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Scenario Planning: A Strategic Tool for Resilience Programming in Complex Humanitarian Settings-Lessons from Somalia

Introduction

As a part of the Somali Resilience Partnership (SRP), the Resilience Learning Activity (RLA) facilitated a panel discussion on ‘scenario planning in a complex humanitarian and development space. The United Nation Food and Agricultural Organization ([FAO](#)), the Building Resilient Communities in Somalia ([BRCiS](#)) Consortium, and World Vision International ([WVI](#)), who are SRP partners with significant experience in scenario planning, deliberated the why scenario planning is becoming more critical in areas with protracted crises and fragile contexts. The panelists provided context on their operating environment, described challenges faced, and provided context on their operating environment and the capacity to respond at the community and organizational level.

Learning questions

- What does scenario planning look like at the individual (household), community, and organizational level?
- Why is it essential in a fragile context like Somalia?
- What are the practical steps to execute scenario planning?
- What are the organizational capacities to respond?

“Planning is key in the sense that it forces us to do things differently. Makes us question our beliefs in how we do business.”

*Andrew Mugubo, Livelihood Specialists,
World Vision International*

What does scenario planning look like at different levels?

Most panelists based their remarks on the organizational, operational focus and their approach and constraints. FAO highlighted the critical steps to scenario planning to protect food security, while BRICS provided insights on its participatory community approach.

Scenario planning is about us using evidence from the past like trends, shocks, and any other eventuality and making assumptions about what will happen in the future, and then making decisions about how this will affect our program's projects. Due to such a definition provided by one panelist, another panelist called it ‘futurologist.’

According to the FAO representative in the discussion, scenario planning is absolutely core to food security and resilience programming. We are looking at how communities withstand shocks and stress, which are future events. It is also critical because understanding the type of shock, stress, intensity, and frequency affects our households. This is key to designing and implementing resilience programming. It is also based on context analysis and evidence generated from the qualitative and quantitative data we use.

An excellent example of this is the Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit’s (FSNAU’S) seasonal analysis and Early Warning Early Action, which predicts the likelihood of having a good food security situation or a good harvest, water, or pasture. This analysis is used to trigger early warning not only for FAO but also to the entire humanitarian community and the Somali government. The analysis is used to predict the likelihood of drought and flood events. It also considers the severity and magnitude of such shocks in specific locations. Such analysis has been benefited by most of the humanitarian organizations, if not all.

The WVI has vast experience of scenario planning from an operational perspective as it emphasizes the need to ask second questions when implementing programs in a fragile environment. Failing to ask those second questions will expose resources unattended to a likely shock and risk.

Scenario 1: WVI built big offices in Wajid, Bakool, in 2010, and shortly after that, Al-Shabaab terror insurgents booted them out abruptly. The organization was forced to leave behind massive resources and records worth thousands of dollars investment.

Scenario 2: WVI built big offices in Tiyeeglow-Bakool, where Al-Shabaab currently controls. They are no longer able to operate there. In this case, the management had failed in asking the second question on whether Wajid or Tiyeeglow was worth such investments in terms of building offices given the nature of the fragile context of the environment.

Based on those incidents and evidence from the past, the WVI in Somalia no longer build their own offices anymore but instead opted for rental spaces. The second question constantly challenges organizations to think critically beyond the need of the day in a fragile context where shocks are always possible.

“Ask communities about their priorities; In Somalia we have challenges; designing programs that address these is important; if priorities change, we need to be flexible to change our programs; need to understand the context.”

-Kassim Mohamed, BRICS Consortium focal point, SWS.

Why Is Scenario Planning Important in a Fragile Context Like Somalia?

Scenario planning is essential in the context of Somalia because sheer trends and shocks keep looming in our working environment, from COVID-19, migration, conflict, to floods and pests.

According to the BRICS Consortium, community participation in scenario planning is crucial in building resilience. Participatory scenario enables communities to explore potential future changes, their associated impacts and develop a locally relevant action plan. The process allows them to effectively manage both the opportunities and risks of change, thereby increasing their resilience. Incorporating scenario planning into action planning within programs would mean that development planning would be based on likely (rather than ideal) scenarios and vulnerabilities. BRICs applies the bottom-up approach using an area-based approach. The communities are well versed with their context and understand specific needs based on the prevailing condition, e.g., the communities decide when to start doing early planting due to anticipated insufficient rainfall. Traditionally, the communities did scenario planning if crops failed, herds died, and pasture was lost.

Co-planning strategies to enable communities to withstand shocks that are no longer bearable in the traditional way of life is pivotal to resilience building. To achieve the community participation objective, the BRICS consortium;

- Develops yearly action plans with their target communities; if changes of context occur, for example, flood, drought, or pest arises in the year, they take those changes into account because the project was designed with a degree of flexibility to respond immediately. This is a lesson learned from past experiences.
- Allocates internal relief funds ('risk fund'), which is a pull of cash intended to respond to any eventuality that may compromise the resilience-building journey, for example, an influx of displaced persons from the rural to the urban areas. We expect the cash response to enable the communities to absorb the shocks and stresses.

What are the practical steps of Scenario Planning?

The FAO representative provided four critical steps to the scenario planning process as highlighted below:



What about organizations' ability to respond?

When developing different scenarios on what is likely to happen, a pertinent learning question is whether organizations can respond to the identified scenarios. Capacity looks at different elements, including the financial, capital, or human capacity. At the organizational level, the WVI;

- Have a rapid response team comprising a pool of people with different capacities and specialties who can be tasked with an evolving scenario that needs a response.
- Consider that human capacity to respond does not only lie in the number of specialists of the organization but also collaborative and strategic relationships. It is a question of understanding organizational capacities and the resources and those of the counterparts.
- Analyzes the communities and their capacity to absorb and respond to likely scenarios. For example, under its Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) programs, the WVI conducts community vulnerability and capacity assessment. This process identifies the gaps in capacities and who has those capacities around the area. The response demands collaboration with all stakeholders' whether external or internal, as they are considered critical in building the capacity to respond.

Finally, all panelists agreed that flexibility in program implementation is critical for successful scenario planning.

In-depth analysis from the panel discussions can be accessed via this [video link](#).

About the Somali Resilience Partnership (SRP)

Somalia Resilience Partnership (SRP) is a collaboration, Learning, and adaptation (CLA) platform for USAID implementing partners and critical resilience Consortiums in Somalia's Bay and Bakool regions. SRP provides a platform for activities to Sequence, Layer, and Integrate at a granular level. It SRP also provides a structure for field-level staff to powerfully communicate and influence higher-level decision-makers.