

Method 3: Impoverishing Shocks/Crises

Purpose

Sudden shocks or crises can act as “triggers” (i.e. forces) causing an individual, household or whole community to become poorer. Examples include harvest loss due to wild animals, flooding or an accident requiring hospital care.

This Activity helps us:

- Identify locally relevant shocks and crises that lead to increasing poverty at individual, household and community levels
- Assess the frequency (or prevalence) and severity of these shocks/crises
- Understand *how* they cause an increase in poverty
- Learn how people respond to these impoverishing forces

The Activity is best used *prior* to an investigation of “Impoverishing Processes” (see: Method 3).

Process

Step 1: Form a Discussion Group of 6-8 persons with roughly equal numbers of like-aged, outspoken women and men. Then:

- Explain the Activity’s purpose and procedures
- Create a three-column matrix
- Review the locally relevant shock-triggers identified by participants in the 1st Community Meeting. Agree to use, add and/or subtract from this list. As each shock-trigger is agreed upon, have participants write it down/place its symbol in the first column.

The Facilitator should challenge participants to identify shocks pertaining to:

- Human crises (e.g. illness, death, alcoholism)
- Material crises (e.g. theft, damage to housing due to fire or flooding)
- Environmental crises (e.g. drought or floods)
- Economic crises (e.g. crash in cash-crop prices)
- Livelihood related crises (e.g. the loss of a boat, livestock epidemics, crop loss due to pests or unemployment)

Ultimately, the result might look something like this:

| Shock -triggers | | |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Malaria | | |
| Theft of livestock | | |
| Crop loss due to flooding | | |
| ... | | |
| ... | | |
| ... | | |

Note: One Research Team has effectively used this method with several social groups in the same community (e.g. petty traders, urban jobless and elderly persons). Well done!

Step 2: The Discussion Group’s next task is to score the frequency and severity (at the household level) of each trigger.

In practice, the Activity works best if “frequency” is scored relatively and “severity” is scored absolutely. Thus, on a scale of 1 to 5, those shocks that strike the most often are given 5 (regardless of how often this is in absolute terms). Meanwhile, the *severity* of shocks is scored so that:

- 1 = the shock sometimes leads to a small increase in household poverty
- 2 = the shock sometimes leads to a moderate increase in household poverty
- 3 = the shock ordinarily leads to a significant increase in household poverty
- 4 = the shock ordinarily leads to a dramatic increase in household poverty
- 5 = the shock ordinarily leads to destitution

Thus, participants might develop a matrix appearing something like this:

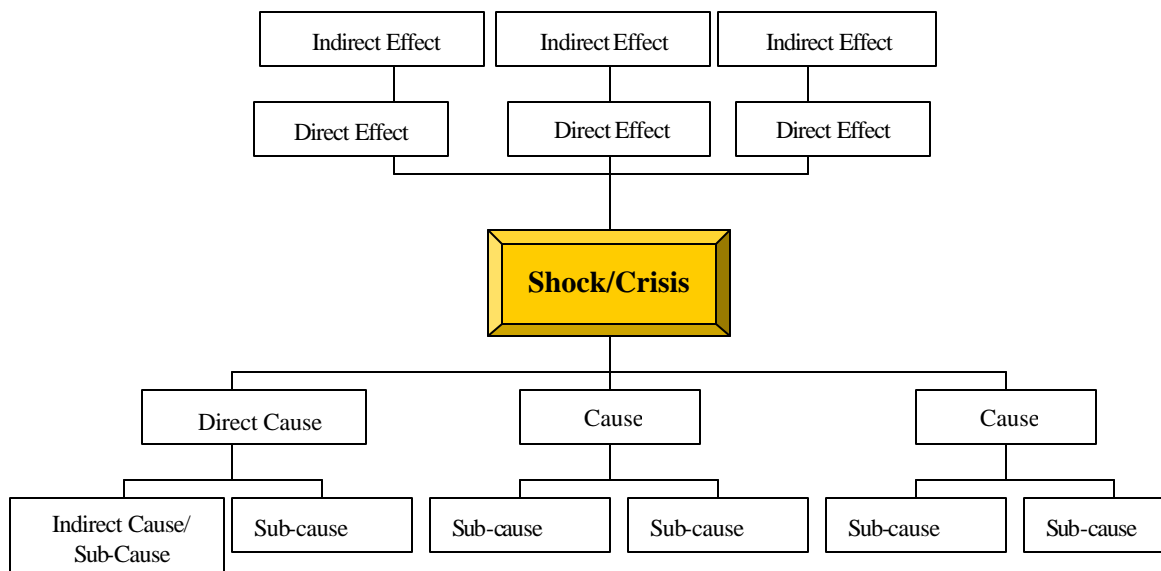
| Shock -triggers | Frequency | Severity |
|---------------------------|-----------|----------|
| Malaria | 5 | 1 |
| Theft of livestock | 2 | 3 |
| Crop loss due to flooding | 1 | 4 |
| ... | ... | ... |
| ... | ... | ... |
| ... | ... | ... |

Scores can be made using any marker (e.g. pebbles or thorns – people seem to prefer hard/sharp things to use in this exercise!) that participants choose.

Step 3: Discussion Group participants should provide a summary interpretation of the matrix they developed. In particular, they should be able to identify the most frequent trigger, the most serious trigger and the most “threatening” trigger (i.e. the most severe trigger with a strong likelihood of occurring).

Step 4: This matrix is a *starting point* for Group reflection on, and analysis of the most frequent, severe and threatening shock-triggers. The two major issues to explore are:

1. How do these triggers directly *and indirectly* contribute to impoverishment?



In many cases, participants will be able to develop “Shock/Crisis Trees.” People find this fun to draw– literally showing the “causes” as roots and “effects” as green leaves.

2. Are some individuals or households more vulnerable to these triggers than others? Which ones? Why? Note: the “Community Map” may be a useful resource to help focus this discussion.

Step 5: Now, explore the coping mechanisms that people employ at individual, household and/or community levels to:

- ❑ Decrease vulnerability to the trigger (for example, people in drought prone areas could grow only drought resistant crops)
- ❑ Prevent the trigger from occurring (generally speaking, people cannot prevent a “drought” from occurring. They could, however, move to a less drought prone area. To use another example, people could prevent themselves from catching HIV/AIDS by practicing safe sex)
- ❑ Lessen the trigger’s impact (for example, people who lose a harvest due to flooding could stave off hunger by borrowing food from distant relatives)

Of course, there might not be effective coping mechanisms for some kinds of shock/crisis. But, this is exactly what the exercise stands to teach us!

In some cases, you may be able to enter brief descriptions of these coping mechanisms directly into the Activity Matrix.

| Local Shocks/Crises | Frequency | Severity | Coping Mechanisms |
|---------------------------|-----------|----------|-------------------|
| Illness | | | |
| Theft | | | |
| Crop loss due to flooding | | | |
| ... | | | |

Note well: It may be necessary to explore “coping mechanisms” through a separate Activity. If participants are tired or have other engagements, bring this Discussion to a close.