

Essay on Development Policies

Building Resilience

The Ultimate Approach to Bridging the Gap between Humanitarian Aid and Development Assistance?

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Introduction

The recurrence of humanitarian crises, despite tremendous investments in relief and development efforts, is one of the key factors leading to doubts being raised about the effectiveness of international aid. An insufficient coordination and strategy alignment between actors of humanitarian aid and international development cooperation is commonly being blamed for the lacking sustainability of humanitarian efforts and the lack of preventative disaster management in development projects (USAID, 2012). The current approaches to disaster management are further being challenged by additional factors – such as demographic changes, environmental degradation and, above all, climate change – increasing chronic vulnerabilities as well as the frequency and severity of disasters, while reducing their predictability (IPCC, 2007; SIDA, 2012; World Bank, 2011).

Amidst these difficulties, resilience rose to prominence as a seemingly novel approach, which promised to solve many of these issues by uniting the efforts of humanitarian and development actors, leading to strengthened capacities, of vulnerable people themselves, to deal with disasters. Accordingly, most larger aid organizations now aim at mainstreaming resilience. However, literature review, as well as my personal experience, shows that for those actually involved in projects and programs is is all too often “...not clear what resilience is, or how it can or should be promoted...” (Humanitarian Policy Group, 2012: 1).

Thus, in the following pages I attempt to clarify some doubts by discussing five key questions: (i) What is the gap between humanitarian aid and development assistance about? (ii) What does the term resilience mean in different disciplines and especially in international aid? (iii) How can – or should – the approach be implemented? (iv) What is really new about the concept? (v) Why is it becoming so popular just now? Throughout this paper I discuss the overarching issue of whether or not resilience really has such great potential for integrating humanitarian and development efforts.

What is that gap in need of a bridge?

In many ways humanitarian aid and development assistance are two sides of the same coin. In general terms, more developed societies are less vulnerable to the effects of natural hazards and populations affected by recurrent crises are less likely to attain a higher development status (IPCC, 2007; USAID, 2012). Consequently strong cooperation and coordination between the two sectors should be a matter of course; however as USAID (2012: 3) puts it:

“Too often, our humanitarian and development teams operate in separate geographic locations, on separate problems, with separate goals.”

This is partially explainable by two aspects from the history of aid itself: (i) In the 1980s much of humanitarian aid was channeled around governments, as they were perceived as being an important part of the problem in crisis-affected regions and seemingly prevented the compliance with humanitarian principles. Development assistance, on the other hand, was a means of engaging with governments in order to put societies on track to sustainable development (Macrae, 2012). (ii) Disasters were long perceived as unpredictable outliers, merely interrupting the progressive process of development (IPCC, 2007). Consequently the sole purpose of humanitarian relief was to guarantee the survival of the local people until they could resume their position on the road to development (Macrae, 2012). So, the two were “...designed to be different in terms of their goals, institutions and timeframes...” (Macrae, 2012: 1).

In the 1990s much of this ideology changed, as the realization spread that vulnerability and crisis are recurrent and often symptomatic of poverty and therefore mitigating risks should be an essential part of development cooperation and sustainability should be an important aspect of relief, too (IPCC, 2007). Thus, policy makers have undertaken serious efforts to link short term humanitarian aid with the more long term efforts of development assistance. However, such efforts often resulted in “...ideologically driven stand-offs...” between the two communities who “...often find it difficult to understand each other's language and motivations...” (Macrae, 2012:1), leaving the *status quo* unchanged.

Several organizations now see resilience as the ultimate tool for achieving what so far seemed impossible (e.g. USAID, 2012; IFRC, 2012). In the following I will briefly explain what the concept is about in order to facilitate a judgement of the approach's potential.

What is resilience?

It is by no means a novel term; originating in ecology and material sciences, resilience refers to the ability of a system to respond and adapt to disturbances and changing circumstances or of a physical structure to absorb shocks. Later it has been adopted by psychology, where it refers to the capacities needed to deal with adversities. More recently it has been applied in various social sciences and has found its way into the humanitarian and development jargon. (IFRC, 2012)

The definitions used in international aid are quite consistent as the following three examples show:

“For USAID, resilience is the ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth.”

(USAID, 2012: 5)

“...the ability of countries, communities and households to manage change, by maintaining or transforming livelihoods and poor people’s quality of life in the face of shocks or stresses – such as earthquakes and drought – without compromising their long-term prospects.”

(SIDA, 2012: 11)

“We see resilience as the ability of individuals, communities, organisations or countries exposed to disasters, crises and underlying vulnerabilities to anticipate, reduce the impact of, cope with, and recover from the effects of adversity without compromising their long term prospects.”

(IFRC, 2012: 3)

These definitions highlight four key aspects of resilience: (i) The concept applies to a wide range of levels from individuals to the global human society. (ii) There is a clear focus on the abilities, present in the respective system, to deal with shocks and changes. (iii) The importance of adaptation, during the continuum of “before, during and after” a stressful event, is being emphasized. (iv) They point out that any given strategy to deal with an adversity needs to be sustainable in order to enhance resilience. Consequently, the resilience approach aims at protecting development gains on the longer term and reducing the negative impact disasters and crises have on development while harvesting their potential for positive transformation.

It is important to point out that the mentioned “shocks and stresses” can take basically any given form. Rapid onset shocks – such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, hurricanes and also terror attacks – are the most spectacular and attract most media attention. Gradual onset stresses – like droughts, economic and political crises or natural resource depletion – are, however, not any less disastrous to the development of a society and are equally interlinked with poverty and vulnerability. Consequently, the concept can, theoretically, be applied to virtually all settings. Yet it is most commonly used in regard to disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate change adaptation

(CCA). USAID (2012: 13) adds a geographic criterium for the applicability of a resilience approach, as they specifically focus on “... areas of recurrent crisis...”, where chronic poverty and high exposure to shocks combine and where “...high levels of humanitarian assistance have historically been dedicated...”, as these areas offer obvious potential for improved coordination between development and humanitarian work.

According to the above definitions, a resilient system, say a community, should be capable of anticipating any given crisis, take preventative steps, respond effectively in case a disaster strikes and afterwards “build back better than before”. While this sounds perfectly fine and logical, it is rather difficult to clearly point out what that means for international aid. In a necessary first step in the process of getting the abstract concept of resilience closer to the reality of aid workers, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) has published a list of six key characteristics of resilient communities based on an extensive investigation undertaken in the aftermath of the 2004 Tsunami:

“A safe and resilient community...

- 1. ...is knowledgeable and healthy. It has the ability to assess, manage and monitor its risks. It can learn new skills and build on past experiences.*
- 2. ...is organised. It has the capacity to identify problems, establish priorities and act.*
- 3. ...is connected. It has relationships with external actors who provide a wider supportive environment, and supply goods and services when needed.*
- 4. ...has infrastructure and services. It has strong housing, transport, power, water and sanitation systems. It has the ability to maintain, repair and renovate them.*
- 5. ...has economic opportunities, It has a diverse range of employment opportunities, income and financial services. It is flexible, resourceful and has the capacity to accept uncertainty and respond (proactively) to change.*
- 6. ...can manage its natural assets. It recognises their value and has the ability to protect, enhance and maintain them.”*

(IFRC, 2011: iv)

These characteristics show that a resilient community is made up of skilful individuals whom are well organized, as to effectively make use of their collective capabilities. Further, such a community can not act in isolation from its physical and institutional environment, only if this, too, is favourable and supportive can resilience be achieved. While the IFRC has thus set out rather clear goals, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency comes to the conclusion that there are no “...fixed characteristics...” for resilience and that it cannot be “...promoted by checklists...” (SIDA, 2012: 9). In the following, I will show how, if at all, this apparent paradox can be overcome and resilience be put into practice, reducing vulnerabilities through the enhanced cooperation between humanitarian and development sectors.

How can resilience be achieved?

Ultimately, the resilience approach seeks to better combine humanitarian and development efforts in order to more efficiently and effectively save and improve lives by sustainably reducing vulnerabilities. Therefore it is considered essential to support the beneficiaries in increasing their adaptive capacities and improving their abilities to address and reduce risks as well as the potential to “bounce back” after an adversity. Also the social and economic conditions of the most vulnerable need to be improved, especially through the diversification of livelihood strategies. (IFRC, 2012, SIDA, 2012; USAID, 2012)

As mentioned above, the resilience approach can only be effective if it is applied at all levels. At the **international level**, enhanced harmonization and coordination is required, this includes a more open approach to sharing experiences and lessons learned. Resilience needs to be further mainstreamed as a cross-cutting concept and synergies between different disciplines of humanitarian aid and development cooperation need to be identified and further promoted in multi-sectoral approaches. In order to avoid resilience becoming a *cliché* without profound implications on the international aid system, institutional learning needs to be reformed and on a political level it needs to be accepted that resilience programming often involves a higher degree of risk taking and flexibility as well as a more long term commitment than current approaches. Eventually new types of results and new methods for monitoring and evaluation will have to be developed; a task which can only be successful if all actors work together. (GFDRR, 2012a; SIDA, 2012; USAID, 2012)

At a **national and regional level**, the focus should be on funding domestic organisations rather than on self-implementation. This could include the anticipatory setting-up of protocols with national agencies, enabling the international funding of national relief measures while facilitating

transparency and reporting. The national disaster management should be strengthened through support in anticipatory planning and in the development of legal frameworks (DFID, 2011). Social protection mechanisms should be strengthened, including insurance, livelihood support and food security measures (SIDA, 2012). National policy makers should be encouraged to enact necessary reforms in order to strengthen accountability and to guarantee the involvement of vulnerable communities, the civil society and the private sector in preventing disasters and providing emergency relief (IFRC, 2012).

At **community level** the focus should be on strengthening self-organizational capacities, especially on local institutions that can prepare for and respond to shocks and stresses. A classic example is the establishment and training of civil contingency committees (DFID, 2011). This should be combined with advocacy efforts to ensure that the most vulnerable are being heard in their country and that the local institutions know their rights and where to demand them (IFRC, 2012). Infrastructure should be build in a way as to withstand current and future hazards as well as to serve multiple functions (DFID, 2012). It is of primary importance to base all efforts on the ideas and desires of local stakeholders respecting and strengthening local ownership over development measures (USAID, 2012).

Resilience also implies a focus on the creation of societal structures, which are capable of understanding and responding to not only single disastrous events but much rather the complexity of multiple hazards, recurrent crises and continuous or seasonal stress (SIDA, 2012). In order to understand this complexity, including the underlying vulnerabilities and the structural and institutional issues interfering with resilience, a multidisciplinary assessment is indispensable. Experts from both sides of the “humanitarian-development divide” should get together with representatives of the local population to gain a common understanding of risks and opportunities (USAID, 2012). It is strongly recommendable to combine tools from the different backgrounds (e.g. vulnerability and capacity assessment (VCA) from the humanitarian side and sustainable livelihood assessment from the development side) to obtain a holistic evaluation of the local situation. If a transformational component is to form part of the resilience building strategy, it is essential that this strategy is based on an explicit theory of change, as otherwise these efforts are most likely to remain fruitless if not detrimental (SIDA, 2012). Throughout all stages of the project cycle, development and humanitarian professionals should inform each other on objectives, approaches and strategies, cooperate closely and coordinate all relevant steps (USAID, 2012).

Properly realizing this approach is supposed to bring together humanitarian and development efforts while maintaining their respective strengths (USAID, 2012). However, arguments are rising that the “building back better” or transformational aspects in post-crisis assistance “...challenge the very nature and role of emergency relief...” (Humanitarian Policy Group, 2012: 3) and that consequently disaster risk reduction (DRR) may be better placed under the responsibility of development assistance rather than humanitarian aid (SIDA, 2012). In the following I will provide an example of such a transition and outline some ways of implementing the resilience concept in real-life settings.

El Salvador is the country with the second highest exposure to multiple risks (GFDRR, 2012b). Recurrent disasters – such as earthquakes, floods, hurricanes and volcanic eruptions – as well as multiple causes for vulnerability – including economic poverty, over-population, internal conflicts and environmental degradation – make it an ideal setting for the application of the resilience concept. The *Bajo Lempa* region is particularly at risk due to its exposure to natural hazards and its economic and political marginalization. Here, the Swiss Red Cross had been active in several humanitarian interventions, during which DRR always played a major role in addition to the emergency relief efforts. In 2011, a decision was made for a more long term development commitment following the IFRC's promotion of the resilience approach.

Already during the phases of the humanitarian interventions, opportunities for “building back better” were sought: (i) Instead of providing short term water supplies, wells were constructed and lasting water filters provided; (ii) the post-disaster funds were used to construct emergency shelters, which during other times serve as community centres; (iii) the intense contact with the local population was used to establish community based civil protection units and train their members in disaster prevention and response and (iv) strong cooperation with local and international partners, involved mostly in rural development, had been a key aspect from the beginning. Despite the transition to a more developmental phase, the project team remained prepared for potential disasters and their humanitarian consequences. However, the majority of these efforts was solely targeted at reducing the risks from the recurrent floods and only in 2013 was a resilience approach systematically applied.

The first step was a thorough analysis of the local risks and capacities making use of a combination of tools (VCA¹, CRISTAL² and CEDRIG³). Based on the results, community specific micro-

1 <http://www.ifrc.org/en/what-we-do/disaster-management/preparing-for-disaster/disaster-preparedness->

projects, focusing on risk mitigation, climate change adaptation, ecosystem management and livelihood diversification, were then elaborated and realized mainly by members of the community with only technical and economic support from the Red Cross. The contents of training courses for community health and civil protection committees were restructured, now including broader topics and being less specifically designed for isolated risks. In order to strengthen the local capacities to anticipate and prepare for shocks and stresses, local systems for observing a broad array of factors related to climate change are being installed. In these efforts of joint monitoring, members of the local community work together with academic professionals to collect data of interest and later analyse and evaluate those in a manner as to facilitate local adaptation strategies.

This example illustrates a way in which many of the principles of the resilience approach can be implemented and key aspects of humanitarian and development work can be united. However, it also shows that many steps into this direction had been taken way before resilience became an official goal of the project and before the project team was aware of the existence of such a concept. This raises the question whether resilience is really such an auspicious new paradigm.

What's so new about this?

Rome and resilience have one thing in common: they both were not built in a day. Obviously the concept is building up on previous concepts and approaches in international aid. Cross-cutting issues of international aid – such as local ownership and participation, gender equity, good governance, inclusiveness, accountability, harmonization and sustainability – explicitly have primary importance to the approach (IFRC, 2012; USAID, 2012).

In a certain way, resilience can be seen as a combination of the sustainable livelihood approach (SLA) and DRR, making both approaches more appealing to the respective other side of the humanitarian-development divide. A comparison of the SLA's livelihood dimensions with the IFRC's characteristics of a resilient community (cf. pg. 5) shows striking similarities: human capital is quite the same as being knowledgeable and healthy; social capital is well covered by being organized and connected; having infrastructure and services is well comparable to physical capital; economic opportunities and financial capital have quite the same implications; and natural capital is

tools/disaster-preparedness-tools/

2 <http://www.iisd.org/cristaltool/>

3 http://www.sdc-climateandenvironment.net/en/Home/Tools_Training/CEDRIG

very much alike the sixth characteristic on natural assets. In comparison to traditional DRR, what is new about resilience is an enhanced focus on all sorts of risks and crises instead of preparing only for specific natural hazards. Further, the approach highlights the complexity of risk situations and thus promotes longer term holistic solutions rather than focusing on quick physical infrastructure responses (Humanitarian Policy Group, 2012; USAID, 2012).

Resilience is thus basically an enhanced form of the linking relief, rehabilitation and development (LRRD) approach, which has been around for decades but was mostly popular within humanitarian circles. In the following section I will point out some of the circumstances responsible for resilience's rapid rise to fame which could lead to finally rooting LRRD deep in international aid cooperation.

Why now?

The recurrence of many crises despite tremendous expenditures has – amongst other factors – raised serious doubts about the effectiveness of international aid. Consequently, the pressure has risen on the aid community to reform in order to become more efficient and reduce the need for repeated humanitarian interventions (Humanitarian Policy Group, 2012). Coupled with the realization that DRR shows good returns in reducing the need for external humanitarian interventions, the stage was set for a promising new approach to LRRD (DFID, 2011).

Yet, the main reasons for the recent popularity of resilience thinking are to be found in demographic changes and the increasing evidence for the dramatic impacts of climate change (Humanitarian Policy Group, 2012). Scientific scenarios indicate that “...disasters are increasingly normal...” (SIDA, 2012: 31) turning DRR into a key concern for sustainable development and climate change adaptation (CCA) interventions (GFDRR, 2012a). Resilience is also about adapting to more gradual environmental changes and reducing predictability in regard to climatic trends and weather extremes. Consequently, the focus on (livelihood) diversification and less disaster-specific DRR are important aspects of resilience linked to climate change (SIDA, 2012).

Given the complexity and the uncertainties related to climate change, supporting systems – for instance households, communities or states – in reaching a position where the system itself is capable of dealing with the majority of shocks and stresses in a sustainable and dynamic manner seems equally attractive to humanitarian and development actors alike. However, it remains important not to reduce resilience to a CCA measure as this may lead to ignoring other important

applications and implications of the concept (SIDA, 2012).

Conclusion

Resilience is being famed for having great potential for bringing the “universes” of development cooperation and humanitarian aid closer together. However, such attempts and the majority of the principles of the approach are actually not that new and innovative. The implications climate change has on international aid, as well as other factors, have brought resilience to fame in recent years. Consequently, the great hopes placed on resilience may partly be justified, although this is hardly due to the novelty of the approach but much rather exactly because of its popularity among both sides of the divide.

However, the popularity of resilience brings along its own risk as it leads to common “resilience-labelling” of any given intervention without being based on a clear concept of the approach. Due to the uncertainties, as to what exactly resilience means and how it should be implemented, the concept's aspired renovating impacts on the international aid structure often remain wishful thinking (Humanitarian Policy Group, 2012).

According to the Stockholm Resilience Centre's senior researcher Brian Walker building resilience is basically about supporting a system in maintaining its self-organization and allowing shocks to occur without letting them get out of hand⁴. For international aid, this would imply a drastic reduction of external involvement and limiting international assistance to technical and monetary support when explicitly asked for and in cases of truly intense crises. Or, as USAID (2012: 7) puts it:

“International assistance should become nothing but a catalyzer for sustainable and transformational change led by local institutions.”

Thus, truly committing to resilience would go far beyond bringing humanitarian and development actors closer together. However, any drastic changes in the function and self-image of international aid would require a true commitment to profound reforms, rather than just promoting a new concept which is being half-heartedly applied.

4 <http://www.stockholmresilience.org/21/research/what-is-resilience.html>

Abbreviations

CCA	Climate change adaptation
DRR	Disaster risk reduction
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
LRRD	Linking relief, rehabilitation and development
SLA	Sustainable livelihood approach
VCA	Vulnerability and capacity assessment

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