

The relevance of 'resilience'?

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Key messages

- The concept of resilience is at the centre of current debates in development, climate change adaptation and humanitarian aid. However, it is not clear what resilience is, or how it can or should be promoted during and after crises.
- Although it seems self-evident that opportunities to build people's resilience should be seized, a strong case would be needed to justify diverting humanitarian resources to that end.
- Far more understanding is needed about what kind of support is most effective and how this can best be delivered.

There are good reasons why the concept of resilience is at the centre of current debates in development, climate change adaptation and humanitarian aid. The number of people affected by disasters is not likely to diminish, and frustration with the need for repeated massive aid efforts in the same parts of the world has led to increasing pressure to address the underlying vulnerabilities that lead to humanitarian crises. Climate change is expected to cause more widespread and more extreme hazards, and to exacerbate factors that make people less able to cope with shocks. 'Building resilience' has been invoked as a new organising principle by the UN, donors and NGOs, as a way to prevent unacceptable levels of human suffering, reduce the costs of emergency response and bring climate change adaptation into mainstream development practice. However, despite widespread agreement in policy circles that resilience should be a central concern, many are struggling to know exactly what resilience *is*. This growing 'resilience debate' thus rests on a paradox that needs explaining.

The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) made resilience a core theme in its 2011–2013 research programme, and initial work has focused on its role in shaping the organisation of international aid. This Policy Brief presents the understanding gained in the course of this research; it argues that, for the resilience discourse to make a continued contribution to international aid, and in particular for the role of humanitarian action, a change in its direction is now needed.

Resilient people or 'systems'?

The use of 'resilience' to reframe challenges which have previously been discussed under headings such as sustainable development, vulnerability and disaster risk reduction (DRR) has facilitated the inclusion and increasing influence of the climate change adaptation (CCA) community. This is visible in the proliferation of studies of resilience and adaptation in eco-systems, and the domination of the language of 'systems' rather than people, even in the definitions of resilience. The adoption of the latter offered the mainstream humanitarian/DRR communities an opportunity to 'work across silos' by sharing an analytical approach with CCA, as well as providing a tempting opportunity to borrow the apparently scientific, non-subjective certainty of ecology.

The resilience of eco-systems to shocks and stresses appears to be an empirical matter, as do the qualities of the eco-system which affect how well it 'absorbs' or 'recovers' from any disturbance. Analogies for these qualities have then been looked for in the resilience of human 'systems'. While insights can be learned from such analogies, it can be dangerous to be seduced by this 'scientistic' approach.¹

¹ The concept of 'scientistic' as a critique is borrowed from T. Cannon and D. Müller-Mahn, 'Vulnerability, Resilience and Development Discourses in Context of Climate Change', *Natural Hazards*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2010. There are numerous examples of the approach, e.g. much of the work from the Resilience Alliance, www.resalliance.org.

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Ecological resilience appears value-free because only the ‘system’ is valued, not the wellbeing of individual creatures. Indeed, in judging the health of an eco-system, hidden value judgements may be made about which species’ survival matters. The paradigm encourages value-free analysis by focusing on outcomes and symptoms of resilience, avoiding looking at the power relations that are at the root of much vulnerability. The quest for objectivity remains an illusion, though, because exploitation too can be resilient, so any ‘scientific’ analysis still has to judge which is resilience-to-be-supported and which is resilience-to-be-fought.

The pond-ecosystem analogy brings another danger by suggesting a clearly defined and bordered system, with external threats (‘natural’ hazards) and internally determined ‘community’ resilience. Human societies though face internal threats, and their vulnerability, or resilience, has external roots. There is no neat distinction between risk, shock, vulnerability and response, because in the real world they can be one and the same: sources of conflict also shape people’s economic opportunities and their abilities to exploit them.

Resilience frameworks

There have been explicit attempts to develop resilience frameworks that different disciplines can share, in order to break down the silos (‘development’, ‘emergency’, ‘climate change adaptation’) that can inhibit the development of coherent strategies. There have been two broad approaches, both of which have drawbacks. One approach breaks down the process of suffering a shock and responding to it either temporally or causally, and identifies factors that will determine how the ‘system’ responds to the problem.² There is a need to keep such a framework simple and generically applicable on the one hand, and yet, on the other, capable of incorporating complex socio-economic dynamics. There has been a tendency to err on the side of the former, e.g. models that combine the ability to withstand a shock and the ability to bounce back, though no empirical basis is offered for equating them. Indeed, though recovery

is normally assumed, there is a dearth of evidence on just how this happens – why after a shock previously stagnating livelihoods can improve, and why this upward trajectory then gets stuck. This preference for simplicity also means that the frameworks cannot assist in answering critical questions, such as what is it that makes people more or less sensitive to crisis, because these dimensions are left as unexplained ‘black boxes’. This undermines their very purpose since such a framework cannot help guide research into recovery, and, more worryingly, it allows any livelihood or DRR intervention in any context to be (re-)labelled ‘resilience building’.

The second approach develops frameworks around the characteristics that are deemed to ‘make up’ resilience. As Table 1 illustrates, such lists have approached resilience from widely different angles, and their usefulness lies precisely in enriching the diversity of the lenses used to examine resilience.

Interpreting these characteristics as individual building-blocks of resilience encourages a modular analysis, which poses two distinct risks. First, given the wide-ranging dimensions on these lists, any intervention (emergency or developmental) can be justified under one or other heading as ‘resilience building’. Second, the ‘resilience by building blocks’ approach undermines the demand for analysis to explain the inter-connectedness of material, political and institutional factors in creating resilience or vulnerability. It should be impossible to separate one component from another (e.g. assets only come alive through the way institutions give people access to them and their benefits) or from their context (e.g. a characteristic that brings resilience in one situation may bring vulnerability in another). Using frameworks that do not incorporate real-life dynamics would be a disappointing step backwards.

Attempts to quantify resilience have built on characteristics approaches, by measuring various indicators for dimensions of resilience, and combining them as modular components of resilience.³ The administrative desire to quantify resilience

Table 1: Examples of characteristics of resilience from different conceptualisations

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| Twigg (<i>Characteristics of a Disaster Resilient Community: A Guidance Note, Version 2</i> (London: UCL, 2009)) | Legal and regulatory systems; information management and sharing; social protection; organisational capacities |
| Folke (‘Resilience: The Emergence of a Perspective for Social–Ecological Systems Analyses’, <i>Global Environmental Change</i> , 16, 2006) | Learns to manage by change; accepts uncertainty; non-equilibrium dynamics |
| Holling (‘Resilience and Stability of Ecological Systems’, <i>Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics</i> , 4, 1973) | Flexible; dynamic; able to absorb change; diverse |

² See for example DFID, *Defining Disaster Resilience: A DFID Approach Paper* (London: DFID, 2011); A. Mitchell, *Disaster Risk Management For Insecure Contexts*, ACF-International Briefing Paper (Paris: ACF, 2011); T. Frankenberger et al., *Building Resilience to Food Security Shocks in the Horn of Africa*, Discussion Note (Washington DC and London: USAID and DFID, 2012).

³ The development of econometric tools for measuring resilience at household level has been led by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), e.g. L. Alinovi et al., *Livelihoods Strategies and Household Resilience to Food Insecurity: An Empirical Analysis to Kenya* (Rome: EUI, 2010).

is obvious: to assess comparative need, target resources, measure impact and judge ‘value for money’. However, this quantitative approach also serves to decontextualise resilience, making it harder to understand how specific threats shape people’s response to them. This approach also faces the challenge of constructing resilience from factors that are found from household level to national and international level. Factors that cannot be captured through simple, measurable indicators, such as power relations, risk being further neglected, which may lead to interventions that ignore the most important determinants of vulnerability.

There is as yet no consensus framework, and even if one emerges, the importance of frameworks in bridging silos may be exaggerated. An examination of the use of other frameworks developed to support international aid, e.g. UNICEF’s model of the causes of malnutrition or DFID’s sustainable livelihoods framework, leaves doubts about the ability frameworks have to help integrate the work of different communities of practice, whose silos are maintained not by frameworks but by powerful institutional forces.⁴

The missing debate

Despite its focus on disasters and emergency actors, the role of humanitarian action in building resilience is rarely discussed. There is an assumption that resilience-building will help avoid crises and (expensive) humanitarian assistance, and often a suggestion that humanitarian aid ought to be designed to contribute to long-lasting recovery and resilience – but what constitutes ‘recovery’ is left unexplained. Given that the ‘humanitarian–development divide’ is one of the thorniest dichotomies in aid, the lack of discussion on how to deliver assistance when humanitarian crises still occur is surprising. This is particularly so, because the growing argument that crises can be turned into transformational opportunities by building resilience in post-crisis relief assistance (‘building back better’) challenges the very nature and role of emergency relief. The related idea that, after crises, more resilient people could ‘bounce back better’ also needs explaining, given evidence of the long-term impacts of crises from fields as diverse as macroeconomics and psychology.⁵

HPG’s current work on resilience uses concrete examples to reveal the complexity of institutional and political reconstruction, which exposes how little ‘resilience optimism’ has so far been informed either by careful analysis or evidence on what ‘BBB’ means, how recovery happens, and whether, how, when and by whom it should be supported. Our comparative analysis of aid responses in post-

⁴ S. Levine and C. Chastre, *Nutrition and Food Security Response Analysis in Emergency Contexts*, HPG Commissioned Paper (London and Rome: ODI and FAO, 2011).

tsunami Aceh, post-Nargis Myanmar and post-earthquake Haiti reveals the specificity of Aceh, the example where a crisis did create an opportunity for peace and reconstruction (but only after specific political changes and processes over previous years).⁶ After the tsunami, the aid community saw an opportunity to rebuild better based on unprecedented funding, whereas Indonesians saw opportunities for institutional reconstruction and better governance. Likewise, following Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar, the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) focused more on creating new relationships with Myanmar than on measuring recovery indicators of communities in the delta. The international-led discourse on reconstruction in Haiti, which hoped that the earthquake could trigger fundamental change, may have copied the wrong lessons from Aceh, revealing an underlying naivety in expecting a crisis to change the chronic problems of inequality, poverty and aid dependency that had turned an earthquake into such a humanitarian crisis in the first place.

Though it seems self-evident that opportunities to rebuild differently should be seized, there are three sets of reasons to maintain a level of realism around what can be achieved in the aftermath of humanitarian crises. Technicians feel that BBB demands stricter building standards and more technical solutions which, because of their higher costs and because of an imperfect understanding of the trade-offs people are forced to make against multiple risks, may actually exclude those most in need from the benefits of assistance. Second, humanitarian crises are rarely without a dimension of conflict (political, if not armed), and the powerful often have their own interest in how the livelihoods of the less powerful are ‘developed’. Crises provide easy cover for the powerful to advance their own private interests and political agendas (relocating Mozambican peasant farmers from the fertile and flood-prone banks of the Zambezi, settling pastoralist victims of ‘drought’ in the Horn of Africa). Humanitarian actors are not equipped with the necessary political-economy *savoir faire* to avoid acquiescing in this: the lack of a historical dimension to the current resilience debate raises fears that long-identified and long-analysed mistakes will be repeated.⁷

Third, there is a need to question why building resilience should at all be a responsibility of humanitarian assistance. The Haiti and Aceh cases illustrate the limitations of short-term emergency relief in dealing with chronic needs and a longer-

⁵ See e.g. J. E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002) and A. Crabtree, *On Not ‘Bouncing Back’: Questioning ‘Resilience’*, draft, EADI/DSA, 2011, <http://eadi.org/gc2011/crabtree-239.pdf>.

⁶ L. Fan, *Disaster as Opportunity*, HPG Working Paper, 2012.

⁷ E.g. M. Bradbury, ‘Normalising the Crisis in Africa’, *Disasters*, 22(4), 1998; J. Macrae, ‘The Death of Humanitarianism? An Anatomy of the Attack’, *Disasters*, 22(4), 1998.

term future. Both cases showed the need for humanitarian assistance to be subordinated to a reconstruction agenda set by developmental paradigms and resourced on an appropriate scale and time frame. Scarce humanitarian resources are supposed to meet immediate pressing needs. They are rarely sufficient even for this limited purpose, and a strong case would be needed to justify diverting them to address long-term needs, or for believing that the short-term horizons, tools and skills of emergency response are appropriate for bringing about structural changes. So far, the BBB ideal remains firmly anchored in wishful thinking.

The resilience debates

The recent debates have been useful in rethinking the relationship between aid and crises, and have helped the humanitarian, development and CCA communities to see their common goal, even if that cannot easily bring the merger of three communities of practice into one. There has been a reemphasis of the need for all sustainable development to take a dynamic perspective, and put adaptive capacity and innovation at its centre, and of the importance of risk management – a new DRR, focusing more on people than on physical infrastructure, and on all risks, not just natural disasters. The resilience label may help development actors to engage with issues of crisis and risk as their own challenge, which will hopefully lead to permanent change.

Whether resilience should become an organising concept of international assistance is another question. Putting to one side those interested in resilience as the cheapest alternative, the case for resilience is simple (development policy, investment and assistance have a moral duty to help the most vulnerable and to avoid humanitarian suffering) and the label is attractive (a focus on supporting what people can do for themselves). Even if ‘resilience’ is used as the external mobilising banner, though, no reasons have yet been shown why it should displace ‘vulnerability’, grounded in looking at the forces and dynamics that restrict people’s choices and opportunities, as the central analytical concept. A debate shaped by attention to outcomes and symptoms risks detracting attention from how these outcomes came about, and the unacceptable trade-offs which people are sometimes forced to make to guarantee survival may too easily appear like resilience. The term ‘vulnerability’ became less useful when it became a label attached to huge pre-defined ‘categories’ of people (women, children, the displaced, the old), used to justify unsophisticated aid targeting. The word lost its link to threats and processes, and ceased to look forward to future risks. Resilience offers another chance to keep the discussion on people’s ability (or inability) to deal with the problems that life presents them with, and the constraints they face. However, any over-optimism

that this chance will be taken is surely curbed by the rapidly appearing language of generic ‘resilience-building’ programmes, being used to re-package interventions (grain banks, ‘improved’ seeds) which have been run for decades without noticeably challenging the structural factors that keep people in poverty.

Where next?

The resilience debate has been dominated by an abstract discussion about how aid agencies should describe their work. In order to give more meaningful support to people whose livelihoods are precarious, far more understanding is needed about what kind of support is most effective and how this can best be delivered. Thus far the discussion on resilience has contributed to this goal only tangentially. The key critique emanating from HPG’s research is that the most important questions about supporting resilience are too often being left unaddressed. Resilience analysis will become of more practical use to policy and practice if it can become less self-referential and develop two distinct, empirical components.

An outward-looking analysis will entail building up a body of empirical studies of collapsed, surviving and recovering livelihoods in and after crises. A wide variety of conceptual models can inform this work, which should not be expected to deliver clear-cut ‘answers’: such studies will be more useful if they acknowledge more explicitly how professional and moral judgements have been used to decide the determinants of resilience, by balancing winners and losers, and the trade-offs between the present and the future or between security and independence.

A second, inward-looking research strand will avoid the pitfalls of being self-referential if it can look empirically at how the bureaucratic requirements of fund disbursement constrain decision-making. A real challenge exists, rarely openly discussed, in accepting the imperfection of bureaucracies, with their need to maintain financial accountability, to manage themselves according to technical specialisation and to work as the implementing arm of political decision-making, while at the same time ensuring that the systems they administer can still provide coherent strategic support to people living with crises.

The importance of the call to make resilience a central aid objective is not questioned by this paper. However, the call was for a political change in aid prioritisation and targeting, and was not intended to pose a new, conceptual challenge. Better understanding of what is needed is essential, but it is far from clear that creating a new conceptual paradigm is the way either to achieve understanding or to meet the political challenge of reorienting aid.