

Resilience: Conceptual Reflections

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The term “resilience” has experienced a drastic increase in its usage over the past few years. Commonly associated with the fields of child psychology, ecology and engineering, it has now appeared in the vocabulary of practitioners and scholars working on global issues of sustainable development, peacebuilding, disaster relief, urban planning, and humanitarian action. The term features prominently in recent documents by a number of United Nations agencies, bilateral donors, and non-governmental organizations, and has received application on a variety of analytical levels, from the resilience of individuals, communities and affected populations, to institutional, urban and systems resilience.

This Brief was written in preparation for the 2012 Annual Meeting of the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform. The theme of the conference is “Operationalizing Resilience in Peacebuilding Contexts: Approaches, Lessons, Action Points”. In order to set the scene for the event, this Brief offers an overview of the ways in which the concept of resilience has been used in a variety of settings. It will critically assess the merits of applying the term to issues of peacebuilding, before posing a series of exploratory questions that may contribute to further discussion.

Concepts

A variety of definitions and understandings of resilience can be found in a whole host of scholarly and practitioner communities – and even within a particular sub-field or working group, a common meaning is frequently absent. Moreover, resilience is often used interchangeably with a plethora of related terms, including adaptability, robustness, and transformability. Before any discussion over the potential merits of using the term, it is thus important to outline what it is we are referring to.¹

Resilience thinking shifts the focus from deficits to strengths: from what is wrong or amiss, to what is strong and robust about a body or system

When referring to resilience, it is crucial to specify the resilience of what to what

At its most basic, resilience is a word increasingly used in common parlance to denote the capacity to “bounce back” after a disturbance or shock. Such stress can be either chronic or acute, in that it can refer to a long-lasting strain as well as to a sudden crisis. Just as building materials have varying levels of elasticity and resistance, so too can individuals, communities or social systems exhibit different degrees of resilience before they surpass the threshold at which they permanently deform or break.

Intuitively, such a basic understanding of resilience is of only limited utility in the context of peacebuilding or disaster relief, as most things in the social world do not go back to their original form after succumbing to stress or shock. Individuals subjected to famine, or cities experiencing armed violence will perhaps never be the same again – but could still have demonstrated a significant degree of resilience despite not returning to the (psychological, material or structural) state they were in prior to the disturbance.

The idea here is that conceiving of the world as social or natural “systems” allows one to think about continuous, intrinsic change that is often at too slow a pace to be easily recognizable. Some degree of “adversity” is actually required by a system in order to function properly in the long-term. So-called “systems resilience” thus aims to study the ways in which the functioning of the household, community or ecosystem can be maintained in the event of a disturbance – in other words: to what extent the component parts of a dynamic, constantly changing system can absorb a shock without experiencing overall system failure.

Yet such a systemic view still does not take into account the capacity to adapt and to self-organize when certain parts of the system do indeed cease to function. A state may no longer be in a position to provide basic services to its citizens amidst an on-going civil war, but a local community may nonetheless be able to respond by finding ways of providing these services itself. The literature thus speaks of “complex adaptive systems” in order to highlight the ways in which they entail “the ability to withstand, recover from, and reorganize in response to crisis”.² Resilience then refers to the ways in which the system may change its actual structure in order to continue functioning.

In this context it is also possible to distinguish between adaptation and transformation. Whereas the former refers to the capacity of a system to withstand the disturbance and maintain its stability, the latter relates to the situation in which a shock makes the existing system untenable. Resilience can thus imply the ability to cope with the onset of a disturbance by withstanding it, or to the ability to transform into a new one. It is important to specify the resilience of what to what: at times it is only a sub-system that transforms in order for the system as a whole to adapt.

Applications

In practitioner circles, definitions of resilience are often more descriptive than analytic and borrow from (and oscillate between) all three of the understandings just outlined – the narrow engineering view of resilience, systems resilience, and finally the resilience of complex adaptive systems. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), for instance, relate resilience to the notion of shock absorption as “the ability of individuals, communities, organizations, or countries exposed to disasters and crisis and underlying vulnerabilities to anticipate, reduce the impact of, cope with, and recover from the effects of adversity without compromising their long-term prospects”.³ Similarly, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) presents resilience as a means of conceiving community-based approaches to prevent and reduce risks and vulnerabilities to disasters and shocks.⁴

The understandings of resilience offered by UNICEF, UNDP and the IFRC take their cue principally from engineering and ecology. Yet inspiration has also been found in biology and medicine – for instance to study resilience in urban contexts. In medical terms, resilience constitutes the stress response of a body, social system or community as reflected in its metabolic process, including side-effects and by-products. “Chronic” urban violence would then refer to situations in which violence is perceived to have become an overwhelming if not seemingly intractable feature of urban life, and in which the metabolism is constantly exposed to, and having to defend off, the stress factor.⁵

The issue here is thus how actors and institutions manage to cope, adapt and ultimately self-organize in situations in which the dynamics of urban violence persist and when an immediate resolution to the problem is not foreseeable. Stress responses can be formal, informal or a combination of both, and their coverage can be universal or particular. The notion of metabolism, however, implies that resilience can produce both “positive” and “negative” effects, including unintended consequences and outcomes.

One way of conceptualizing this distinction would be to gauge whether adaptability has resulted in an overall reduction of stress emission, or whether it has simply constituted a deflection of vulnerability onto other parts of the system without necessarily having addressed the source or cause of the disturbance. In the context of urban violence, to continue with this topic, positive effects of resilience might thus be observed when legitimate actors and institutions – local government, schools, faith-based organizations or NGOs – offer urban services that strengthen civic solidarity and/or generate new practices and coalitions capable of managing or reducing violence. Another example would be the organization of neighbourhood watch initiatives by local residents in areas which, for a combination of topographical, spatial, logistical, infrastructural or political reasons, suffer from an absence of police services.

In the same vein, negative effects of resilience could relate to situations in which armed actors take advantage of and adapt to conflict and insecurity in order to gain control over a given space (a territory, village, neighbourhood) – or at least make use of the perceived absence of social order and weak institutions in order to further their own ends. While levels of violence might actually be reduced in the

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Resilience means many things to different people – are we sure we are always talking of the same thing?

process, such “alternative” security provision may also entail arbitrary and exclusionary practices that occlude and exacerbate, rather than tackle the dynamics from which the violence is seen to be emanating.

The distinction between positive and negative effects highlights that the desirability of resilience is ultimately in the eye of the beholder. While it might be argued that the neighbourhood watch initiatives that typically emerge as a community response to violence and insecurity are a systemic attribute worth supporting, such dynamics can also be subject to political manipulation or co-optation by “criminal” networks. Armed (often by public authorities) and conscious of incumbent economic incentives, communal self-defence mechanisms and practices have been known to reach a degree of autonomy that may in turn be perceived as resisting and challenging the authority of the state.

Opportunities and pitfalls

Why apply the term resilience as a heuristic device, as a lens with which to make sense of the world? For a start, because it shifts the focus from deficits to strengths: from what is wrong or amiss, to what is strong and robust about a body or system. Harnessing those positive traits, rather than only trying to alleviate weaknesses, is what “resilience thinking”, as Martin-Breen and Anderies aptly call it, is all about. Resilience might thus allow us to reflect upon the ways in which women associations in East African slums have organized the collection and recycling of waste using hydro-forming techniques developed locally to produce fuel for cooking (so-called *briquettes*). It might also enable us to recognize and evaluate the capacities of communities to not only co-exist, but indeed to reconcile their difference in the wake of armed violence.

A further opportunity lies in the fact that resilience is arguably not (yet) a “loaded” term that has already been appropriated by one or the other practitioner community. As has already been pointed out in a number of recent discussions of the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform, resilience might thus act as an enabler that fosters cross-sectoral collaboration. If practitioners involved in development, peacebuilding and disaster relief can all identify with the term, perhaps it can help generate that elusive programming “coherence, coordination and complementarity”, which has been called for repeatedly in the context of aid effectiveness.⁶

On the other hand, over-usage of the term can also lead to the impression that resilience is a directly observable phenomenon, something tangible that can be empirically studied. It certainly can be studied, but perhaps not as a social fact in its own right. One way of expressing this is to say that resilience is part of the external observer’s vocabulary used to make sense of what is being observed, rather than a term that is necessarily meaningful to the individuals involved in the societal dynamics that are being examined.⁷ Resilience might thus constitute a very practical concept to assess risk, humanitarian and development needs, as well as a community’s response to a shock, crisis and chronic stress, but it is not really a term that can be included in the questionnaire of the next survey administered in the poor neighbourhoods of Dili.

As with all such terminology, there is a fine line between the advantages it harbours for continuing the conversation, and the descent into conceptual ambiguity and (possibly unconscious or unintended) moralizing about how things ought to be. It is worth emphasizing again that resilience is not directly empirically observable, but a lens we use to make sense of, and conceptualize, the ways in which bodies or systems will respond to possible future events. And individuals, communities or ecosystems can certainly also react negatively to change – be it willed or as a result of exogenous shock. It is certainly possible to observe resilience of affected populations to economic growth (the so-called “poverty trap”), or to a particularly well-meant peacebuilding intervention.

From the normative perspective of seeking ways to improve the perceived plight of those sets of individuals or societal structures that have experienced a disturbance, resilience can also be used to describe the flip-side of positive development: namely the ability to resist piecemeal change or structural transformation. Resilience is both relational and perspectival, in that it can be taken to represent a positive characteristic that can be harnessed in support of peacebuilding aims, and as an obstacle standing in the way of precisely these goals and ambitions.

Operationalization

Resilience can offer us a new perspective, a lens through which to reflect upon and critically analyze the work we are doing. With it, we can question our assumptions, priorities and operational practices. Yet harnessing “resilience” also involves making choices, choices that are situated within the inevitable tensions between individual freedom and social order, between formal and informal institutions and service provision, and ultimately between the institutional dynamics of the social system in question and the capacity-building agenda of the international community seeking to intervene in precisely those dynamics.

From a peacebuilding perspective, resilience thinking helps to remind us of the complex relationships between the local, national and international levels, and of the type of institutional collaboration taking place among them. Resilience highlights how informality is not simply about filling a void left by the absence of state services, but an intrinsic part of the way in which society, understood as a system, copes with and adapts in the face of disturbance. External assistance, seeking to recognize and foster these dynamics, often operates with an incomplete understanding of the complexities of the social environment – the challenge is thus that an intervention in one area might create unwanted side-effects or by-products somewhere else in the system.

The “operationalization” of resilience in the field of peacebuilding needs to come to terms with the inherent tension between formal and informal institutions. Any attempt to integrate practices and mechanisms of resilience, or to adapt formal service provision in light of perceived resilience, entails making changes to the conditions in which those systems evolved. In many instances, resilience systems emerge and persist where informality offers more flexible and adequate services for the needs of poor and underprivileged communities. As a result, the coping and adaptation mechanisms they harbour may resist all attempts to formalize (or co-opt) them. Tontine micro-credit schemes in many parts of Africa and Asia are an

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obvious example – as indeed are informal street markets, which only function (and make economic sense for those involved) precisely because they are informal.

The challenges to operationalizing resilience are manifold, not least because community-based coping and adaptation strategies are not *per se* based on equitable participation, gender equality, and inclusive governance. Some parts of the system might be reacting to a disturbance, but not necessarily in the way foreseen by the system as a whole. Thus, greater resilience might not only lead to increased intra-group solidarity (the clan, tribe, or neighbourhood, for instance) but also to inter-group rivalries. In peacebuilding terms, therefore, trying to build on and foster resilience can offer opportunities for reducing insecurity and violence, but may also constitute an obstacle for longer-term reconciliation and social cohesion.

The critical dimension in operationalizing resilience resides in the defining characteristics of resilient systems themselves. Mechanisms and practices of resilience do not emerge out of societal aspirations, but out of the necessity to cope with and absorb shocks, rapid transformation or chronic stress. In practical terms, this translates into the needs of communities for cheap, simple and non-bureaucratic access to services, including security. The aspirations of state and society, by contrast, are usually directed at overcoming the need for resilience mechanisms to kick in. Approaches to operationalizing resilience must thus complement affordable and flexible access to services while simultaneously providing perspectives for a sustainable alternative.

Concluding thoughts and questions

The practitioner fields of security, peace, development and humanitarian action have a tendency to be awash with new concepts and catchwords. Every so often, it appears to make sense to inject a new term into the mix in order to enliven stale debates and continue the conversation. “Resilience” is undoubtedly one of those words current *en vogue*.

Is more resilience always better than less? Should everything be made more resilient? On what level of analysis should we think about resilience in the context of peacebuilding? Empirically, instances of resilience appear to be all around us. Thus, when hundreds of thousands began fleeing the fighting in Libya, local associations in southern Tunisia began collaborating with Libyan refugee groups in order to create provisional facilities – drawing on both Tunisian and Libyan teaching staff – in order to allow children to accomplish their school year. But what are the analytical and/or operational advantages of labelling this initiative as constituting a form of resilience? And what exactly is resilient in this case? The Libyan education system? The refugee community? Or perhaps even the Tunisian population facing the influx?

The crucial feature of a complex adaptive system is precisely its complexity, a complexity that makes the attribution of causality and intentionality extremely difficult, if not impossible. Bearing this challenge in mind, how would one go about measuring the extent to which a particular project or programme has had an effect on levels of resilience (*of what, to what*)? How can it be ascertained that

something has ceased to be resilient (and precisely towards what disturbance?), or that the resilience of a body or system has increased? What would be the theory of change according to which the programming intervention would be designed? It would appear that evaluating the effectiveness and impact of programmes seeking to foster resilience would require significant methodological innovation.

For the broader peacebuilding agenda, an emphasis on resilience might imply focusing more on prevention – on advanced planning procedures and early warning systems, for instance. But resilience is, first and foremost, about systemic self-help mechanisms. Harnessing these would be akin to attempting to boost a person's immune system. The question remains: can we predict how a system will react in the face of crisis? Do we know which parts of the system need be targeted or supported in order for the system as a whole to cope with and outlast the disturbance?

How a focus on resilience can provide a basis for long-term peacebuilding solutions constitutes the main programming challenge in the time ahead. Resilience thinking focuses the attention on the inherent strengths, rather than the weakness of the system. Yet difficult choices will have to be made about entry-points, and about which parts of the system to privilege over others. Those choices will, in turn, depend on how we think the system as a whole works. Resilience may already have gained much traction from a variety of stakeholders, yet these crucial discussions have arguably just begun.

Resilience is, first and foremost, about systemic self-help mechanisms

Endnotes

¹ What follows draws heavily on Patrick Martin-Breen and J. Marty Anderies, "Resilience: A Literature Review", unpublished paper prepared for the Rockefeller Foundation, September 2011. 64pp. For a more comprehensive and theoretically refined discussion of the term, readers are invited to consult that document.

² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³ See International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, "The Road to Resilience: Bridging Relief and Development for a more Sustainable Future", IFRC Discussion Paper on Resilience, June 2012. UNDP, "Putting Resilience at the Heart of Development: Investing in Prevention and Resilient Recovery", UNDP Representative Office in Japan, June 2012. UNICEF, "Humanitarian Action for Children: Building Resilience", New York 2011.

⁴ See the lecture by Helen Clark, the UNDP Administrator, entitled "Building Resilience: The Importance of Prioritizing Disaster Risk Reduction", 15 August 2012, available at:

<http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/speeches/2012/08/15/helen-clark-building-resilience-the-importance-of-prioritising-disaster-risk-reduction/>

⁵ This approach was followed by a joint initiative of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the Graduate Institute's Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP), entitled "Urban Resilience in Situations of Chronic Violence". A multi-year research endeavour, recently funded by USAID, it asked how urban actors and institutions – both formal and informal – cope and adapt in the face of persistent levels of violence that are identifiably associated with a particular exogenous or endogenous shock. See: <http://graduateinstitute.ch/ccdp/ccdp-research/projects/current-projects/urban-resilience-chronic-violence.html>

⁶ The "3C Roadmap" was the outcome of a high-level conference convened in 2009 by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), together with the UN, NATO, OECD and the World Bank. The report is available at: <http://graduateinstitute.ch/ccdp/ccdp-research/projects/completed-projects/coherence-coordination-complementarity-conference-3C.html>.

⁷ In anthropological terms, this refers to the distinction between an etic and an emic account of social phenomena.

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