



An Afghan child – herding animals for a livelihood in Pulecharkhi, Kabul, November 2017. Photo: Joel van Houdt/Oxfam.

MEASURING HOUSEHOLD STRESS

Introducing the multi-sector Coping Strategy Index for Afghanistan

Oxfam developed a multi-sector Coping Strategy Index (mCSI) to provide the humanitarian community in Afghanistan with a tool to assess and monitor the impact of interventions – especially multi-purpose cash grants (MPCGs) – with data collected from Nangarhar, Herat, Kunduz, Kandahar and Kabul provinces. The project was funded by EU humanitarian aid and Oxfam’s internal funds.

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INTRODUCTION

Oxfam developed a multi-sector Coping Strategy Index (mCSI) to provide the humanitarian community in Afghanistan with a tool to more effectively and frequently assess and monitor the impact of interventions – especially multi-purpose cash grants (MPCGs). The mCSI has been tested in Nangarhar, Herat, Kunduz, Kandahar and Kabul province to verify its validity as a proxy of overall household stress. The mCSI product and accompanying guidelines are presented in this report. The mCSI is recommended for use in combination with other humanitarian needs assessment, post activity monitoring, and analysis and evaluation tools.

WHAT IS THE COPING STRATEGIES INDEX?

A single coping strategy is an action taken by individuals within a household when shocks, such as natural disasters and conflict, push them beyond the difficulties faced in ‘normal’ times. The Coping Strategies Index (CSI), then, consists of a set of indicators to ascertain the coping strategies that households might adopt to cope with stressful situations. Humanitarian agencies can use the CSI to better understand the overall situation of household stress by measuring the frequency and severity of coping strategies instead of relying entirely on sectoral proxy indicators.

Originating from the food security sector, the use and analysis of CSIs has been expanded to measure responses to stress across several sectors and types of programming. The multi-sector CSI, or mCSI, has been contextualized for Afghanistan and consists of 11 indicators designed to provide an easy to use proxy measure of overall household stress.

HOW WAS THE mCSI DESIGNED?

The mCSI was developed in three phases. First, a list of coping strategies based on existing practices in Afghanistan was developed through extensive consultation with humanitarian agencies, sector clusters and relevant technical working groups. Second, 20 focus group discussions were conducted in Nangarhar, Herat, Kunduz, Kandahar and Kabul to receive community input on the proposed strategies list. We also conducted participatory exercises with community members to weight each strategy and recommend appropriate severity ratings based on the impact on wellbeing of a household employing a strategy. Following that, 2,000 household surveys were conducted to generate quantitative data to test the validity of each strategy. Finally, the mCSI, translated into Dari and Pashto, was prepared to be shared with the humanitarian community.

An additional study tested both 7-day and 14-day recall periods, and found that a 7-day recall is most appropriate for the mCSI due to a strongly observed ‘discounting’ effect as households tend to disregard and under-report the strategies adopted furthest in the past. The final mCSI contains strategies from a wide variety of sectors, and has a positive relationship with 9 vulnerability criteria: (1) households with children who are not adequately immunized; (2) households in damaged housing; (3) households with pregnant or lactating woman; (4) households that did not receive humanitarian assistance in the last 3 months; (5) households with a disabled family member; (6) households without a current source of income; (7) households with more than 7 family members; (8) households with more than 3 children under the age of 5; and, (9) households headed by a chronically ill or disabled family member. It should be noted that the research findings also highlight that vulnerability is complex and multi-faceted, and triangulation of indicators and tools therefore remains best practice.

WHEN AND HOW TO USE THE MULTI-SECTOR COPING STRATEGY INDEX?

The tool has been developed for the humanitarian community to apply in cash, market-based or integrated programming across a number of sectors. It could be used by individual humanitarian agencies, humanitarian clusters or other stakeholders for context analysis, needs assessments, and the monitoring and evaluation of programmes. The mCSI can easily be integrated in any type of questionnaire or the appropriate section of a relevant document.

To collect data using the mCSI, simply follow the questions and steps in the module below to collect inputs from respondents about the frequency of use for each coping strategy over the last 7 days. The answer provided for each of the 11 strategies should then be recorded in the frequency column of the table. Note that the answer for frequency should always fall between 0 and 7. Even if a household employed a strategy several times on the same day, that day still only counts as 1.

It is important to highlight that the respondents should be reminded regularly during the survey period about the time period they should consider beginning from the first day of the survey and counting backwards (i.e. 'the last seven days' or 'since last Thursday' NOT 'the past week', or 'last week'). Otherwise, respondents may begin to provide responses regarding coping actions taken outside of the consistent period of the last 7-days (i.e. recall period).

After data collection has been completed, two steps are required to calculate the mCSI score per household.

Step 1: Calculate the score of each coping strategy employed within the last 7-day period.

Calculate the score of each coping strategy by multiplying the reported frequency of its usage, and the corresponding severity weighting for each coping strategy.

Step 2: Calculate the mCSI score.

Calculate the mCSI score by adding the score of all eleven coping strategies to produce a final number for each household.

The mCSI score of surveyed households can be grouped in to four quartiles: the lowest 25% of households (i.e. quartile 1) can be considered as having the 'lowest stress' and the highest 25% of households (i.e. quartile 4) can be considered as having the 'highest stress' (as analysed in Section 6 of the full report available at <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/measuring-household-stress-the-development-of-a-contextualized-multi-sector-cop-620472>

All humanitarian agencies should be aware that organizational judgement is required to establish cut-off points while interpreting results. In this study, we have taken 40, 80 and 120 as indicative points (section 3.6 of the full report has more details), but each agency and project should interpret results in light of their interventions and specific context.

AFGHANISTAN MULTI-SECTOR COPING STRATEGIES INDEX (mCSI) MODULE

#	Coping strategy	Weight (W)	Frequency (F)	Score (W x F)
1	In the last 7 days, how many days did at least one household member (male or female) rely on less-preferred, low quality and less expensive food?	1		
2	In the last 7 days, how many days did at least one household member (male or female) reduce food consumption for small children to eat?	1		
3	In the last 7 days, how many days did the household reduce the total amount of water for domestic use (drinking, washing and cooking etc.)?	1		
4	In the last 7 days, how many days did the household use unsafe water (without boiling/purification) from open sources?	1		
5	In the last 7 days, how many days did the household borrow/rely on help from friends or relatives for staple food or borrow money to spend on food or essential household needs?	2		
6	Is the household living in a partially damaged house; makeshift, overcrowded/collective shelter; tent; space intended for other purpose (e.g., livestock); or in the open air? <i>Hint: If the household lived in the above mentioned poor shelter in the last seven days, put 7.</i>	2		
7	In the last 7 days, how many days did at least one household member (male or female) reduce the number of meals eaten, compared with usual frequency of food consumption?	3		
8	In the last 7 days, has the household sold any assets (including livestock, jewellery, furniture, electronics, etc.) due to recent shocks or emergency?	3		
9	In the last 7 days, how many days did at least one additional member (male or female) seek employment or any kind of income source, including daily labour, street vending, or any instance of moving away from home to seek work? <i>Hint: Refer only to household members over 16 years old.</i>	3		
10	In the last 7 days, how many days did children (girl or boy) NOT attend school to engage in employment and/or productive household activities (collect firewood, fetch water, housework etc.)?	4		
11	In the last 7 days, did at least one household member delay seeking medical attention for a critical health problem due to recent shocks or emergency?	4		
Household mCSI score (Sum of scores 1 through 11)				

EXAMPLES OF HOW TO USE THE mCSI

There are various ways to use the mCSI as part of an analysis or report.

- Calculate the average mCSI score for a group of households. For example, report the average mCSI score for all households in the population and then compare the average mCSI score for groups that are considered particularly vulnerable such as female-headed households, new arrivals to an area, prior aid recipients, or the landless.
- Calculate the variation in mCSI scores between households. For example, if the standard deviation is small, then it means the average stress is similar across most households; if the standard deviation is large, then there are many differences between the households that must be understood.
- Calculate the mCSI score at the household level and then sort the score from high to low. The households with the highest mCSI score could be considered for inclusion in programming.

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For more information, or to comment on this publication, please email policyandpractice@oxfam.org.uk. The link to the full report can be found at <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/measuring-household-stress-the-development-of-a-contextualized-multi-sector-cop-620472>

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