

Political flag or conceptual umbrella?

Why progress on resilience must be freed from the constraints of technical arguments

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Key messages

- Theoretical discussions about what resilience means and how to measure it are distracting attention from the vital task of gaining more understanding about people's vulnerabilities and how to address them.
- 'Resilience' should not be turned into a technical discipline or an aid category. The case for resilience is to change the political decisions about what development policy and aid in general is used for.
- Empirical evidence, not definitions, must be the basis for understanding the limits of people's coping and freedoms. Theoretical frameworks should facilitate the generation of evidence, not determine the conclusions of analysis.

Recent attention on building resilience in difficult environments has provided a new locus for long-standing discussions about how to engage in crisis contexts in ways that go beyond meeting immediate needs. Yet there are signs of frustration with the ongoing debate, stemming in part from the lack of a clear way forward for practical action. While the argument for promoting resilience may seem clear, it is much less clear how this should be achieved in environments where

many of the assumed prerequisites – good governance, social cohesion and economic opportunity – are in short supply. This is not to imply that resilience has no relevance in these contexts, but it does suggest some fundamental changes in the way aid is conceived, organised and delivered.¹

¹ S. Levine and I. Mosel, *Supporting Resilience in Difficult Places: A Critical Look at Applying the 'Resilience' Concept in Countries Where Crises Are the Norm*, HPG Commissioned Paper for BMZ (London: ODI, 2014).

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Two resilience arguments

There are two broad arguments for resilience, one political, the other technical. The political argument is that, since the shocks and stresses that cause crises can often not be prevented, the task is to ensure that people are better able to cope when things do go wrong. Thus, the overriding objective of development policy and finance must be alleviating the predicament of the most vulnerable, not simply making poor countries richer. Although macro-economic changes will often be a means to the real end, many kinds of economic progress bypass or even further marginalise those who need help the most. The implicit criticism is that, in past and current practice, tackling vulnerability has not been a high enough priority. As such, ‘resilience’ is a flag for rallying political will behind institutional change in the way decisions are made and resources allocated.

The technical argument for resilience is that addressing the challenges of the future requires a different way of thinking and a different way of programming because the old ways have proved technically inadequate. Previous thinking has not properly incorporated ideas related to risk and complexity or challenges such as climate change, and new ideas will have to be included when analysing options for development support. ‘Resilience’ is here used as a conceptual umbrella under which different disciplines can come together to tackle complex problems with more holistic interventions.

The two arguments are not mutually exclusive but they are *different*. While the political argument is convincing, the technical argument has not resolved what exactly needs to be done. It is normal in any discipline for there to be a continual process of technical and conceptual development which improves thinking and practice. However, for resilience, unlike other disciplines, this discussion about conceptual and technical insights has come to hide the goal: the adoption of new thinking has come to be equated with the task to be achieved, so that, until conceptual disagreements are cleared up, many are unsure what needs to be done. A brief look at some of the stages where the separation of the two arguments is critical² helps illustrate why the role of the

technical discussions on resilience needs to change, and how it can inform and improve practice only when the real objective of resilience (i.e. making vulnerabilities the centre of development policy and investment) is freed from its stranglehold.

Defining resilience

There has been much discussion around the ‘true’ definition of resilience. Many definitions have been generated, which are often acceptable as a general indication of the job to be done but are invariably inadequate to capture all possible worries about people’s vulnerability.³ For example, many make reference only to how much loss people (or systems) suffer, but do not address the essential question of how far they fall below any threshold of acceptable coping; little distinction is made between how much people lose and how quickly they recover. Definitions refer variously to individuals, households, communities and countries, but the differences between what resilience means at these different levels, what is desirable at each level and how the different levels are linked, if at all, are left hanging. Definitions tend to ignore the price which people have to pay as insurance for their future. Indeed, if taken literally, definitions which measure resilience only by how much people lose in a crisis would consider a slave to represent the paradigm of resilience because, being given only the barest conditions for survival, their life is likely to change less than anyone else’s whatever crisis occurs.

The attention the technical school pays to defining resilience is misplaced. The political argument for resilience does not rest on establishing a precise and scientific definition. Empirical evidence, not definitions, is required to understand what needs to change in the lives of people constantly at risk of falling into crisis, and to identify what influences how people cope and (to use the language of Sen) their range of freedoms. Empirical evidence may help us over time to refine how we think about resilience, and the development of distinct conceptual frameworks for resilience may be a vehicle for helping spread this understanding. However, analysing the lives of different individuals or societies in any given context, and how to make them more resilient, can continue without these frameworks, by using a range of existing analytical tools.

2 For a fuller discussion of these issues, see S. Levine, *Assessing Resilience: Why Quantification Misses the Point*, HPG Working Paper (London: ODI, 2014); Levine and Mosel, *Supporting Resilience in Difficult Places*; I. Mosel and S. Levine, *The Case for Rehabilitating LRRD: How LRRD Can Become a Practically Useful Concept for Aid in Difficult Places*, HPG Commissioned Paper for BMZ (London: ODI, 2014).

3 For a fuller discussion, see Levine, *Assessing Resilience*.

Supporting resilience in protracted and recurrent crises

The political case for resilience is partly a call for more investment in longer-term support to help people cope in the most difficult situations, where crises continue for many years, are frequently repeated or are an ever-present threat. These are often countries with political problems such as questioned state legitimacy, inefficient or corrupt state bureaucracies, conflict and highly unequal power relations in society. The technical argument often assumes that resilience depends on a range of circumstances that are so far from these conditions that support for resilience may be impossible in the most difficult situations.⁴ It is of course much *harder* to build resilience in difficult places: that is why they remain marginalised by development policy and aid. But if the technical argument leads to more investment being targeted where it can have easier and more visible impact, then it will be undermining the key thrust of the political case. Some kinds of support for vulnerable people or societies may indeed be impossible in some situations if this support is premised on a paradigm that is both state-centric and derived from a rural idyll of cohesive and equitable self-sufficient communities. But the mechanisms and institutions on which people depend are much wider, and other forms of support may be conceivable.

The connection must be made between individual and household possibilities and the ‘big picture’, including the macro-economy (and national and regional markets), power politics and conflict, local informal institutions and local culture, such as attitudes to risk, gender roles and attitudes to innovation and experimentation. Analysis should start, not from what we think resilience is about (i.e. how it is defined), but instead by using a wide set of lenses to look at how people are coping in real situations, what opportunities might exist for them to enlarge their freedoms and what constraints they face in achieving this.

What does resilience programming look like?

There is little agreement about what resilience programming actually looks like. Attitudes range from a belief that we cannot yet know what might work

because resilience-building is a new endeavour to the creation of lists of pre-identified programmes deemed to be resilience-building. The quest to characterise resilience *building* is a product of the idea that resilience building is both a new task and a generic one. However, pre-qualifying certain activities as ‘building resilience’ risks legitimising programming without analysing or understanding the specific context at hand. This sits uneasily with the political argument that development and aid policy have been too weakly grounded in vulnerability and resilience analysis. It could even be argued that there is no such thing as resilience programming: interventions and policy changes can of course support resilience, but they do not constitute a generic class with inherent commonalities across contexts. Supporting resilience means providing support based on resilience analysis, i.e. an analysis which puts at its centre the attempt to understand vulnerability.

Several considerations could aid analysis and intervention design:

- Bringing together a wide range of perspectives and expertise in developing a strategy. These should include technical, political and economic experts; experts in process as well as content; and the perspectives of both ‘development’ (long-term) and humanitarian response (crisis-focused).
- Making the analysis forward looking, based on future trends and likely future risks.
- Focusing on the *processes* which make people unable to invest in their own futures and vulnerable to risks.
- Designing responses which are flexible enough to adapt to changing situations.
- Ensuring that the analysis is disaggregated, adequately reflecting the degree to which processes that drive marginalisation, vulnerability or exploitation affect different people in different ways.

No generic resilience-building programming should be expected to result, though. Programmes will be specific to their context and to the kinds of vulnerabilities which are being addressed.

How to organise support for resilience

The existence of resilience programming and funding also derives from the idea that resilience-building is a distinct task. However, the political argument for resilience is that attention to extreme vulnerability must be the main objective of aid in general. Creating

⁴ T. Frankenberger et al., *Enhancing Resilience to Food Security Shocks in Africa*, Discussion Paper (Tucson, AZ: TANGO International, 2012) is rare in explicitly accepting this implication.

a separate technical silo of resilience programmes, existing side by side with the majority of aid resources which continue to be used as before, is to undermine efforts to change the way aid as a whole is organised, planned and monitored (though there is a legitimate case to be made for piloting different ways of thinking about how to address resilience by creating temporary funds for such programmes). Resilience will be supported to the extent that more development aid:

- pays attention to crisis;
- adopts the principles of ‘Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development’ (LRRD – specifically two-way LRRD: the creation of joint strategies that embrace both short- and long-term thinking);
- includes risk in its analysis;
- goes beyond the (current) risk reduction focus on natural hazards and includes risks from conflict, politics and power relations;
- takes vulnerability, rather than hazards, as the starting point;
- and most importantly makes the (often difficult) political decision to use development policy and funding to address marginalisation.

The cause of resilience will be advanced by identifying and addressing the structural, institutional and bureaucratic obstacles to making these changes.

Measuring progress

There is a strong case for increased attention to monitoring the impact of development interventions in general, much better use of tools for measuring what progress is being made in supporting resilience and much better collaborative learning from experience. A huge investment of time and effort has recently gone into developing methodologies for measuring resilience, and there have been several attempts to draw up a list of what resilience is a function of (i.e. its components, such as assets, safety nets and access to services), and to define indicators by which each of these can be measured and mathematical functions for combining these components into a single resilience measure or index.

If, however, resilience is primarily a political agenda working with a non-scientific definition of resilience (as this paper contends), then it cannot be definitively

captured by any set of characteristics. Nor can it be known in advance what people’s future ability to cope would depend on. If it is the case that there is no separate class of resilience-building interventions (as this paper also contends), then there is no need to see impact monitoring of ‘resilience-building interventions’ as different from any other kind of impact measurement. Good impact monitoring is derived from understanding the specific problems of certain people in a given situation: by identifying their key constraints and opportunities; developing a theory of how change can be brought about and designing an appropriate intervention; identifying the specific changes that would be expected – economically, socially, politically – if different outcomes were to be achieved for people; and, finally, working out whether or not these changes are indeed happening. Such an approach does not permit intervention types to be schematically compared across different contexts, or the mathematical comparison of people’s resilience in different countries, but this may in any case be unnecessary. Investment in monitoring impact is needed to generate over time learning about what works and how; better understanding of people’s rationales and strategies when faced with difficulties; knowledge about what helps people cope and what expands their agency; and ways of holding people and institutions to account, including for the impact of their actions or inactions.

Conclusion

Much remains to be learned. New approaches and perspectives will hopefully bring improved understanding and new insights to old challenges. To that extent, what this paper has called the technical argument for resilience should play an important role in informing the practice driven by the political argument. However, the technical argument risks doing the political argument a disservice when it makes the challenge itself new, rather than offering new insights. The constraints to better targeting, better design and better evaluation of development practice are largely political and institutional, and a narrow technical and conceptual focus risks distracting attention from what needs to be done and from what can already be done. The technical debates should continue and will hopefully thrive. However, a huge leap could be made rapidly in the use of development policy and aid to reduce the vulnerability to crisis of some of the most marginalised people in the world if the technical argument were clearly separate, and if the political imperative to reduce extreme human suffering were freed from these theoretical discussions.

5 See Levine, *Assessing Resilience*, for a more detailed theoretical critique of the major approaches.