

Appropriate Assistance Approaches

In a previous article, the author argued that project sustainability could take more than one form. If its acceptable broad definition is “able to be maintained,” then a development project can be sustainable even if it requires constant external input, as long as that input is assured. This is distinct from a self-sustainable project, which generates sufficient inputs internally to maintain itself. The article concluded by stating that it is wise to determine which type of sustainability is appropriate for a given project, to enhance its attainment.

An allied question is whether a development activity per se is always the correct response to assisting the poor. My view is that it is not, and this article outlines how people cope during and after a “negative event,” what decisions they make and why, and suggests suitable assistance responses depending on the victims’ capability to react. Finally, the issue of project sustainability is examined in light of the assistance response chosen.

This commentary is based on work done at the University of Arizona, Office of Arid Lands Studies (used with permission), and on field work by the author in the slums of Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

To effectively assist a group, the donor and practitioner must understand the requirements of its members and the inputs offered must correspond to the group’s ability to respond to them. Once the coping strategy that a group of individuals adopts during and after a disaster is understood, a suitable response can be applied.¹

Disasters often impact households in the form of reduced food security, leading to hunger. In seeking to help affected populations, donors often rely on the tools of relief

¹ This article seeks to explain one aspect of the development equation. As with any approach, the real and in-depth participation of all the stakeholders in any assistance effort is of paramount importance. An alternative definition of development states that “Development is a process by which the members of a society increase their personal and institutional capacities to mobilize and manage resources to produce sustainable and justly distributed improvements in their quality of life consistent with their own aspirations.” This would be impossible without open and genuine consultation. (See an article in this series called “Organic Development” for a discussion of the power of participative development.)

activities and development programs. Relief tends to be a short-term humanitarian effort and concentrates on the alleviation of emergency conditions by means of the provision of livelihood. Although necessary, like first aid, in saving lives initially, it is seldom sufficient to re-establish the former household asset base, which would allow the household to cope with normal conditions. Development, or livelihood promotion, at the other end of the continuum, does not address emergency conditions. It focuses on sustainable long-term benefits and works best with households that can afford the small down-side risks involved with changing traditional activities, e.g. trying new crop varieties that have a low, but ever-present chance of failure.

Between these two is a class of activities that attempts to conserve the households' remaining productive assets early in the process. These activities simultaneously abate the impacts of the emergency (the humanitarian or relief aspect), shorten the recovery period and reduce the vulnerability of future food emergencies (the development aspect). The time frame may range from months to years, and the recipient households must possess some productive assets to benefit, such as land, animals or tools. This class of activities can be called mitigation or livelihood protection.

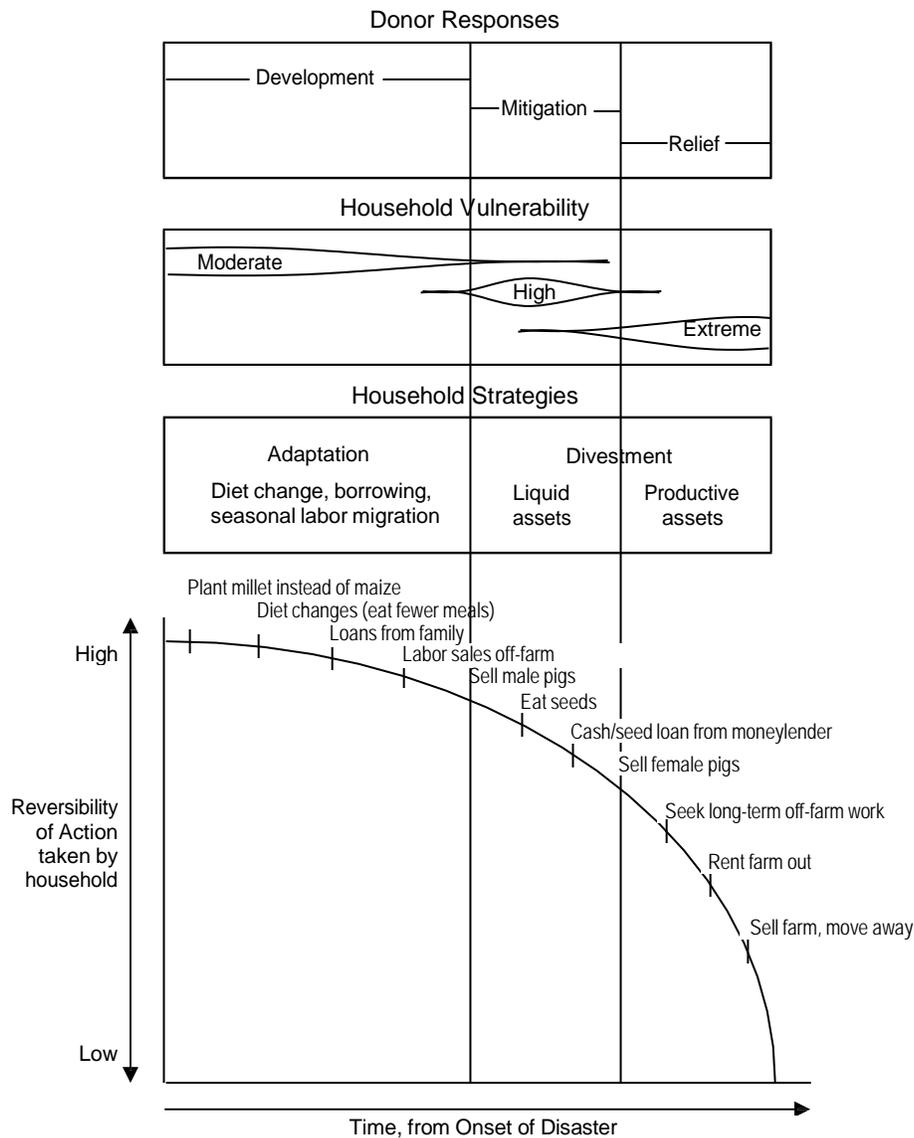
Following on this conceptual basis, there are three intervention objectives that are consistent with mitigation as it is described above:

- to conserve and enhance productive assets at the household level (e.g. project purchase of distress-sold livestock at pre-event prices followed by subsidized sell back after the emergency);
- to mitigate the current emergency while reducing vulnerability to future emergencies (e.g. repair of a damaged irrigation system or establishment of a seed bank, both accompanied by training in asset maintenance); and
- to reinforce and build upon existing patterns of coping (i.e., social capital) and draw from them as appropriate (e.g. establish and train a community disaster committee).

The figure below graphically shows a theoretical household coping strategy continuum from the onset to the extreme end of an emergency, as well as hypothetical household coping strategies employed, household vulnerability and the appropriate donor

responses. Households the world over will react to a slow-onset emergency the same way: by divesting themselves of those assets that are the least damaging to the household's ability to subsequently return to a better economic state. An illustrative listing of the order of divestiture for a farm-based family, from the most to the least easily reversible, is shown on the curve. A similar curve could be developed for an urban family. During stressful times, households from a given group can be found in each of the three areas delineated by the dotted vertical lines. Donors need to know with which group they are dealing because, for example, groups with few productive assets will not

Household Coping Strategies and Appropriate Donor Responses



respond well to development interventions and development-ready groups can be set back by receipt of relief.

This continuum can be traversed by an individual or a large group of households either very slowly, as in a protracted drought, or very quickly, as in a flood where most productive household assets may literally be swept away. The proper response to an emergency is to act to “push” the population back up the curve by continuing to provide the appropriate response to each group. Naturally, there will be a greater need for short-term relief immediately after the emergency because there will be a relatively greater number of people who are incapable of fending for themselves. As relief efforts begin to taper off—and continuing for a longer period—mitigation interventions are appropriate. Finally, it is important that development activities continue throughout, both to preserve prior investment in them and to serve those households that have recovered sufficient productive assets to benefit from them.

The reason there is such a large overlap in the household vulnerability classifications (moderate, high, extreme) is that families differ greatly in the quality and amount of productive assets they possess (e.g. arable land vs. a moto-taxi), their access to other sources of income (e.g. remittances vs. a neighbor), and their relative positions on local social and political structures.

Project sustainability using these divisions between livelihood provision, protection, and promotion would appear to be an appropriate objective only for the latter, i.e. development programs. Asking relief and mitigation activities to be self-sustainable would be near impossible and the external inputs needed to make them sustainable would be onerous (think of the cost of maintaining a peace-keeping force in a country). Indeed, these types of assistance should not be sustainable, as they are only appropriate at or near the end of the negative event and can impede the process of real sustainable development if continued overlong.

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