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Title: Building community resilience: lessons learned from a case study in West Africa

Improving the resilience of local communities (generally, or to more specifically defined risks and challenges) has become a central goal of many international development programs over the last decade. Building resilience is now broadly considered integral to the concept and practice of sustainable development. In practice, specific activities are implemented with the intention of building a community’s resilience but not always with a clear articulation of what success would look like, and often with little discussion of the successes or failures of the effort. In an effort to address this gap, this paper considers six different livelihood activities implemented by the USAID STEWARD program as part of their effort to build resilience to climate change in communities throughout Sierra Leone and Guinea. Activities included: Village Savings and Loan Associations, market garden groups, tree nurseries, rice and fish ponds, improved beekeeping, and animal husbandry. Through analysis of interviews, focus groups, and household surveys, collected in 27 communities throughout the duration of the STEWARD program, we followed each activity over time examining if, how, and why each activity was or was not successful in building community resilience. Our analysis was rooted in assessing whether the activity contributed to one of six key attributes of community resilience, identified through previous case study in the academic literature. These attributes included: knowledge, skills, and learning; community and social networks; people-place connections; community infrastructure; diverse and innovative economy; and engaged governance. In identifying the successes and failures of each activity to enhance attributes of resilience, we derived several “lessons learned.” These lessons can be useful to other development organizations as they move from a general goal of “building community resilience” towards activities that can be implemented in local communities. Additionally, these lessons help further define what it means to build resilience by identifying some specific mechanisms and contexts that are conducive to the process. More broadly this research highlights the importance of monitoring and evaluation work in providing grounded context to theoretical concepts.