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Making the Most of Resilience

Resilience is becoming a hot topic. The increasing interest it is attracting in the development community offers an opportunity for designing and implementing more effective forms of intervention. Specifically, a variety of actors are proposing resilience as a framework for fostering deeper integration between humanitarian and longer-term development interventions. However, putting it into practice is not necessarily an easy task and many challenges lie ahead.

In this briefing we explore how policy makers can make the most of resilience. This includes: defining the concept to make it more relevant to a wider range of development practitioners; building on the concept's strengths but also recognising its weaknesses; addressing these weaknesses by complementing resilience with other relevant concepts.

Introduction

There is currently a growing enthusiasm for the concept of resilience in the international development community. The UK Department for International Development (DFID), for example, recently declared its aim to embed resilience in all its country programmes by 2015 (DFID 2011). Similarly, in its 'Building Resilience to Recurrent Crisis Policy and Programme Guidance' the US Agency for International Development (USAID) intends to use resilience as a way to foster a better collaboration between its humanitarian and development programmes. A number of other actors (WFP, FAO, Oxfam, CARE, etc.) are also sensing the opportunity to develop common understandings, objectives and ways of collaborating around resilience.

This briefing is about making the most of that opportunity, by:

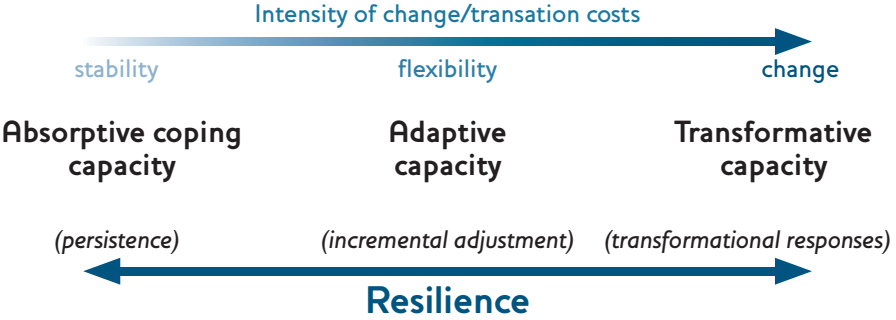
- Providing a definition which is relevant for development policy makers and practitioners;
- Identifying the strengths of the resilience approach;
- Identifying areas for improvements in resilience approach;
- Outlining the lessons to be learned from existing practice and proposing a way forward for putting these lessons into practice.

What do we mean by resilience: coping, adapting, transforming

Resilience is not just about the ability to maintain or return to a previous state; it is about adapting and learning to live with changes and uncertainty. There are three types of capacity that are important in helping people do this: (i) absorptive capacity, that is, the ability to cope with, and absorb the effects of shocks and stresses – for instance when a household temporarily reduces its expenses following a drop in its income; (ii) adaptive capacity, that is, the ability of individuals or societies to adjust and adapt to shocks and stresses, but keep the overall system functioning in broadly the same way – for instance when a household decides to diversify its crops in order to respond to changing weather conditions; (iii) transformative capacity, that is, the ability to change the system fundamentally when the way it works is no longer viable – for example, when a farmer decides to stop farming, and migrates to a city to become a taxi driver.

These three capacities comprise a 3-D resilience framework (see Fig.1) which can

Figure 1: The 3-D resilience framework



Source: Béné et al. 2012

be used to guide thinking around the design of development policy and practice. Box 1 gives an example of how this framework can also be used to identify current examples of development interventions with resilience characteristics.

Why is resilience useful?

There are many reasons to use the term resilience within development. Above all, instead of looking at specific problems in isolation, as sectoral approaches often do, a resilience approach requires us to consider a number of different issues and perspectives all together. It helps us, therefore, to think holistically and encourages us to adopt cross-sectoral and inter-disciplinary approaches that enable us to see the bigger picture.

Resilience thinking also offers many relevant elements for development interventions. First, many shocks –such as extreme weather or economic crises – are increasingly affecting groups of households or even entire communities (as opposed to shocks that affect individual households). Because of its emphasis on holistic and cross-sectoral approaches, resilience can help us to understand the consequences of these shocks and how households, villages or societies respond both as a collective and as individuals.

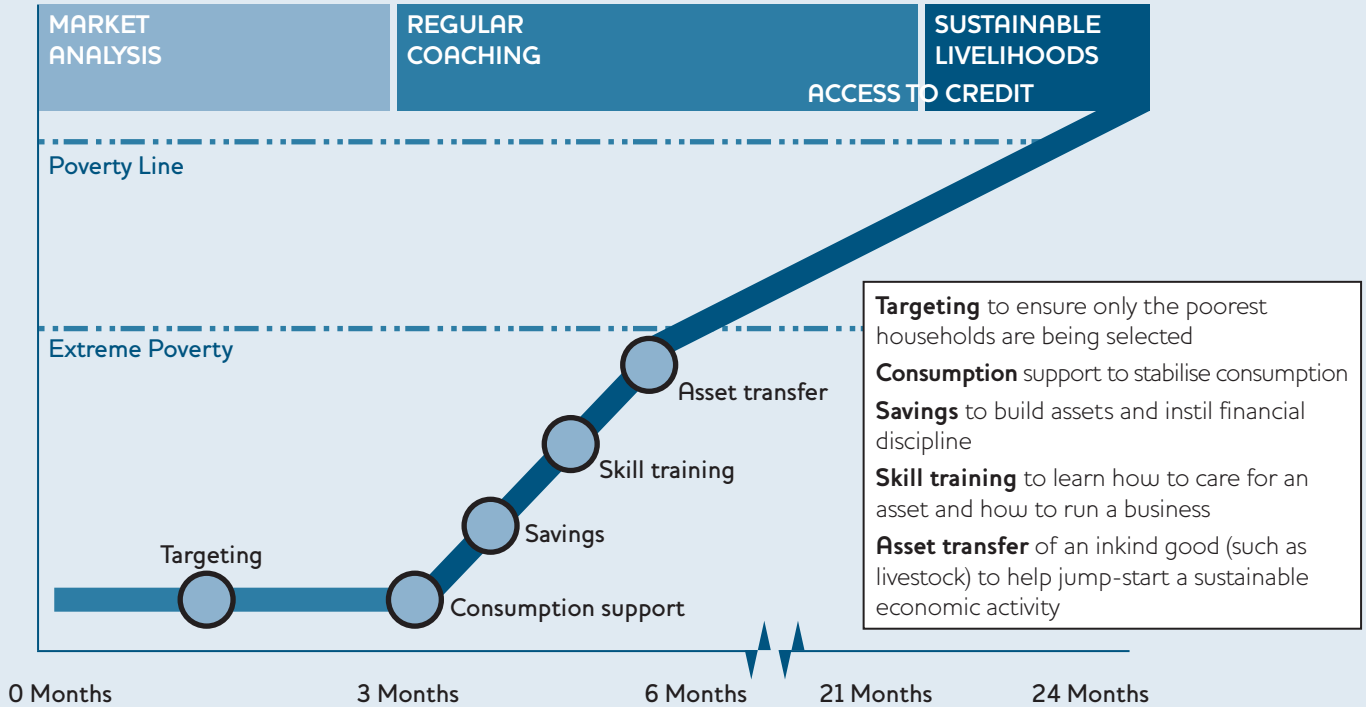
Secondly, the processes development must get to grips with, such as market volatility, population dynamics and environmental changes, happen at different levels (local, global) and across different scales (geographical, jurisdictional). They affect people and environments simultaneously. For instance, human mis-use of natural resources, leading to environmental degradation such as deforestation, can reduce the capacity of an ecosystem to provide a buffer against natural hazards (e.g. tropical storms). Conversely, a well-maintained environment can contribute to agricultural productivity and provide other sources of income, such as (eco)tourism. Resilience thinking can, then, help policy actors realise how actions at one level can have implications at others, and how intervention into one part of a system can help (or hinder) another part.

Thirdly, resilience holds intuitive appeal. 'Building resilience' makes sense as a goal to work towards in a world in which multiple shocks – be they climate-related, economic or political – can cancel out the progress made by development interventions. In that context, resilience is emerging as a policy narrative which is used to bring together different actors and different disciplines under one single approach – as in the case of the resilience project presented in Box 2.

At the country level, a number of social protection programmes, e.g. in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Rwanda, now focus on 'building resilience' rather than simply increasing income. Their objective is to reduce vulnerability and build

Box 1: BRAC's efforts to 'target the ultra poor' of Bangladesh: resilient development in action

BRAC, a Bangladeshi NGO, offers small loans and other assistance to help people build up their livelihoods and escape poverty permanently. When it became clear these efforts were not reaching the poorest, BRAC changed the support it offered to them. Instead of small loans, it provided options more targeted to the needs of the poorest, such as providing food, free healthcare access and skills training. In doing this, it was helping not just with the adaptive and transformative elements of building resilience but with ability to cope (absorptive capacity). Implicitly, this intervention recognised that building some level of stability needs to happen before poor people can make bigger, enduring changes.



Source: Redrawn from Hashemi, S. M. and Umaira, W. (2011) *New Pathways for the Poorest: The Graduation Model from BRAC*. Centre for Social Protection, Brighton: IDS

Box 2: Resilience and food security

The World Food Programme (WFP) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) have recently launched a resilience project to ensure vulnerable populations have enough nutritious food. Their approach brings together inputs and people not just from the conventional sectors involved in food security interventions, but also from other communities working on disasters, climate change, natural resources and social protection. The programme recognises, therefore, that food security can only be achieved through adopting a multi-sectoral, integrated approach. Resilience provides the framework for this integrated approach, and is being used as a platform to "share knowledge, foster policy dialogue, and field level collaboration".

Source: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and World Food Programme (WFP) (2011) *Building Resilience: Bridging Food Security, Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction*

sustainable livelihoods which are resistant to shocks and, in the longer-term, help people lift themselves out of poverty.

These different examples show that the narrative around 'building resilience' is starting to serve a brokering function, bringing together actors and institutions that hadn't always worked together. In this sense, there is a political space opening up which can be used to foster more effective collaboration amongst a diversity of actors. Policy actors can now build on this growing momentum and design policies that support these initiatives. There are, however, lessons to keep in mind while designing these policies.

What can be improved?

Whilst resilience thinking can offer clear advantages to development policy and practice, some limitations remain that need to be considered.

Resilience is not always good. As an analytical framework, resilience is about how much a system can stay the same or change in response to shocks and stresses. It has, however, little to say about whether staying the same or changing is good or bad in itself: in other terms, it has no in-built 'moral compass'. This point has important implications, especially as we recognise that in many cases, resilience goes hand in hand with poverty (in the sense that chronic poor people are very resilient), often at the expense of wellbeing. It would therefore run counter to the aims of development to support this type of 'resilient poverty'. Instead, what would be more desirable is to transform the system. In other cases, however, adaptation or transformation may not necessarily lead to better outcomes for everyone. We need, therefore, to think carefully about what kind of resilience we want to build. What does 'good' and 'bad' resilience look like? **Whose resilience, to what, and who decides? Policy makers need to be clear about these questions when using resilience to inform policy and practice.**

Resilience thinking is not strong on social dimensions. Resilience thinking still struggles with important social considerations. For instance there can be (and frequently are) trade-offs between different groups and/or individuals' resilience within the same system or the same community (e.g. some groups/individuals may strengthen their resilience to the detriment of other, more marginalised- groups/individuals). In other words, one person's resilience may contribute to another's vulnerability. **Policy makers and practitioners should therefore be aware that resilience is not an automatically pro-poor concept, and that resilience thinking does not ensure that the most marginal are systematically benefiting from resilience interventions.**

Resilience is not a theory of power. These issues around winners and losers in resilience interventions show that, if misapplied, resilience can skate over important dimensions of power, even when these help to explain why some groups are more resilient than others. It is not that we cannot use resilience thinking to explain why power relations implicit in persistent poverty can be resilient in themselves, but there has been little work in this area so far. **Having a grasp on power relations in areas of intervention is essential in order to avoid policy decisions or resilience interventions that inadvertently entrench poverty and exclusion, rather than reduce them**.

Resilience can also be co-opted. Different actors with divergent agendas can all sign up to a term like resilience, but pull in different directions. Sustainable development has often been accused of being used as a way to justify, rather than challenge, an unsustainable 'status quo'. Could the same fate befall 'resilient development'? Some argue already that the risk is there for existing initiatives to be relabelled in terms of resilience but without being designed to actually meet good resilience objectives. This partly depends on who defines resilience, and what they want to be resilient to. For instance, resilience is increasingly linked with economic growth, an issue which perhaps more than any other is simultaneously vaunted as the solution and the problem within development. **The difficult but necessary policy challenge is not to lose sight of these considerations in efforts to use resilience to bring different actors together.**

Box 3: Resilience in Ecuador

The project "Enhancing resilience of communities to the adverse effects of climate change on food security" in the Pichincha Province and the Jubones River Basin in Ecuador incorporates a resilience approach from its initial stages, seeking to integrate climate change adaptation and food security simultaneously. The project has two components. The first focuses on building capacity and knowledge management to ensure people do not lack food. The second includes the construction or rehabilitation of physical assets, to increase the adaptive capacity and resilience of both communities and ecosystems against climate change events.

The key features of the project include a strong focus on institutional coordination, ensuring that the programme is aligned with the government's food security and adaptation priorities. In terms of implementation both national and local authorities are involved and coordination between the different actors is actively encouraged. The project also aims for community participation and local capacity building, to achieve ownership and sustainable outcomes. In this way, a resilience approach builds on existing components and collaboration, rather than being seen as a 'new' magic bullet.

Source: Adaptation Fund. **https://www.adaptation-fund.org/project/1328-enhancing-resilience-communities-adverse-effects-climate-change-food-security-pichincha**

Making the Most of Resilience

Making the most of resilience

In order to make the most of resilience, we need to use it wisely. What does this entail?

Viewing resilience as opportunity, not panacea: There is no such thing as a universal, all-embracing solution when it comes to complex issues such as poverty. Resilience should therefore be treated with the same level of interest but also caution as any other concept: it is useful to better comprehend some issues but not others. It is also important not to reinvent the wheel but rather to integrate and combine resilience with what we already know and what is already working. A number of organisations are already starting to do this (see Box 3 for an example).

Plugging the gaps with complementary concepts: While resilience cannot, and should not, be expected to 'do everything', it can be used in conjunction with other approaches to improve results. In particular, vulnerability analysis can complement and strengthen resilience thinking – and vice versa, as vulnerability analysis is very much grounded in social, political and economic realities, and often seeks to capture the power relations that are missing in resilience thinking. Vulnerability, however, does not always manage to generate the holistic perspectives that resilience can provide; using both, therefore, is advisable.

Not regarding resilience simply as adaptation or transformation: Too often in the literature, resilience is reduced to the ability of people to adapt. However, as Figure 1 shows, resilience stems from the combination of (and the synergies between) three capacities: the capacity to smooth impacts of shocks, the capacity to adapt to these shocks, and the capacity to transform to new, more appropriate systems when necessary. Development interventions and policies are therefore likely to be most effective (in terms of long term impact) if they are grounded in all three elements.

Recommendations for effective resilience policy

Think more systematically in terms of 'good' and 'bad' forms of resilience, and 'political economy of resilience': This means being clear about the implications of resilience-focused interventions for the different actors and groups that are targeted and thereby creating development interventions and policies which do not enhance resilience at the expense of wellbeing.

Start putting resilience into practice effectively: The recent progress towards a better conceptual understanding of resilience needs to be complemented by similar efforts in getting better at implementing, measuring and monitoring resilience in ways that are most relevant to development objectives and in particular to poverty alleviation. Efforts to measure resilience are in their infancy, but early research has been presented by the Food Security and Nutrition Network. (See further readings box for details)

Develop a common framework and indicators that can be used across programmes and projects: All current resilience indicators derive from individual projects. To transcend this adhoc approach and establish the conditions for rigorous comparison and cross-learning, international community actors will need to unify their efforts, agree on and adopt a common framework and set of generic indicators.

Credits

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Further reading

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Read more on measuring resilience at http://fsnnetwork.org/document/measuring-resilience

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