

A conceptual analysis of livelihoods and resilience: addressing the ‘insecurity of agency’

Adam Pain and Simon Levine

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About the authors

Adam Pain is Visiting Professor at the Department of Urban and Rural Development, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Uppsala, Sweden, and Visiting Researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen.

Simon Levine is a Research Fellow with the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI).

Humanitarian Policy Group
Overseas Development Institute
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
United Kingdom

Tel. +44 (0) 20 7922 0300
Fax. +44 (0) 20 7922 0399
E-mail: hpgadmin@odi.org.uk
Website: <http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg>

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The concept of ‘resilience’ features prominently in mainstream aid discourse, where it is being used to frame discussions around climate change, social protection, sustainable development, macro-economic development and humanitarian responses to emergencies. The breadth of its application is seen as a potentially positive contribution in itself, with hopes that, by becoming a shared organising concept across many disciplines, resilience may help in breaking down the barriers between them. There is, in particular, an expressed hope that a focus on ‘resilience-building’ can help bridge the persistent and much-criticised divide between emergency response and development assistance.

Building resilience seems a common-sense reaction to mounting humanitarian needs in a world where many humanitarian crises are created, not by short-term emergencies that swiftly pass, but by long-term stresses. Six countries and territories¹ have been among the top ten recipients of international humanitarian assistance for at least nine years during the decade 2000–2009 (DI, 2011). ‘Resilience-building’ seems the obvious answer when emergency response is so often used to react to crises which were predicted and (perhaps) preventable, and where it is increasingly hard to make a sensible distinction between chronic and acute problems. This is reflected in the number of international organisations – donors, UN agencies and NGOs – that are presenting the problems of crisis-prone areas and their own objectives in the language of resilience. The European Union (EU) is seeking to make ‘increasing resilience ... a central aim of EU external assistance’ (EC, 2012) and the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) has committed to making resilience ‘a core part of the work of all [its] country offices’ and to ‘show international leadership on this important area of work’.² For ECHO, resilience is the ‘key to avoiding the increasingly frequent recurrence of severe food crises [in the Sahel region]’ (ECHO 2012), and the explicit goal of one of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)’s corporate priorities is ‘to enhance the resilience of livelihoods against threats and emergencies’ (FAO, 2011). Resilience brings relief and development efforts together where tens of millions of people are ‘vulnerable to recurring shocks that chronically devastate whole communities and reverse hard-won development gains’ (USAID, 2012); is the key to a coordinated strategy in Somalia (FAO, UNICEF and WFP 2012); and is the ‘hope’ for ‘a new vision

of an adapted aid approach’ (Gubbels, 2011). The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) sees resilience as a ‘critical element in promoting sustainable development [which] should be part of the international development agenda beyond 2015’. There are many other examples.

A further driver of ‘resilience-building’ emanates from concerns over the costs of emergency response, and there is an increasingly stated belief that crisis prevention, or interventions that can reduce risk or susceptibility to risk, are more cost-effective than humanitarian action (Venton and Siedenburg, 2010; Venton et al., 2012). The argument that the resources for humanitarian action are limited and insufficient to meet future needs has been made an explicit justification for giving increased attention to resilience-building (HERR, 2011).

Much of the soul-searching that has gone on recently has been accompanied by an explicit admission by many development and humanitarian actors that, though they feel certain that building resilience is the correct way forward, they are less sure what this entails or how to do it. Resilience is thus characterised at the same time as self-evidently common sense, and yet conceptually and programmatically elusive. This paper sets out to examine this paradox, and to explore what resilience might mean and what determines it in disasters, conflicts and complex emergencies. It aims to provide some conceptual clarity to inform more practically focused research on resilience, humanitarian action and livelihoods in situations of protracted and recurrent crisis.

At first sight, it seems surprising that so much of the discussion of resilience is taking place in humanitarian circles: hopes of resilience seem oddly placed in crisis- and disaster-prone areas. The paper starts, therefore, by outlining the rationale for a focus on disasters and resilience. This is followed by an outline of the key concepts associated with resilience, including vulnerability, risk and adaptive capacity. It concludes that, with respect to disasters, resilience, while limited as an analytical concept, has potential as a mobilising metaphor and ideal. A focus on people’s agency, their ability to make and follow through on their own plans in relation to socio-economic security, might constitute a core ingredient of resilience which is relevant to humanitarian action, and which can be openly assessed (Wood, 2007). The paper argues that, if humanitarian debates focus on reducing people’s vulnerability and enhancing their agency, rather than on building resilience, they will gain conceptual coherence.

¹ The six are Sudan, the occupied Palestinian territories, Iraq, Afghanistan, Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

² See <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/publications1/hum-emer-resp-rev-uk-gvmt-resp.pdf?epslanguage=en>.

Chapter 2

Why crises and resilience?

Emergency actors and analysts have struggled for many years to place emergency assistance within the broader context of preventing suffering following predictable and recurrent shocks and during protracted crises, using terminology such as ‘saving lives and livelihoods’ (Lautze, 1997; HPG, 2006), ‘linking relief, recovery and development’ (Ross et al., 1994; EC, 2001) and, most recently, ‘resilience’. In recent years disaster response has increasingly been set within disaster management more broadly, and more particularly disaster risk management (DRM). The concept of DRM makes disaster response an integral part of an overall framework that deals not only with early warning and preparedness for response, but also includes addressing vulnerability to risk. The acceptance of DRM as a mainstream paradigm for thinking about disasters is evidenced by the commitment by 168 countries to implement an action plan, the Hyogo Framework for Action (2005–2015),³ whose subtitle, ‘Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters’, makes clear the link it makes between disasters (and thus humanitarian action) and resilience, at least at an operational level.

The Hyogo Framework was from the start designed as an action plan, not a process for gaining more clarity in thinking about how DRM can best be achieved. Resilience too is very quickly becoming an organising principle for programming and fund allocation. The underlying assumption is presumably that we already understand DRM and resilience, know what to do and therefore need to make progress on the ground urgently. This paper questions this assumption. There is an easy charge that there is no need to over-theorise what is common sense, and that academic arguments have little to offer the difficult work that is needed on the ground. There is, though, a distinct danger in conducting practical work (elaborating policy, implementing interventions, doing empirical research) that is not based on explicit and coherent thinking. Decades of research and action on ‘poverty’, in particular the easy association between poverty and income, is instructive. Income has had enormous attraction, both as an indicator of poverty and as the target of poverty reduction efforts, because it is measurable, and can seemingly be measured from household to national level while maintaining the same meaning. It took many years before the non-income dimensions of poverty were properly recognised, and they remain of secondary concern even today, in part because it is much easier to measure income or assets objectively than it is to measure other dimensions of poverty, and in part because the apparent objectivity acquired by focusing on income rather than poverty makes it possible to appear apolitical

³ ‘Hyogo Framework for Action 2005–2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters’. Outcome of the World Conference on Disaster Reduction, Hyogo, Japan, 18–22 January 2005.

(or politically neutral). Apart from the common reluctance to engage with issues of power, professionals from many disciplines and backgrounds find that a politically neutral and ‘objective’ measurement lets them see themselves as working together towards a common goal. Much work on poverty has thus remained at the level of symptoms or trying to engineer outcomes directly, without seeking to question, for example, why those without assets lack them in first place.

Likewise with resilience: while it is fairly clear what a ‘lack of resilience’ looks like (even if it is less clear how to measure it), this is not the same as having the analytical clarity needed to guide policy, programming and budget allocations, and to have a measurable indicator of progress. Many questions remain, including:

- what constitutes resilience;
- whether resilience should be thought of at individual, community or societal level, or whether it should rather be thought of as a property of livelihood systems or ecosystems;
- the scale and timeframes it works within;
- the degree to which resilience is specific to particular risks, or whether it makes sense to talk of people or communities as ‘resilient’ generically;⁴
- whether resilience in the face of sudden-onset natural disasters amounts to the same thing as resilience in protracted and recurrent crises;
- how to measure resilience without it becoming what each person chooses to measure, or what is easily measurable;
- how and on what basis people address and respond to long-term stresses and threats, given that humanitarian aid may only make a relatively small contribution to the overall resources that households and populations in crisis can draw on; and
- whether humanitarian interventions contribute to, are irrelevant to or undermine such responses. Such an assessment will need to be based on the findings from empirical research.

What, though, should researchers look for and analyse?

2.1 Contesting the meaning of resilience

‘Resilience’ has been described as ‘the capacity of people or “systems” to cope with stresses and shocks by anticipating them, preparing for them, responding to them and recovering from them’ (HPG, 2011: 5). This definition is consistent with

⁴ As with vulnerability, most people agree in theory that one is either resilient against (or vulnerable to) a certain risk or problem, but in practice both ‘resilient’ and ‘vulnerable’ are most commonly used as generic properties.

others drawn from different perspectives and indicators of assessment, which put at their centre the concepts of ‘absorbing’, ‘accommodating’ and ‘responding to’ disturbance. Three widely used definitions illustrate this:

- ‘The capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while undergoing change’ (The Resilience Alliance, 2012).
- ‘The capacity of a system, community or society potentially exposed to hazards to adapt by resisting or changing in order to reach and maintain an acceptable level of functioning and structure’ (United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, 2005).
- ‘The ability of a social or ecological system to absorb disturbances while retaining the same basic structure and ways of functioning, the capacity for self-organisation, and the capacity to adapt to stress and change’ (The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2007).

Unlike the first definition quoted, these three mainstream definitions have in common a focus on ‘systems’ of a social or ecological nature, with no evident attention to the individual or the household. Resilience is thus seen to be a collective property – of the community rather than the individual.⁵ The RA and UNISDR definitions emphasise resilience in the face of disturbance and stress and the capacity to change and adapt – seeing resilience as a transformative capacity. The IPCC definition is more conservative, focusing more on retaining the same basic structures and functions: recovery to the *status quo ante*. Both transformative and more conservative expressions of resilience may be needed, and policy-makers may wish to prioritise them differently in different situations: definitions which elide these differences, though, do not assist in the making of such a judgement. DFID’s definition, emanating from a more obviously practical perspective, is thus clearly different:

Disaster Resilience is the ability of countries, communities and households to manage change, by maintaining or transforming living standards in the face of shocks or stresses – such as earthquakes, drought or violent conflict – without compromising their long-term prospects (DFID, 2011).

Not only is there no talk of ‘systems’, but both the transformative and conservative dimensions are explicitly included.

The term ‘resilience’ is widely used in the literature on crisis contexts. In many cases, it has been used almost as an equivalent to food security,⁶ frequently in conjunction with aid interventions. The 2010/11 food crisis in the Horn

⁵ This is a feature of at least six of the frameworks reviewed by Bahadur et al. (2010), discussed below.

⁶ Although ‘food security’ is often applied to people’s short-term ability to meet their food needs, it is supposed to refer to the degree of security people have that they will continue to be able to meet their needs (‘access ... at all times’).

of Africa and the 2011/12 crisis in the Sahel have again brought about a desire to see a permanent end to the cycle of food insecurity. This has frequently been presented in the language of resilience, for instance by the EU, the UN, donors and NGOs. The use of the term does not necessarily indicate any great conceptual shift. The World Bank’s social protection and labour strategy 2012–2022 is entitled ‘Resilience, equity and opportunity’, but the word resilience hardly appears in the text, and there is no discussion at all of what it means. The Inter-Agency Plan of Action for the Horn of Africa (IASC, 2011), intended to prevent a repeat of the 2011 food crisis, uses the language of resilience-building, while a not dissimilar document (UN, 2000) following a previous food security crisis did not mention the word ‘resilience’ even once.

Resilience is often employed descriptively rather than analytically, i.e. in a non-technical sense, as a simple opposite to vulnerability or even as a near-synonym of food security (see for example EC, 2012). In Afghanistan, the term has often been applied to stress how resilient local livelihoods have proved in the face of the enormous challenges since 1978, a proposition that is set against the core narrative driving much of the post-2001 humanitarian intervention, which is based on perceptions of destruction, collapse and impending famine caused by long-running conflict.

The agricultural production systems of Afghanistan can only be described as robust and resilient. For fourteen years, from 1978 to 1992, rural production systems in Afghanistan continued to support the remaining rural population under conditions of extreme difficulty. Although malnutrition and hunger were reported, this did not degenerate into ... catastrophic situations (UNDP, 1993).

Other scholars appear to be saying something similar. Fitzherbert (2006) argues that the unprecedented wheat harvest of 2003, which followed the long five-year drought from 1998, ‘demonstrated the robustness of indigenous farming systems’ and their proven ability to recover from crises ‘both those where natural hazards were the dominant causal factor and those brought about largely through human activity’. Pingali (2007) argues that the Afghans’ resilience was underappreciated by external agencies in the design of their interventions, commenting that:

[w]hile most interventions in Afghanistan concentrated on improving food availability through food aid and increasing agricultural inputs ... [a] close examination of access related issues reveals a gap in the understanding of the Afghan people’s extraordinary resilience ... Afghans have been anything but passive and static, adopting brilliant, innovate and unorthodox strategies to secure food, livelihoods and stability in a shifting and insecure environment.

Figure 1: Leach's distinction between stability, durability, resilience and robustness

Strategic response to events	Shocks (short-term)	Stresses (long-term)
Control	Stability	Durability
Response	Resilience	Robustness

On a quick reading, these three authors appear to be saying something similar and quite clear, using 'resilience' and 'robustness' interchangeably. However, on closer examination there are questions. Is it the same thing to describe the *production systems* of Afghanistan as resilient (UNDP and Fitzherbert) as to describe the *people* as resilient (Pingali)? In fact neither the health of a production system nor a skill in adapting necessarily relates to people's livelihoods or successful outcomes, if it is true that 'agriculture production is not necessarily a good proxy for the health of rural livelihoods. Statistics regarding the macro performance of the agriculture sector tell us very little about the everyday livelihoods for a range of Afghan populations' (Pain and Lautze, 2002). Is resilience the ability to avoid collapse (UNDP), the ability to recover (Fitzherbert) or the ability to adapt quickly, not measured by any specific outcome (Pingali)? If the term should be applicable to all three, does this imply a link between one kind of ability and another, and do they share the same determinants? Is the fact that Afghans have had to be extremely skilful just to survive evidence of their resilience, or their lack of it? If the ability to survive against the odds is considered as resilience, then analysis is also due of the long-term impact of such coping mechanisms, for instance on poverty reduction. If progress is retarded because people are being forced to take risk-avoiding measures (i.e. resilience), then the easy equation of resilience with the ability to resist and to bounce back and progress should be challenged.

Leach (2008) argues that there is a need to differentiate⁷ between responses to shocks (short-term disturbances to an otherwise constant trajectory) and responses to stresses (long-term disturbances to what was normal). The distinction makes intuitive sense because it is reasonable to imagine that people will try to cope with a problem in a different way if they expect their previous normal conditions to resume after a short time. Leach also distinguishes two types of response: one is to resist the problem so that the status quo can be maintained despite the shock or stress (which she calls 'control'); the second is more dynamic, involving some form of adaptive change or transformation ('response'). Leach suggests that four different terms (resilience, durability, stability and robustness) should be used to distinguish between four kinds of situation, covering what people are responding to and how (see Figure 1), in order to avoid 'conflat[ing] different kind of dynamics'; 'resilience' she reserves specifically for an *adaptive* response to *shocks*, as implied by the Resilience Alliance definition.

Which words should be used for each of the four intersections

⁷ It is accepted that, from the perspective of complex emergencies, such distinctions can be difficult to make since such circumstances often combine hazards layered over long-term stresses.

in Figure 1 may be a matter of semantics. It is not semantics, though, to argue that, whichever terminology is used, an analysis of people's ability to deal with crises must be capable of distinguishing between these very different situations and responses. People (both those affected by the shock and external actors trying to assist them) must make decisions about whether or not the previous status quo is likely to be re-established relatively quickly, and thus whether they need to develop (or support) short-term coping strategies, or whether new livelihood and other strategies will be necessary in a new future. For an external agency, just as for the people affected by crises, it is important to consider that what helps people's livelihoods to remain constant in the face of difficulties (e.g. their assets or institutions, policy or interventions) may be the very same factor which constrains their ability to adapt. The engagement of a climate change perspective in the resilience debate has heightened awareness of this dilemma, because of its attention to the problem of maladaptation (i.e. strategies which help people to deal with the pressures of change in the short term, but in ways which undermine their ability to adapt in the longer term). It may only be possible with hindsight to know which strategy is 'better': investment in what Leach calls 'durability' (helping people affected by stresses to maintain their existing livelihood strategies), or investment in 'robustness' (helping people to change their overall strategies before it is too late).

There is sometimes a presumption, seen also in the language used to describe the different approaches, that adaptation, flexibility, ingenuity – e.g. Pingali's 'brilliant, innovate and unorthodox strategies', above – are what resilience is ideally about. The tendency to glorify change and adaptation needs to be tempered, since it is not necessarily evidence of resilience. As the discussion on Afghanistan makes clear, households have been extremely dynamic, moving in and out of opium poppy cultivation, migrating and diversifying, but their basic economic circumstances have not improved over a decade (Kantor and Pain, 2011). Young et al. (2009) talk of adaptive practices by the Northern Rizaygat, including militarisation and the use of intimidation and violence, to cope with loss of access to resources. These may be the only choices available, but these adaptations have been short-term, quick-return activities serving simply to keep people alive: not only have they not changed the circumstances of their marginalisation, but they have fuelled further conflict. This represents a heavy discounting of the future in order to be able to survive in the present. This brings out the need to consider resilience by reference to the range of opportunities available, their risks and their long-term implications for personal security, a point taken up at greater length below.

Box 1: The resilience of institutions

Because vulnerability is so often linked to the way in which power is exercised by institutions, external agencies have often tried either to create new institutions or to enforce changes to existing institutions in order to effect a positive and permanent change in the way in which society works at a local level. However, such social engineering does not follow simple rules of cause and effect. The attempt to introduce new 'rules of the game' frequently does not lead to a displacement of the existing rules. This has been seen in a multitude of contexts. Rules intended to change gender power relations on councils by stipulating a minimum quota for women's membership have been shown to achieve token presence, but not necessarily to affect male domination of the agenda, which is based on deep-seated relationship-based 'rules' (Kapampara, 2000). In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), research on the formation of village committees by an NGO in South Kivu to manage community reconstruction projects has found that powerful individuals such as chiefs and church leaders exert disproportionate influence over the committees (Bailey, 2011). In Afghanistan, too, the same process of institutional 'bricolage' was evident, whereby new institutions transplanted over existing ones, both at the village or government level, simply became subject to the older 'rules of the game' (Pain and Kantor, 2010: 35). Existing institutions adapt to new circumstances, but without fundamentally changing their nature. There may be widespread evidence of adaptation and change in external form, but this does not necessarily do much to change basic patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

Two further comments need to be made. First, there is, as with social capital, a dark side to resilience, in the sense that social systems that are hierarchical, unequal and exploitative (as they are in different ways in, for instance, Uganda, the DRC and Afghanistan) can show considerable resilience and robustness. The persistence of authoritarian regimes illustrates this. In this sense resilience cannot be treated as a normative and necessarily desirable concept; resilience simply seeks to assess whether or not a system shows capacity to respond to shocks or stresses. As Adger notes (2008: 5) 'systems that generate outcomes that are desirable or undesirable can be equally resilient'. It follows that interventions cannot simply seek to 'build resilience'

without analysing the nature of resilience and its outcomes, to assess whether or not it is desirable. In contrast, the term 'vulnerability' can be used in a more simple normative way, in that it refers specifically to susceptibility to harm from a specified threat. Accordingly it is misleading to treat resilience and vulnerability as different sides of the same coin. Second, neither adaptation nor resilience can simply be read off by reference to outward characteristics, nor can change in people's level of resilience be read off by reference to simple evidence of change. As the examples in Box 1 illustrate, even though the form of an institution may change, it remains to be analysed whether or not change has been brought to people's lives. Both these observations reinforce the conclusion that 'resilience-building' can never be programmed from a checklist: there is (unfortunately) no substitute for in-depth livelihood, institutional and power analysis, and then the use of judgement to inform action.

It was noted earlier how resilience has been used both as a quality of production systems and of people's livelihoods. Here too, the demand for clarity is not semantic. In treating vulnerability, some authors (e.g. Wisner et al., 2004) specifically reserve the term 'vulnerability' for application to individuals or people, and employ terms such as 'fragile' or 'hazardous' to describe livelihoods or settlement locations at risk. This is not simply to keep the term analytically precise for its own sake, but to recognise the socially differentiated nature of vulnerability within any population or community sharing the same settlement and livelihood type. The importance of making this distinction in reference to resilience is illustrated by Alinovi et al. (2011)'s analysis of the resilience of different population groups in Kenya. Using a variety of quantified indicators of resilience, the study concluded that pastoralists were the least resilient population group in Kenya, largely because they suffered marginalisation and had the worst access to health and education services. This may appear a reasonable conclusion strictly on the terms of the authors' model, but it would be positively dangerous if policy development were informed by a reading of this conclusion that conflated the lack of resilience of these people (i.e. the pastoralists living in specific places) with a lack of resilience of their livelihood system (pastoralism). Their livelihood system is arguably the most resilient possible in their circumstances, in areas where people are exposed to the most risks and where they suffer the worst political and economic marginalisation.

Chapter 3

Resilience frameworks

In facing natural disasters, it is important how well people (or businesses, services etc.) can withstand them. This kind of resilience may not need to be transformative if the status quo is acceptable, and the concern is to maintain it. Resilience may mean that people (and businesses, services, etc.) can continue how they live and work without having to adapt, or it may mean that they are capable of adapting: what makes them resilient is being able to maintain or quickly recover their well-being or their functioning. Work on DRR supports this kind of resilience, which is also the focus of much attention in climate change adaptation.

In protracted and recurrent crises, in fragile and conflict-affected states and in situations of extreme poverty, powerlessness and marginalisation, enthusiasm for the concept of resilience is motivated at least in part by a desire to move beyond maintaining a status quo which is regarded as unacceptable, and to make constant emergency relief aid a thing of the past. Although one of the attractions of the concept, as discussed above, is precisely the hope that it can provide a common framework that can give common goals to communities of practice working on very different agendas (social protection, sustainable livelihoods, climate change adaptation, DRR etc.), this assumes that these different areas have enough in common that they can be grouped together under the same umbrella term.

How have resilience frameworks addressed change without transformation? In a review of 16 conceptualisations of resilience developed in relation to climate change and disasters, Badahur et al. (2010) draw attention to the different levels at which they were positioned, their components, key characteristics and potential indicators, and in particular how resilience was seen in relation to vulnerability. Of the 16 conceptualisations only three (Manyena, 2006; Mayunga, 2007 and Twigg, 2007) specifically focus on resilience in relation to disasters. The other 13 talk more in terms of graduated change and disturbance.

The analysis of Badahur et al. points not only to the widespread use of the concept at different levels of analysis, but also to the deployment of a diverse range of overlapping meanings. Different understandings of the term lead to the selection of different clusters of components that might contribute to resilience, the identification of different characteristics of resilience to focus on and consequently the selection of different indicators of resilience outcomes. Many use 'the community' as the unit of analysis, but also recognise that resilience needs to be addressed across different scales or levels. The relationship between vulnerability and resilience is also contested. Many treat vulnerability and resilience

as opposites (see for example Twigg, 2007), while others (see for example Manyena, 2006) do not. There is also a lack of consensus on the relationship between adaptive capacity and resilience. Some treat adaptive capacity more as the ability to be resilient, while others see it more as learning in response to disturbances, and there is a lack of consensus on the conceptual overlap between adaptation (as outcome) and adaptive capacity (as process). In summary, there is no consensus on exactly how resilience should be conceptualised, approached and assessed. The implication is that agencies will have to tread carefully in designing interventions to address 'resilience'-building.

Furthermore, in all of the conceptualisations there is a bias towards those characteristics that are seen to capture or reflect good resilience *outcomes* (rather than the causes of a lack of resilience – a point returned to later). Bahadur et al. (2010) attempt to capture the generic features of 'resilient systems' in a set of ten points (summarised in Box 2) by using the ten most common elements of resilience frameworks. Many of these features (effective governance, structure promoting community cooperation, diverse livelihood opportunities) are however frequently absent in protracted and recurrent crises or conflicts, and as a result they offer little insight into sub-optimal coping or survival practices in crises. Such practices might not be progressive or transformative in their outcomes, but they constitute the context and the problems that many interventions that seek to build resilience will need to work on. This is another example of how conceptualising resilience through a description of its idealised state, without addressing underlying causes of resilience (or the lack thereof) makes it much less useful for practitioners.

Box 2: Ten main characteristics of resilient systems

- High levels of diversity
- Effective governance and institutions which may enhance community cohesion
- Existence of uncertainty and change, including non-linear change
- Community involvement
- Preparedness activities about living with rather than resisting change
- A high degree of social and economic equity within the systems
- The importance of social values and structures in promoting community cooperation and equity
- Recognition of non-equilibrium dynamics
- Continual and effective learning
- Resilience as a multilevel property

Source: Bahadur et al., 2010.

As noted above, three of the resilience frameworks reviewed by Bahadur et al. (2010) specifically address resilience in relation to disaster, and are grounded more at the community and household level, which is where the humanitarian focus is. Twigg (2007) outlines an approach to applying the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) by developing a checklist for characterising what a disaster-resilient community might look like, built around the five thematic areas in Hyogo, namely governance, risk assessment, knowledge and education, risk management and vulnerability reduction, and disaster preparedness and response. While acknowledging that the notion of a disaster-resilient community is an ideal, the concept of resilience that is deployed strongly emphasises the agency element of response: ‘a focus on resilience means putting greater emphasis on what communities can do for themselves and how to strengthen their capacities, rather than concentrating on their vulnerability to disaster or their needs in an emergency’ (p. 6). Accordingly, the kind of community resilience which can be supported by an HFA approach is seen in terms of the capacities of communities to:

- Absorb stress or destructive forces through resistance or adaptation.
- Manage or maintain certain basic functions and structures during disastrous events.
- Recover or bounce back after an event.

The Hyogo framework, though, treats each of the five dimensions separately, reflecting the lack of a conceptual framework that would link them analytically or causally. Against each of these thematic areas relevant components are identified, against which the characteristics of a resilient community can be scored or assessed. The approach to resilience-building derives from action planning, assuming a rational planning framework and a set of normative assumptions about how things should be. Its primary concern is with natural disasters and it works within a framework where the notion of risk is treated as an objective reality that can be assessed, with disaster as a random and unpredictable outcome of such a risk. Progress towards ‘resilience’ is seen as a set of technocratic steps, from awareness through willingness and action to the development of solutions and finally ‘the development of a culture of safety amongst all stakeholders, where DRM is embedded in all relevant policy, planning, practices, attitudes and behaviour’ (Twigg, 2007). However, the conceptual framework of the Hyogo action plan – an undifferentiated ‘community’, a lack of attention to why communities might be exposed to risk in the first place, disasters as natural events and an assumption of a benevolent, technocratically competent state – makes it, and any resilience framework derived from it, a poor fit to the reality of most complex emergencies.

For resilience approaches to offer help that is analytically or practically useful for engagement in complex emergencies, a number of challenges need to be faced. First, although academics have written about the concept theoretically, this has

often been disconnected from the discussions of practitioners, so there is still a need for greater practical clarity over core concepts and terms. The everyday use of the term (which, for example, does not worry about whether or not resilience and vulnerability are exactly opposites) may not be precise enough to aid analysis, which will have a practical impact on the coherence of interventions and policies. If the same terms are deployed in different ways, using different instruments of assessment without this being clearly understood, then it will be impossible to develop a clear strategy, since different types of interventions and policies will be developed, which will not all speak to the same issues.

Second, the focus in the analytical stage must move away from symptoms, i.e. from saying what would characterise a more resilient system or community, and instead must help analyse the means by which this can be achieved. An over-reliance on technocratic instruments of planning, as described for the HFA above, means at best a focus on the proximate causes of lack of resilience, rather than the underlying processes that lead to lack of resilience in the first place. These underlying causes may indeed include deficiencies in the technocratic instruments, or in the political decision behind them. It is generally true that problems are usually best addressed by giving attention to their underlying causes (except in the most urgent situations where symptoms need direct attention), but this is particularly true for addressing ‘lack of resilience’, because of what resilience describes: not an immediate set of assets but a long-term capacity, a future ability to cope with future possible problems. In addressing other problems, such as food and nutritional security or access to health care, the outcome or ‘the symptom’ is what is ultimately important to the individuals concerned, even if this can only be changed fundamentally by addressing its underlying causes. This is different for resilience, which is really a property of the deeper underlying conditions: there can be no immediate measurable ‘outcome’ or ‘symptom’ of such a latent capacity except with hindsight. The technocratic approach to engineering an outcome will also downplay, or even marginalise, one of the ingredients of resilience, people’s capacity to find their own solutions. Relying on an engineered solution becomes more dangerous the less a risk can be fully predicted. Attempts at providing engineered solutions are also themselves subject to the same issues of power and politics which attention to underlying causes will have to engage with.

This leads to the third change needed in the resilience discussions within various communities of practice in the broader aid world. In most of the literature, discussions and conversations of aid practitioners there is a strong bias towards the resilience of *communities* at risk. Yet conceptualising resilience at the level of communities leaves no room for analysing the constraints to choice and action that might exist because of power inequalities and exclusion *within* the community. Cannon (2008) argues for the importance of understanding the power relationships within ‘communities’

even when dealing with resilience to natural disasters. Fourth, more attention is needed to multiple or repetitive events and to long-drawn-out conflicts, where uncertainty and risk are pervasive. Fifth, frameworks need to become less static and linear, and better able to explore the interactive effects and drivers of resilience (or lack of resilience) operating at multiple levels. This means having an understanding of resilience that facilitates an analysis of how changes at, for example, national or community level affect the resilience of households and individuals. This is an important area of research, given the increasing attention being given to protracted crises (e.g. FAO and WFP, 2010) and fragile and conflict-affected states (e.g. World Bank 2011; IDPS, 2012). These rely on assumptions or hypotheses about the interplay between forces at local and national level, for instance how increasing employment can bring improved livelihoods at household level and building stronger relations between citizens and their governments, which in turn creates more stable, less fragile states that favour longer-term peace, economic growth – and resilience. There is an urgent need for empirical research and critical analysis to illuminate the conditions under which these processes do or do not play out in this way. There is a need too to understand whether, in different situations, the increasing resilience of a state or a community supports or detracts from the resilience of different households, and the extent to which the various desired outcomes (peace, growth and poverty reduction, resilience) are genuinely mutually reinforcing or even compatible.⁸

Running through this discussion of resilience have been a number of key themes related to questions of agency and choice, risk, adaptation, levels of analysis (household and community) and time. The next section moves on to argue that the connection between these core themes can provide an analytical lens to give substance to the concept of resilience.

3.1 Agency and socio-economic security: a route to resilience?

A key conclusion from the discussion so far is that, while resilience has value as an organising concept or mobilising metaphor, analytically it has rather less traction unless the discussion can move to one of understanding *agency* and the capacity of people to act. This, it will be argued, is particularly relevant to many humanitarian crises, but can best be approached by first considering the nature of agency in relation to socio-economic security (used in the wider sense of human security) and giving it, as Wood argues (2007: 109), a ‘strong sense of time, opportunity, choice and risk’. This means building on what we know about what poor people do to attempt to gain socio-economic security. The discussion

draws on literature that is less frequently quoted within humanitarian discussions, but, it will be argued, will give humanitarian discourse the opportunity for more insightful analysis of its own work in relation to the agency of people affected by crises.

Humanitarian actors have often had difficulty in addressing ‘agency’, since people’s own goals and strategies cut across the sectoral objectives of aid organisations. Apart from the difficulties which many agencies have in supporting people’s own priorities where those differ from those of the aid organisation, or where they do not easily fit into organisational mandates, dealing with agency also presents practical difficulties for monitoring and evaluation, because people will use their agency in diverse and unpredictable ways; and for analysis, because sectorally-focused assessment tools do not easily provide the information needed to understand how people are trying to plan for themselves. A way forward may be to start the discussion away from the everyday humanitarian concepts which struggle with ‘agency’, and instead use the concept of welfare regimes (Gough and Wood, 2004). This analytical framework takes the institutional landscape to include not just the state but also the market, communities and households. A welfare state is supposed to protect people from threats and risks, including market forces (and in particular threats arising from the labour market). Households thus achieve formal ‘welfare’, relying on a mixture of market and state protection mechanisms. Among the features which are seen to be implicit in this model are the separation of the state from the market and individuals and the existence of boundaries, rules, rights and obligations which establish degrees of order, fairness and *predictability*.

Where there is conflict, or where the state is weak and there is an environment of acute risk and uncertainty, households have to seek security and welfare through informal means. This informal security regime is frequently characterised by pervasive and deep patron–client relations marked by strong hierarchies and inequalities of power. Extreme ‘leakiness’ between institutions, a characteristic of informal security regimes, blends the informal with the formal and provides individuals and communities with opportunities to promote, secure and reward self-interest in the market or state, and thereby gain and consolidate their position and reinforce patronage. Many protracted crises take place in such contexts.

Informal security regimes provide limited informal rights – but at a cost. Other situations are characterised as ‘insecurity regimes’, because they are essentially destructive of household coping mechanisms and informal rights. Outside narrow ties of ascribed identities, they generate levels of insecurity that few informal security mechanisms can withstand or evade, processes of exclusion and the creation of suffering and personal insecurity (Bevan, 2004). Where the state provides or guarantees security and order and the provision of basic

⁸ Growth in particular needs to be distinguished from resilience, since the two may be mutually antagonistic. Apart from its less than perfect identity with poverty reduction, growth is also distinguished more and more from ‘development’ in the context of climate change (e.g. Cannon and Mueller-Mahn, 2010).

needs the individual can act (within the rules) to further their interests. This is the normative position associated with rights and is seen to provide the basis for the ‘freedom to act’. In situations of conflict, or where states do not guarantee rights and security in its widest sense, people’s efforts at coping are not so much an expression of their ‘freedom to act’, but can be understood more usefully as seeking *freedom from* threats, risks and hazards (Wood, 2007). Since security is dependent on others, individual autonomy is constrained. There is therefore a correlation or link between the nature of the welfare regime and the degree of autonomy that individuals can secure (Table 1). This difference between ‘freedom from’ and ‘freedom to’ should be critical for a discussion of resilience. Interventions designed to improve the livelihoods of individuals (or households) often try to expand the opportunities which people will be ‘free to’ undertake (e.g. by supporting them with assets or training or supporting social organisation). Factors which constrain these opportunities may be analysed and addressed, but care must also be taken to address more basic constraints that emanate from people’s lack of freedom from various risks. Where people depend heavily on others, and where they can only rely on support by playing certain social roles, the dangers of trying to break out of these roles may be too great, unless the rewards for trying are both significant and certain. This dependence can take many forms, from patron–client relations to approval-seeking behaviour by certain ethnic groups and even a reluctance to try innovations in agricultural methods, where those who try to do things differently are seen as setting themselves above their elders (Ludi et al., 2011).

The failure of the state to provide security or to function effectively and impartially gives rise to a context of acute risk and uncertainty. There is increasing recognition of how significant exposure to risk, and the lack of means to cope with it, are as causes of both the perpetuation of poverty and the creation of poverty traps (Dercon, 2006, Dercon et al., 2007). Households are constrained by their inability to suffer risk or by deep poverty, so that in order to survive they have to forego opportunities that might offer routes out of poverty, including some opportunities that external interventions seek to provide.

Risks, in other words, are not always best described in terms of shocks or even stresses, but sometimes emanate from the structural dimensions of society, such as inequalities and exclusion. Taken as a whole, the risk environment leads to the creation of chronic uncertainty, where the future has to be heavily discounted for survival in the present. In the technical terminology of food security, such strategies, by which people buy immediate survival at a longer-term cost, are called ‘distress strategies’ rather than ‘coping strategies’, because the longer-term negative implications of their actions are evidence that they are failing to cope. This analysis shows that distress strategies, far from being considered only as an extreme reaction to a severe shock, are a common

everyday response by which people guarantee their security even in normal times. Under conditions of a weak state and market failure, the only source of socio-economic security and ‘freedom from’ threats is to be found in the social relationships that can be established within the household and community. If the nature of those social relationships is exploitative, security can come at the cost of autonomy.

Much of the research on chronic poverty in Africa and Asia points to the dependent nature of poorer people on richer people for their security, and the importance of investment in social resources to secure and maintain social relationships that can offer a degree of socio-economic security. For example, Kantor and Pain (2010) argue that it is only through the building of such social relationships that poor people can achieve a degree of predictability in their lives. But the nature and quality of the relationships that can be established are highly variable and diverse: some established between relative equals can be mutually beneficial; others entered into from different resource positions may be highly unequal. While these social relationships may provide informal, non-codified rights and security, they require for the poor, as Wood puts it (2003), a Faustian bargain whereby short-term security is traded for long-term vulnerability. This ‘adverse incorporation’ (Wood and Gough, 2006:1699) perpetuates clientelism.

An example from Afghanistan illustrates the point. In a village near Kandahar in the south, a poor household lost access to land they had been sharecropping for 20 years because the landlord gave the land to a relative. The explanation given by the wife shows how entirely dependent the household was on the landholder for work and credit:

[the landlord] used to say ‘You have to work on my lands honestly. If you do so, then you will be working on my lands forever. If you do not, then I will take my lands in two weeks’. [My sons] used to work on his lands and in another place too. The landlord didn’t like that and he took his land away. We couldn’t argue with him anymore. He is powerful and also has wealth; we are afraid if someday we were to ask him for credit, he will deny it to us (Pain, 2010a: 37).

There are similar examples from other societies, where poor relations have to sacrifice their own independence in order to pay for dependency on their rich relatives; where immigrant or minority populations are tolerated as long as they know their place (and remain cheerful about it); and in the dependence of married women on their husbands in much of the world, where an attempt to claim equality may threaten economic survival. Not only does the example from Afghanistan illustrate the issue of socio-economic differentiation within villages and different levels of choice and agency between rich and poor people, but it also questions whether ‘resilience’ at the household level and ‘resilience’ at the village or community level can be commensurate. There is evidence (again from Afghanistan:

Pain and Kantor, 2011) that points to considerable differences between villages with respect to the degree of socio-economic differentiation, the level of public good provision and the behaviour of elites. Under conditions of relative resource scarcity and limited economic differentiation, where even the elite can be insecure, a moral economy and mutual support can be found. However, under conditions of resource richness and a high degree of economic differentiation the most extreme forms of adverse incorporation are likely to be present. In such contexts, 'building the resilience of the community' may in fact undermine the already limited resilience of the least powerful and the poorest.

All the above points to the fact that, for many people, choices are severely circumscribed, risks are high, autonomy is limited and time preferences are short. This does not mean that there is no capacity to act: people always have some degree of agency, as the spread of opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan and the changing activities of the Northern Rizaygat evidence. Although these examples border on the illicit or self-destructive, Jaspars and O'Callaghan (2010) and South et al. (2012) document how, under conditions of conflict, people have adopted practices that promote their safety and dignity, albeit often at the expense of their livelihoods. South et al. conclude that:

the biggest contribution to people's survival and protection stems from their own activities based on an often detailed and sophisticated understanding of the threats and challenges they face. In particular, community resilience, cohesion and solidarity, combined with good, strong local leadership, are crucial for the protection of the community.

Agency, then, cannot simply be read by whether or not people have room for strategising nor, as has already been

discussed, can it be equated with their skill in doing so. The ability of individuals, households and communities to gain (relative) protection and security in the short term and their capacity to envisage and plan for the longer term is often severely constrained, and it is the nature of those constraints and *what* people are forced to trade off that indicate their degree of agency. In many situations, the best that people can strive for is a very conservative interpretation of resilience, with no possibility of transforming their lives, because they have limited choices and short-term horizons. Shifts in any of the dimensions of their risk landscape, their future horizons (i.e. how far ahead they can plan and make trade-offs) and the degree of choice they enjoy would indicate a move along the spectrum from dependency to autonomous security and the freedom to act. This spectrum and these three dimensions, rather than approaches that focus only on assets, may offer a more useful tool by which the effects and impacts of humanitarian interventions on resilience could be assessed.

3.2 Assessing agency and enhancing socio-economic security

It has been argued that, to increase resilience, the focus for assessment and interventions should be on enhancing people's agency. Wood (2007) outlines seven principles for increasing agency and enhancing socio-economic security, set out in Table 1. The overall list may seem utopian, particularly in the kinds of contexts humanitarian agencies typically confront. It is nonetheless suggested that change in one or more of these measures would indicate increased agency and enhanced socio-economic security.

Most of these principles are self-explanatory, and just two of them need additional comment. It is worth drawing out the

Table 1: Seven principles for reducing the insecurity of agency and enhancing socio-economic security

Principles	Rationale
1. Alteration of time preference behaviour	Reducing the discount rate on the future, foregoing present consumption to manage future risks
2. Enhanced capacity to prepare for hazards	Forms of 'insurance', formal or informal and public good provision to insulate against hazards
3. Improving the quality of informal rights	Increasing the scope, reliability and quality of informal rights and thus reducing uncertainty
4. De-clientalisation	Reducing the unequal dependency of clients on their patrons and enhancing autonomy, including social ties of equal power
5. Enlarging choice and risk pool	Reducing the clustering of interlinked activities and expanding into others with a low covariance of risk
6. Strengthening for poor of well-functioning collective institutions	Expanded access and rights in informal institutions at the community level
7. Improvement of the quality and predictability of institutional performance	Expanding access and rights in formal institutions including those of the market

Source: Adapted from Wood, 2007: 122–32

importance of the first of these principles, which addresses changes in the degree to which vulnerable people have to sacrifice longer-term welfare for short-term gain (in economic terms, the degree to which the future is 'discounted'). The more people are able to think about the future and invest for it, the more they are able to reverse the relationship and trade present consumption for future benefit. This ability to plan and invest (including investment against future possible crises) is a good measure of greater agency, and, we would argue, what aid actors are really interested in when they talk about resilience.

The fifth principle addresses a primary characteristic of insecurity, and several authors and several resilience frameworks recognise diversified livelihoods as a component of resilience. (See for example Alinovi et al., 2010; Ekblom, 2012; Lin, 2001, to name just a few. Many agencies treat diversified livelihoods and resilience as close to synonymous,

e.g. USAID⁹ and the UN.¹⁰) Two comments can be made. First, not all diversification will necessarily lead to risk reduction. What is important is the degree to which livelihoods activities are interlinked, i.e. are vulnerable to the same threats. The risk profile is lowered if people diversify into unrelated activities with low 'covariance' of risk (i.e. whose ups and downs are not related). Second, there are economic arguments that specialisation brings benefits. There are costs to a household needing to undertake a dozen different kinds of income-generating activities, as the poor frequently have to do. Paradoxically, diversification can itself be both a way to gain some minimal resilience, and also a sign of a lack of resilience, the result of a necessary but unfortunate trade-off – the need to discount the future, to buy survival insurance by spreading risk at the cost of prosperity through greater specialisation and investment in the most profitable activities.

⁹ See for example <http://www.usaid.gov/what-we-do/working-crises-and-conflict/disaster-risk-reduction-o/diversified-livelihoods-o>.

¹⁰ See for example UN, 2012.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

The argument has been made that, while the concept of resilience has value in setting a strategic direction and an agenda for what needs to be worked towards, analytically it is less useful given the lack of agreement on what it means, how it should or can be assessed and its focus on symptoms. From the perspective of those engaged in development efforts broadly (including social protection, DRR and climate change adaptation) or emergency relief, resilience may be approached quite differently in situations where the concern is to support people's ability to maintain their well-being in the face of possible problems (the concern of much work in DRR and climate change adaptation) and situations where people live locked into unacceptable situations, and where it would be wrong to characterise as their 'resilience' anything which did not include a significant transformation of their current situation.

This paper argues that many of the core ideas that underlie resilience frameworks – agency, choice, risk and adaptation – can be reworked to engage better with the substance of what these mean in the everyday life of people in these insecure and crisis contexts. It has been proposed that what characterises the lives of such people is a lack of freedom from fear, which severely constrains their ability for autonomous action – the freedom to act independently. In the contexts in which they

lead their lives – weak or failed states and unruly markets – the opportunities for autonomous security do not exist; rather, what characterises their lives at best is dependent security, which is bought at the cost of autonomy. Attempts to assess their resilience, or progress in building their resilience, which focus on certain predetermined dimensions of their lives will inevitably mislead, because people are constantly forced to choose between meeting different basic needs, and because of the variety of their plans and strategies. Rather than seeing resilience in particular choices or abilities, their resilience can best be seen through the range of choices which they are able to make, and the degree to which they can make informed choices about their own futures. This would entail a shift in the focus of humanitarian and development actors, from measuring specific behaviour, assets or other symptoms, to looking instead at people's 'agency', their ability to make their own choices. The central guide for developing policy, designing interventions and analysing their impact could then become to reduce as far as possible the degree to which people live in 'dependent security', and the degree to which they can be helped to have greater 'autonomous security'. This would also ensure that policy and interventions are properly grounded in the lives of the people affected by crises, and in their wider political-economy context.

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Humanitarian Policy Group
Overseas Development Institute
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
United Kingdom

Tel. +44 (0) 20 7922 0300
Fax. +44 (0) 20 7922 0399
E-mail: hpgadmin@odi.org.uk
Website: <http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg>