

# THE FUTURE IS A CHOICE

## ABSORB, ADAPT, TRANSFORM RESILIENCE CAPACITIES

*'All development interventions need an agency lens, i.e. they need to be thought of not simply as delivering a given infrastructure or technology, but as vehicles for expanding people's range of choice'<sup>1</sup>.*

This brief paper is written for Oxfam staff working to make development resilient. It describes resilience capacity and what it looks like in practice.

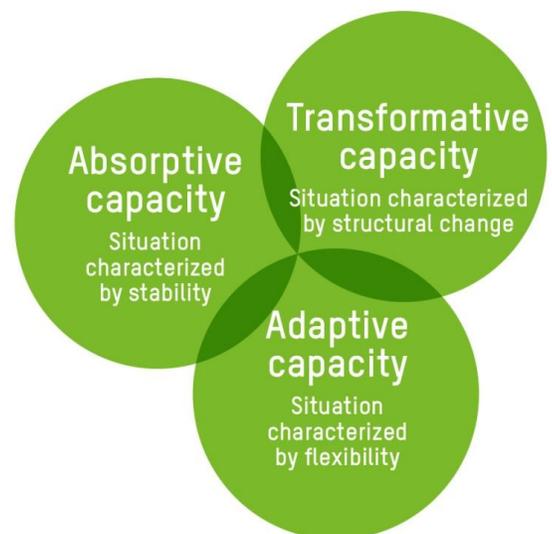
Whilst resilience capacity can be broadly described, it is also necessary to recognise that women and men, communities and institutions will have their own experience and ways of describing resilience and capacity. These unique and specific perceptions need to be understood and applied in the design, monitoring and evaluation of programmes and campaigns.

### CAPACITY – WHAT IS IT AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Change is happening all around us and some change is rapidly transforming environmental, agricultural and political systems causing suffering, turbulence and uncertainty. Resilience is about enhancing the **capacity** to proactively and positively manage this change in ways that contribute to 'a just world without poverty'<sup>2</sup>.

The Oxfam Framework for Resilient Development, *The Future is a Choice*, describes three types of resilience **capacity**: absorptive, adaptive and transformative capacity.<sup>3</sup> These three capacities need to be enhanced to achieve resilient development outcomes, that is, the realisation of rights and wellbeing in spite of shocks, stresses and uncertainty.

The development sector as a whole uses the term 'capacity'. In Oxfam, we more naturally think in terms of agency, empowerment and choice. All these terms – capacity, ability, agency and choice - are similar in their meaning. In our work on resilience, Oxfam has adopted the term 'capacity' to enable us to share better our work with the development sector.



Resilience capacities



Pagina Kaijwa from Zambia is part of an Oxfam women's economic empowerment programme.

understanding of these capacities and how they are strengthened and enhanced over time and in different contexts.

Oxfam's hypothesis is that resilience capacity is strengthened by enhancing collaborative ways of working across levels, sectors and actors and by deliberately engaging in and developing six social change processes that are shown in the diagram below.

At its heart resilience requires us to move away from simply looking at what a person, household, or system **has** and recognise and enhance what it **does**.<sup>4</sup> Or to put it another way, it is not about 'things' only, it is also about agency. Resilience requires 'an agency centered approach'<sup>5</sup>. What our programmes need to leave behind is strengthened agency; enhanced capacity.

Capacity is broken down into three closely overlapping capacities - these are absorptive, adaptive and transformative capacities.

All three capacities are essential for resilience. They are interconnected and mutually reinforcing and exist at multiple levels e.g. individual, household, community, district, national, and within social-ecological systems. As they overlap, it is very unlikely that a programme will enhance one capacity in isolation e.g. humanitarian programming that uses cash transfers is likely to be enhancing the absorptive and adaptive capacities of individuals and market systems.

These three capacities are widely used in the sector and Oxfam, along with other NGOs and academics is developing its

## ABSORPTIVE CAPACITY

*Absorptive capacity is the capacity to take intentional protective action and to cope with known shocks and stress. It is needed as shocks and stress will continue to happen, for example due to extreme weather events caused by climate change, protracted conflict, and disasters.*

Simply stated this is the capacity to 'bounce back' after a shock. It involves anticipating, planning, coping and recovering from specific, known shocks and short term stresses<sup>6</sup>. Absorptive capacity is about ensuring stability because it aims to prevent or limit the negative impact of shocks on individuals, households, communities, businesses and authorities.

***Programme outcomes that indicate that this capacity has been strengthened include:***

- early warning systems are in place and functioning giving people, communities, authorities and institutions timely and relevant information about shocks such as storm surges, tsunamis, cyclones, droughts enabling appropriate action to be taken by people and authorities to reduce the impact of anticipated shocks
- structures and systems are in place and are protecting natural capital e.g. mangroves, forests, reefs and soils and physical capital such houses, shelters, roads, and water systems
- inclusive networks of family, neighbours, friends, and community groups are maintaining social capital
- social protection schemes (particularly those focussed on insurance), and safe mechanisms of remittance transfer are protecting assets and maintaining financial capital
- health and education systems and access to nutrition and support for psycho-social wellbeing are in place and protecting human capital
- disaster risk reduction laws, policy frameworks and well resourced contingency plans are in place and are enabling communities, private sector actors and authorities to function effectively and collaboratively in post shock situations.



Six social change processes that enhance resilience capacities

## ADAPTIVE CAPACITY

*Adaptive capacity is the capacity to make intentional incremental adjustments in anticipation of or in response to change, in ways that create more flexibility in the future. It is necessary because change is ongoing and uncertain, and because intentional transformation takes time and sustained engagement.*

Adaptation is about making appropriate changes in order to better manage, or adjust to a changing situation. A key aspect of adaptive capacity is accepting that change is ongoing as well as highly unpredictable. That is why adaptive capacity is about flexibility, and the ability to make incremental changes on an ongoing basis through process of continuous adjusting, learning, and innovation.

***Programme outcomes that indicate that this capacity has been strengthened include:***

- natural resources including land, soil and water are being used in ways that are inclusive, sustainable and adaptive to change such as climate change
- platforms are in place and bringing together women and men and different stakeholders, public and private, to make forward looking decisions, and learn from experiments involving new ideas and approaches
- diverse and inclusive forms of knowledge and information are being generated and are informing decisions at all levels
- enhanced and inclusive access to productive resources including credit, markets, livestock, and linkages to input suppliers
- social networks are accessible, equitable and innovative and have strong and diverse participation (e.g. self-help groups, savings groups)
- incremental technological and social innovations are being adopted such as new seed varieties, agricultural practices, ICTs, enterprise developments and new forms of partnerships
- legal and policy frameworks that support institutions to adapt and continue to provide services under changing conditions are in place and informing practice.

### **Characteristics of adaptive institutions <sup>xiii</sup>**

- There are policy frameworks that support the institution's ability to adapt proactively
- Have sufficient financial, technological, and human resources and the ability to use them flexibly and swiftly
- Foster a culture of openness and fairness; are accountable for their actions, transparent in their dealings, and well received and respected within the community
- Promote the development of a diverse range of proactive strategies and actions; has a culture of experimentation, learning and innovation
- Use monitoring and evaluation to assess effectiveness and make changes through an ongoing process of incremental adjustments
- Possess a strong but fluid organisational purpose, vision, and set of priorities
- Think ahead to what the future may bring and incorporates this thinking into plans
- Enables decision-making with minimum bureaucratic delays
- Engages in partnerships and collaborative networks with other organisations
- Has visionary champions

## TRANSFORMATIVE CAPACITY

*For Oxfam, transformative capacity is the capacity to make intentional change to stop or reduce the causes of risk, vulnerability, poverty, and inequality, and ensure the more equitable sharing of risk so it is not unfairly borne by people living in poverty or suffering from discrimination or marginalisation.*

Transformation is about fundamental changes in the deep structures that cause or increase vulnerability and risk as well as how risk is shared within societies and the global community. Another way to think about this is that transformation is about addressing the underlying failures of development or power imbalances that cause or increase and maintain risk and poverty. Transformation is not about addressing the close to or proximate causes of risk and vulnerability but their structural or root causes<sup>7</sup>

Researchers and practitioners warn that 'there is a need to resist attributing transformative character to any instance of social change'<sup>8</sup>. ***For Oxfam, transformation is a deep change in the very structures that cause and maintain poverty and injustice.***

Therefore transformative capacity is the capacity of women and men to generate and engage in *deep ongoing change* that addresses the root causes of poverty, and injustice, vulnerability and risk. It can be thought of as 'a well developed sense of agency'<sup>9</sup> that includes the capacity to understand and consciously engage in long-term change process that shift power, beliefs, values and ways of thinking and behaving to support greater levels of justice and equity. It includes the capacity for collaboration and 'mutual reinvention'<sup>10</sup>, to make informed decisions and then to learn and adapt quickly, and build flexibility and momentum for positive and radical change over time.

The transformation of organisations and systems is intimately linked to individual transformation including personal shifts in attitudes, consciousness, motivation, and beliefs'<sup>11</sup>. At the same time, deep rooted poverty and injustice exists at all levels, so change at a local level, such as a household, will not fundamentally alter all the structures of poverty at all levels. For example, greater gender justice at the household level alone will not change the structures of gender inequality within a society.

It may also be possible for change at one level to generate momentum that influences higher levels. For example, increased gender justice within households can generate a momentum for change within the wider community. This is sometimes referred to as *crossing a threshold* or *reaching a tipping point*. Tipping points are most often caused by external events such as an earthquake or other disaster. Slow change may also result in a tipping point such as when an area becomes too drought prone for existing forms of agriculture. These disruptions to the status quo are also opportunities to reorganise and potentially transform unjust and unsuitable practices and systems.

### ***Programme outcomes that indicate that this capacity has been strengthened include:***

- women and men are making conscious changes to gender based power structures at the household, community and institutional level. This would include the re-organisation of how work is done and how resources are shared so that more equitable gendered power dynamics are reinforced and embedded in systems such as laws and organisational policies and practices
- individuals, civil society and institutions are engaged in long term processes of change that address root causes of poverty and risk and social movements are generating momentum for inclusive change

- women and men, groups and institutions who have previously been in conflict are working collaboratively together for example through processes of conflict transformation or in the shared management of natural resources
- people and authorities are working together to innovate and test new approaches and are adopting new ways of organising and sharing power
- people are collectively generating, describing and working towards plausible scenarios of sustainable and just futures
- people who have limited formal power are engaging fully and with dignity in decision-making processes that result in new laws and policy frameworks or ways of managing or organising
- the lived experience of poor and vulnerable women and men are generating knowledge and shaping new ways of thinking and acting
- development and persistence of inclusive forms of governance that for example redistribute benefits, give more equal access to resources or allow people living in poverty to fully participate in the design, monitoring and accountability of policy processes.

## A STORY OF RESILIENCE CAPACITIES GROWING OVER TIME

This is a story of change from Oxfam India adapted from a blog written by Duncan Green<sup>12</sup>. We have made suggestions about what resilience capacities have been enhanced by community members and by other actors working with them. The story illustrates the importance of all three capacities and how they overlap and reinforce each other.

*When the people of Tikamgarh, in Madhya Pradesh first learned how to seed ponds with fish fry, productivity rocketed. However upper caste landowners saw the opportunity to make money and excluded the traditional fishing communities. The communities responded. They formed cooperatives, with the help of an upper caste former civil servant whose NGO, Vikalp, played a key role in supporting their organization, and started to win back control of a few ponds. People's action persuaded the State, Government to revise its fisheries policy, spelling out their rights. The government is now leasing the ponds to fishing communities rather than the upper caste landlords, at lower rates and for longer periods And the fishers' organization, Machhuwara Sangathan, has consolidated itself and no longer needs NGOs to intercede with the authorities on its behalf.*

Processes of learning and innovation enabled the women and men to adopt a new technology (seeding ponds) and enhance their adaptive capacity, however existing power relations were changed and this required community members and other actors to become proactive agents of deeper social change. Social capital was extended and enhanced and new ways of organising and of influencing power enabled community members to bring about change in a higher level of the system i.e. the creation of a policy framework that recognises their rights.

These processes and their results indicate that the communities' capacity to transform the causes of their exclusion has been enhanced.

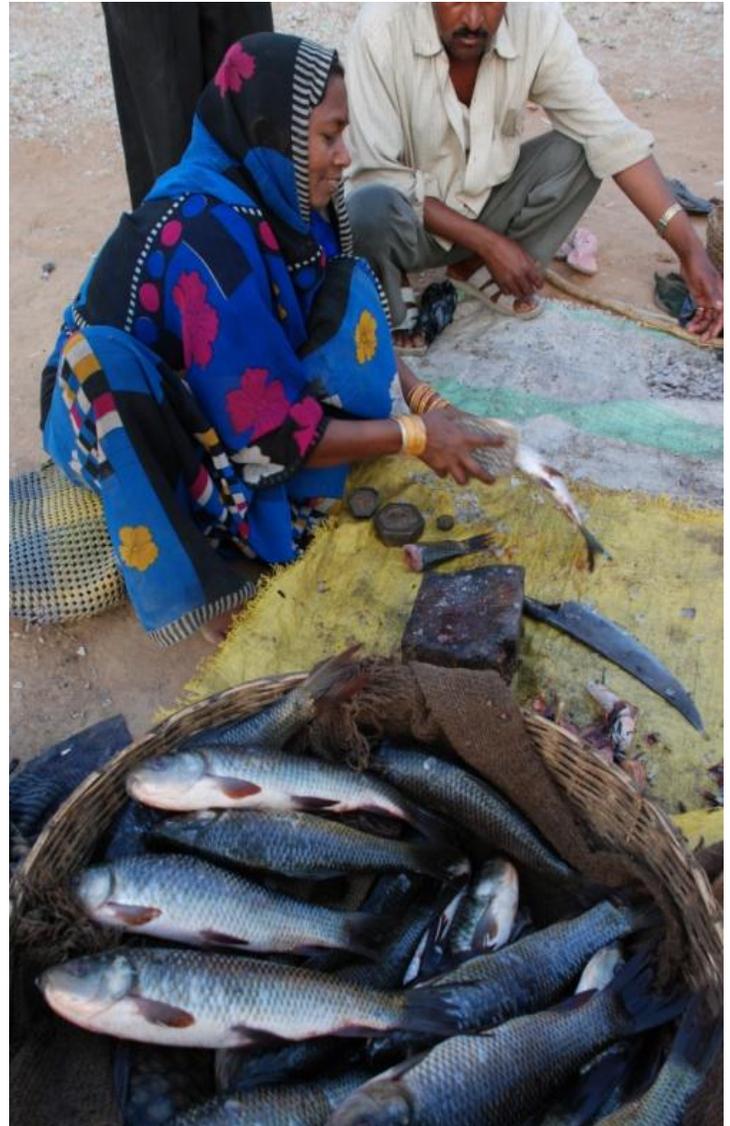
*Twenty three of the ponds are now run by women's cooperatives and everyone agreed they are more productive, because the women take care of the fish better and the police are more worried about incidents of theft involving violence against women, so react faster when thieves try and steal their fish.*

*The fishing communities come from the lower Kewat caste, and the deep psychological roots of caste remain (people kept coming up to touch the feet of Vikalp's Brahmin boss, Omprakash Rawat, during our meetings). But they say they feel prouder of their identity these days, celebrate the birth of their caste heroes, and both men and women stand for local elections, and win. All unthinkable until this process kicked off.*

Processes of empowerment are bringing about changes in the deep structures of gender and caste, and a new sense of identity which are further enhancing the communities' capacity to transform the structural causes of exclusion.

*But it's not all milk and honey. The upper castes are responding in turn and seizing the fertile soil exposed when the dry season comes and the pond waters recede. Farming that land is crucial to the fishing communities in getting through the hot summer months.*

*Then there's the drought, now in its third year. Only about 10% of the ponds still had fish and water in them when we visited, and it's still two months until the monsoon comes. Incomes drop, land conflicts break out, and some people have to temporarily migrate to the cities to find casual labour to see them through.*



Guddi Bai, from Madia village, selling fresh fish at Prithvipur market; the fish were caught from the women's pond.

**These challenges indicate that there may be limits to the communities' absorptive and adaptive capacities that need to be addressed to strengthen their resilience over time. These questions may help prompt further action:**

- What actions are needed to enable the ponds to retain water during periods of drought?
- What actions would increase the coping choices of households so they did not have to rely on short term migration? How can women and men better manage the impacts of migration?
- If cyclical, shorter term risks are not addressed, will the capacity of the communities to transform the structural causes of their exclusion break down?

- And what longer term changes are needed? Is it possible for people from different castes to co-manage shared resources or mutually reinvent a more just and adaptive system for sharing resources? What changes in values, ways of organising and policy frameworks would be required?

## REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

- 1 S. Levine, E.Ludi, L. Jones (2011) Rethinking Support for Adaptive Capacity to Climate Change, ODI [http://www.fsnnetwork.org/sites/default/files/accra\\_rethinking\\_support\\_report\\_final\\_levine\\_ludi\\_jones\\_2011.pdf](http://www.fsnnetwork.org/sites/default/files/accra_rethinking_support_report_final_levine_ludi_jones_2011.pdf)
- 2 Oxfam Strategic Plan 2013-2019 <https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/oxfam-strategic-plan-2013-2019.pdf>
- 3 H. Jeans, G. Castillo, S. Thomas (2016) The Future is a Choice, The Oxfam Framework and Guidance for Resilient Development, Oxfam. <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/the-future-is-a-choice-the-oxfam-framework-and-guidance-for-resilient-developme-604990>
- 4 L. Jones, E.Ludi, S. Levine (2010) Towards a characterization of adaptive capacity: a framework for analysing adaptive capacity at the local level, ODI. <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/6353.pdf>
- 5 K. Brown (2016) Resilience Development and Global Change, Routledge.
- 6 A. Bahadur E. Lovell, F. Pichon (2016). Effectiveness in building resilience: Synthesis report for Oxfam's Resilience Outcome Area, Oxfam.
- 7 M. Pelling, K. Obrien, D. Matyas (2014) Adaptation and Transformation. Climate Change, Volume 133, Issue 1, pp. 113–127, Springer.
- 8 G. Feola (2015) Societal Transformation in response to global and environmental a change: a review of merging concepts. 44 (5) p. 387, Ambio
- 9 G. Ziervogel, A. Cowen, J. Ziniades (2016) Moving from Adaptive to Transformative Capacity: building Foundations for Inclusive, Thriving, and Regenerative Urban Settlements; Sustainability, 8,955 <http://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/8/9/955>
- 10 B. E. Goldstein (ed) (2012) Collaborative Resilience, Moving through Crisis to Opportunity, MIT.
- 11 G. Ziervogel, A. Cowen, J. Ziniades (2016) Moving from Adaptive to Transformative Capacity: building Foundations for Inclusive, Thriving, and Regenerative Urban Settlements (ibid)
- 12 D. Green (2016) Tikamgarh revisited, what's happened to the amazing fishing communities I visited in 2006? Oxfam. [https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/tikamgarh-revisited-whats-happened-to-the-amazing-fishing-communities-i-visited-in-2006/#.V\\_TY76iMI0c.facebook](https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/tikamgarh-revisited-whats-happened-to-the-amazing-fishing-communities-i-visited-in-2006/#.V_TY76iMI0c.facebook)
- xiii J Cooke, S. Freeman, E Levine and M Hill (2011) WWF Shifting Course, Climate Adaptation for Water Management Institutions, WWF. [http://assets.worldwildlife.org/publications/485/files/original/Shifting\\_Course.pdf?1352411226&\\_ga=1.235230018.2132262728.1479744960](http://assets.worldwildlife.org/publications/485/files/original/Shifting_Course.pdf?1352411226&_ga=1.235230018.2132262728.1479744960)

© Oxfam International, January 2017

This paper was written by Helen Jeans, Gina E, Castillo and Sebastian Thomas. It is part of a series of reports written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian programme issues.

Photo credits: Page 2 Abbie Trayler-Smith/Oxfam, Page 6 Rajendra Shaw/Oxfam

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please e-mail [hjeans1@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:hjeans1@oxfam.org.uk) or go to [www.oxfam.org](http://www.oxfam.org)

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.