?
4. Flexibility and options: How much room do people have to make different choices?

The approach reveals which households and groups have strong capacities across different dimensions, which specific capacity areas are present or absent in a population, how different capacities relate to people's vulnerability, where to focus attention in programme design.

c. Strengths and weaknesses of capacity based assessment

 Strengths	 Limitations
- Provides clear categories for understanding resilience dimensions. - Allows comparison of capacity profiles across different contexts. - Useful for programme targeting and thinking about different types of support. - Helps identify which capacity dimensions to strengthen	- May miss power dynamics and structural barriers that determine who can build or use capacities. - Provides a snapshot view, may not capture how capacities change dynamically. - Assumes that having capacities means people can use them. - Risk of focusing on easily observable capacities vs. what matters most in specific contexts. - Doesn't identify vulnerability to specific threats - tells us about general capacity but not preparedness for shocks. - Relies on assumptions about what gives people capacities in their specific contexts.

d. When to use this lens

- ➔ In programme design - thinking about different dimensions of support needed.
- ➔ Understanding capacity profiles of different populations.
- ➔ Identifying which types of capacity are strongest/weakest.
- ➔ Exploring why some households cope better than others.



2. Scenario-based inquiry

a. What is it?

The approach looks at resilience as systems understanding exploring "what could go wrong" and who would be affected. Scenario-based inquiry makes trade-offs visible by tracing how different choices affect different groups under stress conditions.

The inquiry consists of 5 steps:

Step	Questions
1: Identify the most likely disruption.	For your specific area, sector, population - what is most likely to go wrong? Drought, flood, conflict, market collapse, policy change? How frequent? How severe? What early warning signs exist?
2: Map differential impacts	Who is affected and why? Which groups lose benefits first? Which can maintain some level of wellbeing? Which fall into worse situations than before? What factors drive these differences?
3: Trace disruption origins	Why does this disturbance/shock arise? What underlying vulnerabilities exist? What structural factors create risk? How do power dynamics contribute?
4: Explore prevention and mitigation	What could prevent or mitigate the shock and its impacts? What defences, plan Bs, coping mechanisms exist? Why do these work for some people but not others? What barriers prevent access to protective measures?
5: Identify system changes and Trade-offs	What would have to change for mitigations to work for everyone? What power issues prevent problems from being anticipated or solved? How would potential interventions affect different groups? What trade-offs emerge between competing priorities?

b. How to use it?

The Scenario-based inquiry naturally reveals trade-offs because it asks, "for whom?" at each step:

- **Efficiency vs. equity:** Fast market integration benefits some farmers, excludes others
- **Short-term relief vs. long-term capacity:** Emergency food saves lives but may undermine local markets

- **Individual vs. collective:** Women's empowerment programmes may strengthen individuals while disrupting community cohesion
- **Scale tensions:** What works at household level may create problems at community level

And helps you managing trade-offs transparently:

1. **Make them visible:** Use scenario inquiry to identify who wins/loses with each choice
2. **Document reasoning:** Why are you prioritizing certain groups or outcomes?
3. **Enable voice:** How do affected groups participate in trade-off decisions?
4. **Plan mitigation:** How will you address negative consequences for those who lose?
5. **Monitor and adapt:** Track whether trade-offs play out as expected

The approach reveals 1) system dynamics and feedback loops, power structures and who has agency, 2) why some groups are structurally vulnerable and 3) Potential unintended consequences of interventions.

c. Strengths and weaknesses of scenario-based inquiry

 Strengths	 Limitations
- Reveals power dynamics and structural barriers - Context-specific and locally grounded - makes trade-offs explicit and manageable, identifies system leverage points - Surfaces questions about "who decides"/ - It is relevant in all sectors - It helps reveal the assumptions on which resilience analysis is based, allowing them to be tested and monitored.	- Time-intensive and qualitative - less quantifiable for traditional M&E - requires skill in systems thinking - may reveal problems without clear solutions

d. When to use this lens

- ➔ Programme design and theory of change development
- ➔ Designing monitoring systems
- ➔ Understanding why interventions fail for some groups
- ➔ Navigating complex trade-offs
- ➔ Anticipating unintended consequences
- ➔ Building understanding of power dynamics



ANNEX: Resources

Capacity-Based Assessment resources

[BRACED](#) programme focuses on measuring resilience through anticipatory capacity, adaptive capacity, and absorptive capacity plus transformation.

[Oxfam Framework for Resilient Development](#) describes three types of resilience capacity: absorptive, adaptive and transformative capacity, which need to be strengthened together to achieve wellbeing despite shocks and uncertainty.

Practical Implementation:

[FAO's Resilience Index Measurement and Analysis \(RIMA\)](#) methodology estimates household resilience to food insecurity with a quantitative approach to establish cause-effect relationships between resilience and its critical determinants, RIMA was created using the definition: "The capacity of a household to bounce back to a previous level of well-being (for instance food security) after a shock". A short RIMA questionnaire allows collecting minimum information needed for estimating household resilience capacity through short interviews, increasing efficiency in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

Scenario-Based Inquiry Resources

[Participatory scenario planning](#) for climate resilience using Three Horizons Framework for analysing current challenges, envisioning futures, and identifying pathways.

[CARE's Practical Guide to Participatory Scenario Planning](#) for seasonal climate information and resilient decision-making.

Community-Based Implementation:

BRACED gender and resilience toolkit on community mapping provides visual tools for encouraging community action and identifying risks through participatory processes.

Participatory scenario planning for community resilience offers planning tools and case studies showing how communities explore "what could go wrong" systematically.