RESILIENCE:

FROM CONCEPTUALIZATION TO EFFECTIVE INTERVENTION

Policy Brief for Humanitarian and Development Agencies[1]

Background

There is a growing interest in the framing of humanitarian and development activity with respect to the concept of resilience[2]. A number of funders and development agencies have formulated explicit policy frameworks for promoting a resilience-based approach to their work[3]. These identify a number of themes and principles for humanitarian and development assistance framed in terms of resilience.

Some of these reflect ideas familiar from previous formulations (e.g. 'foster[ing] host country ownership' [USAID] or 'building on local relations and new partnerships' [DFID]). Other ideas, however, reflect a more distinctive approach to assistance, such as the conceptualization of 'reaction to disturbance' reflecting the potential of communities to not only recover from shocks but to 'bounce back better' [DFID].

Drawing from across a broad range of contexts, perspectives and disciplines, we propose a core definition as follows:

> 'Resilience is the process of harnessing biological, psychosocial, structural, [environmental] and cultural resources to sustain wellbeing'[2]

Whether adopting this definition or some variant, many questions regarding resilience typically remain unanswered. Specifically, this policy brief seeks to address the following three questions:

- What is distinctive in a resilience-based approach?
- What are the practical implications for programming of such an approach?
- How can the impact of resilience-based approaches be evaluated?

"While a resilience framework usefully pulls us away from risk and deficits, it is not useful if we remain conceptually hazy, empirically light, and methodologically lame." [2]

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[1] This Policy Brief was initially drafted for an IRC Strategic Planning meeting held on 6 May 2013. Comments are welcome to inform the revision of the document for planned wider circulation.

[2] Panter-Brick & Leckman (2013) *JCPP*, 54(4):333-6; Ager (2013) *JCPP*, 54(4):488-500.

[3] e.g. DFID (2011) Defining Disaster Resilience: A DFID Approach Paper; UNICEF (2011). Fostering Resilience, Protecting Children: UNICEF in Humanitarian Action; USAID (2012) Building Resilience to Recurrent Crisis: USAID Policy and Program Guidance.

What is distinctive in a resilience-based approach?

Reflecting on research from a wide range of perspectives and contexts, a number of elements of an approach founded upon principles of resilience can be identified. In particular, work informed by the perspective of resilience may be characterized by:

PRO-CAPACITIES EMPHASIS: An emphasis on strengths, resources, and capacities rather than deficits

While concepts of vulnerability and risk remain important, a resilience-based approach is marked by a significantly greater emphasis on strengths, resources and capacities. Interventions focus on the identification and promotion of these resources. Facilitating strategic access to resources – through processes such as navigation and negotiation – is a key element of a resilience approach.

PREVENTIVE FOCUS: Anticipation of actions that reduce the impact of adversity

Drawing upon principles inherent in a Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) approach, analysis seeks to anticipate potential 'shocks' and develop though collective planning and action capacities that are particularly relevant to such threats. This focus on prevention or mitigation leads to better integration of 'development' with humanitarian relief.

MULTI-LEVEL ANALYSIS: Attention to multiple levels of influence ranging from the structural and cultural through to the community and the individual

A resilience approach calls attention to the many 'layers' of resources relevant to recovery and development. While some actors may appropriately focus interventions on individual and household resources, and others address more structural or institutional factors, all levels represent relevant points of leverage and influence. As Eggerman and Panter-Brick have demonstrated (see right) this necessitates understanding physical, psychosocial, economic, and moral dimensions of resilience across cultures.

SYSTEMS ORIENTATION: Mapping influences within ecologically-nested systems

Resilience-based approaches do more than list the wide range of factors influencing outcomes at multiple levels; they emphasize linkages and dynamic systems, where a change in one factor influences another. The systemic inter-relationship of factors is perhaps most clearly understood with respect to agricultural systems and the natural environment (in relation to water sources or de/forestation). However, the shift in focus from identifying factors and levels of influence to a focus on understanding and modeling linkages within adaptive *systems* is crucial for any approach informed by resilience[4].

Work may not equally reflect all of these features. But some commitment to each of them is required if an approach is to truly reflect core principles of resilience, and not simply be a 'rebadging' of existing approaches.

*"In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to **navigate** their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to **negotiate** for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways."* www.resilienceresearch.org

"Afghans articulated a forceful, policy-relevant message: there is no health without mental health, no mental health without family unity, no family unity without work, dignity, and a functioning economy, and no functioning economy without good governance." Eggerman and Panter-Brick (2010) *Soc Sci Med*, 71(1):71-83.

"The complex processes of adaptation in the aftermath of disaster …depend on many interactions at multiple levels of function….there appear to be fundamental adaptive systems that afford much of the capacity for resilience...[when] faced with disastrous situations"[4]

[4] Masten & Narayan (2012) *Ann Rev Psych*, 63:227–57.

What are the practical implications of such an approach?

To ensure that the framing of resilience does not just result in the 'repackaging' of previous approaches, practical implications need to be clearly articulated. We suggest here three major implications of adopting a resilience approach:

PARTICIPATIVE ANALYSIS: Use of participative analysis to map systems in a particular context

The strengths, resources, and capacities located at the levels of the individual, household, community, and wider institutional and societal systems need to be carefully mapped to identify appropriate points of entry and support. Such mapping needs to be based upon deep contextual understanding – one that comes from participative analysis with a broad range of stakeholders. This is a tall order. The 'nesting' of individual capacities within familial strategies, familial strategies within community processes, and community processes within institutional and societal ones, demands analysis of these systems and the linkages between them. Such understanding comes from being grounded or embedded within social systems. There are a range of participative methodologies available for this purpose. The range and focus of such analyses will vary considerably depending upon context and focus, but will be marked by an identification of the key resources supportive of recovery and development, and the key barriers to securing them.

Ungar and colleagues working with the International Resilience Project in diverse cultural settings have developed methodologies for the assessment of context in shaping definitions of risk and the mediating factors associated with resilience. www.resilienceproject.org

LEVERAGE POINTS: Attention to key influences on developmental outcomes

On the basis of such systemic analysis, a resilience-based approach is particularly mindful of key 'leverage points' for intervention. Whether identifying the multiple factors and systems which influence the transition of a young woman through later years in primary school, or those which facilitate (or impede) greater diversification in crop production, the focus is on identifying key points in the trajectory of local actors facing adversity that determine more (or less) resilient outcomes. Variously referred to as 'gateways' or 'turning points'[5], these signal the critical occasions where resources have particular importance in determining future wellbeing. A somewhat related concept is Hobfoll's notion of 'resource caravans'[5], whereby the acquisition of certain resources enables the accumulation of others. Again, the focus is on actions that can have disproportionate influence because of the leveraging influence they have on other beneficial outcomes.

Rutter[5] summarizes empirical research showing how for previously delinquent youth events such as marriage can serve as a key 'turning point' – "a discontinuity with the past that removes disadvantageous past options and provides new options for constructive change"

Hobfoll notes how some resources – "nurturance, family stability, family safety, neighborhood and community safety"[5] – strongly facilitate the acquisition of others.

PLANNED SYNERGIES: Interventions anticipate linkages to reinforce impact

The awareness of the multiple, interconnecting influences encourages programming that is implemented with awareness of the potential for an intervention focused on one domain having an impact – positive or negative - on others. Achieving the former should be seen as more than 'spillover', but rather the planned outcome of systems-informed interventions. This approach encourages intervention at two or more 'entry points' with a view to having a

[5] See Rutter (2012) *JCPP*, 54 (4), 474-487; Hobfoll (2011) in Folkman et al. Oxford Handbook of Stress, Health & Coping, p. 129; Hobfoll (2012) *Psychiatry*, 75(3):227-32.

synergistic, sustained impact: more than would be achievable with a single-level intervention. Theresa Betancourt – reflecting on her work in Sierra Leone, Rwanda and India in a May-June 2013 *Harvard Magazine* article - contrasts this with the common 'status quo' of humanitarian intervention: "[An agency] sees that kids are hungry, and they offer food. They see that kids need healthcare, so they open a free clinic. But nobody pays attention to how these different needs are *interrelated* or how organizations with different types of expertise might work together to bring the same child greater benefit."

What do planned synergies look like? An intervention fostering innovation and diversification in agricultural practices and one addressing issues of land tenure reform may be linked by systemic analysis indicating the constraints upon agricultural growth with insecure land tenure. Or an intervention targeting economic strengthening of livelihoods strategies of female headed households and a child labor and right awareness campaign are restructured after a systemic analysis highlights the demands initial microenterprise development may put upon the labor resources of marginalized households.

IRC is increasingly recognizing the relevance of livelihoods in addressing child protection concerns. Work in Burundi, for example, has sought to identify the manner in which work to strengthen household livelihood strategies can – in additional to direct financial impacts - also reinforce the impact of protection work addressing familial care practices.

How can resilience-based approaches be evaluated?

Much remains to be understood about the effectiveness and impact of resilience-based approaches: this will require thoughtful evaluations on why such approaches work, how and for whom. This will involve commitment to 'mixed method' evaluations, and comparing across contexts to identify approaches that can be brought to scale. Measures need to be multilevel (individual, household, community, institution) to account for the changes within a dynamic system, and focus on interactions between levels. Crucially, attention needs to be given to analysis of longitudinal trajectories to discern which resources matter the most for promoting sustainability and wellbeing. Significant resources and specific expertise are required for such work, but strong commitment to impact evaluation is required if the promise of resilience-based interventions is to be validated. Reflecting resilience principles, such evaluations will be locally focused and owned and generally involve cross-sectoral and cross-agency coordination. There are a number of examples of evaluations beginning to reflect such approaches.[6]

About the authors

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[6] e.g. Ungar & Liebenberg (2011) *J Mixed Methods Research*, 5 (2), 126-14; DRLA (2012) Haiti Humanitarian Assistance Evaluation: From a Resilience Perspective. Tulane University with State University of Haiti; Ager et al. (2012) *Child Ab & Neg*, 35, 732– 742; Betancourt et al. (2012) *Soc Sci Med,* 74(10):1504-11.