

Capacity development and resilience

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Resilience is associated with the capacity of individuals, groups and society as a whole to cope, adapt, and transform in the face of man-made and natural shocks. Resilience is being used in the areas of food security, climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction, as well as peacebuilding and statebuilding. The concept of resilience is already impacting policy at the highest levels. This chapter aims to capture and build on key lessons from the last two decades of research and practice in the field of capacity development. It suggests how to apply these lessons in the emerging resilience agenda.

Resilience is a critically important concept that has great relevance in peacebuilding and statebuilding, and more generally in moving countries out of fragility and preventing them from sliding back. External stresses – such as those posed by the illicit trafficking of drugs, humans and natural resources; increased competition for resources due to climate change; and increased risk of disasters – are important drivers of conflict and risk undermining progress in peacebuilding and statebuilding. Indeed, they could tip countries back into conflict.

Resilience draws from, builds on and shares many facets with other key agendas, and can *learn* from them. Capacity development is an obvious one. *Capacity* is at the heart of the resilience concept and features prominently on the emerging resilience ‘agenda’ that is being fuelled by international donors and multi-lateral institutions. It is also a core concept in peacebuilding and statebuilding efforts in situations of conflict and fragility.

Below is a short overview of the emerging resilience agenda, followed by a retrospective look at the key evolutionary trends in the field of capacity development. These same trends will be used to see what lessons can be learned from the field of capacity development and whether the resilience agenda has absorbed these lessons and can move beyond them, perhaps even contributing to the field of capacity development.

Resilience, an emerging agenda

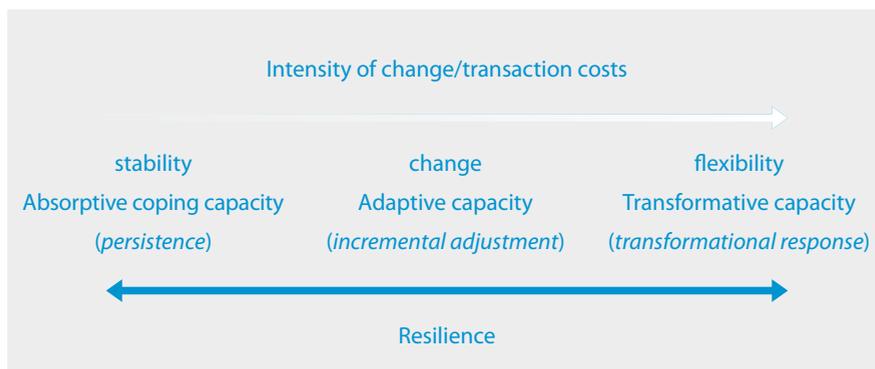
While there is no consensus on what constitutes a ‘resilience approach’, the concept is gaining considerable traction. Key institutions such as the EU (EU 2012) and various UN agencies are incorporating the concept in their guiding policy documents, suggesting that its emergence is an increasingly relevant policy agenda. In the area of fragile states, the focus of this chapter, resilience is seen as the antonym of fragility. The OECD, for example, defines the central objective of international engagement in

fragile states as ‘moving towards effective, legitimate and *resilient* states’ (OECD 2007). Similarly, the g7+, a voluntary collective of self-identified fragile states, describes its mission as ‘supporting countries’ transition from fragility to resilience’ (g7+ 2013). The World Bank uses the resilience concept across strategy and programming, and it has featured in successive flagship World Development Reports. UNDP and UNICEF have both given resilience pride of place in their strategic plans, and the concept is increasingly unifying actors strategically in major humanitarian *and* military interventions, for example, in Syria.

While resilience has been used frequently in the area of disaster risk management, it has developed less dynamically in the sphere of conflict and fragility. As yet, there is no consensus on what resilience means exactly when applied to fragile states, and what ‘building resilience’ really means, although efforts by various institutions are underway to encourage this.¹ Today, there is a growing debate about the who, what and how of resilience and whether it can be effectively assessed (McCandless and Simpson 2015).

The resilience concept is associated with the capacity of individuals, groups and society as a whole to cope, adapt and transform in the face of man-made and natural shocks. The technical term most often used to describe the capacity of a social system to deal with shocks is ‘adaptive capacity’, but a more detailed understanding of capacities for resilience has emerged with the formulation of the 3D resilience framework. Resilience emerges as the result not of one capacity but three: the capacity to absorb, the capacity to adapt and the capacity to transform. In this model, each of these leads to a different outcome: persistence, incremental adjustment or transformational response. For some, a resilient system is the outcome of all three of these capacities. But for others, they constitute different response approaches that can be tapped varyingly, and for yet others, a linear process with transformation as the desired goal (UNDP, UNICEF and Interpeace 2015).

Figure 1: 3D resilience framework²



Evolutionary shifts in capacity development

Our understanding of capacity, capacity development and how to support it has evolved significantly over the last decades (see opening chapter of this book, 'Reflecting on 25 years of capacity development and emerging trends'). Indeed, there are four key themes in the discourse on resilience.

From individual to relational to systemic perspectives

First, capacity development initially focused on building individual skills and competencies, on the assumption that more skilled individuals would improve organisational performance. Increasingly it was understood that organisational capacity was a function of organisational vision, structures, processes and incentives,³ which led to the emergence of a more nested, or systemic notion of capacity across different interconnected levels (see, for example, Fowler and Ubels 2010 and Woodhill 2010). UNDP, for example, 'looks beyond individual skills and a focus on training to address broader questions of institutional change, leadership, empowerment and public participation' (UNDP 2009).

From skills to performance to ability to thrive

Second, the focus on building skills was overtaken by a focus on performance, which held that individuals or organisations would achieve better results once they have developed capacities. Research suggests, however, that capacity consists of a number of dimensions, and the capacity to deliver results is but one (see box on 5c framework below). These dimensions must also extend to the broader abilities that are needed to make an organisation or system endure and perform over time (Baser and Morgan 2008). Whereas the 5C framework was developed to monitor organisational effectiveness, the framework can also be applied to social systems. All five capabilities are necessary – in tandem – to be able to thrive.

ECDPM's 5C framework

ECDPM research on a large number of case studies illustrates that five capabilities are needed for organisational effectiveness:

- the capability to act and commit;
- the capability to deliver on development objectives;
- the capability to adapt and self-renew;
- the capability to relate to external stakeholders; and
- the capability to achieve coherence.

For more information see www.ecdpm.org/5Cs

From value-neutral to value-driven and relating to power

Third, capacity itself is value-neutral: it can support positive or negative forces in development. Yet the process by which capacity is developed is not value-neutral, it is inherently value-laden and political. Capacity development generates winners and losers, and is deeply related to power. People who think about capacity development in a technocratic way tend to treat it as a process of technical learning and adopting best practice solutions, which are themselves considered to be value-neutral. Yet capacity development is often part of an ideological battle. Those 'building the capacity' do so on the basis of inherent beliefs about the direction policies and strategies should take, which may not match with the perspective of those whose capacity is being 'built' (De Weijer 2013). Stakeholders may strongly disagree even on what capacity is (Young, Hauck and Engel 2013).⁴ Thus, a main lesson learned is that capacity development is deeply connected to the goals and aspirations of the actors involved, their agency and motivations, and should not be seen as a technical exercise.

From externally controlled to endogenously emerging

Fourth, over time, the term capacity *building* was replaced with capacity *development*, reflecting a growing realisation that existing capacities need to be developed rather than built afresh. Capacity needed to be viewed as something inherently linked to actors' own motivations, drive and sense of purpose. Further, existing capacities – even if they did not match the expectations of the international community – were increasingly seen as a property of a social system that emerged from a complex interplay of attitudes, assets, resources, strategies and skills, both tangible and intangible. As such, they are much less amenable to external influence. In 2006, OECD defined capacity development as 'the process whereby people, organisations and society as a whole unlock, strengthen, create, adapt and maintain capacity over time'. Capacity development was thus seen as primarily endogenous. 'Support to capacity development' became what outside partners – domestic or foreign – do to support, facilitate or catalyse capacity development (OECD 2006).

Despite these important shifts in thinking, the practice of supporting capacity development has struggled to adapt. Some progress is being made with the development of new frameworks⁵ and practices that support capacity development in a more systemic way. UNDP, for instance, is upscaling its consideration of capacity development in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, advocating the use of political economy and conflict analysis tools to ensure capacity development efforts better respond to issues of power and politics, and to understand and manage social expectations (UNDP 2011: 8-9).

An OECD study on the topic in 2011, however, concluded that 'while understanding about the issues has deepened in the interim, little has actually been done' (Pearson 2011: 8). A number of other studies concluded the following:⁶

- there continues to be an emphasis on skills transfer, mostly through formal training, with insufficient focus on the organisational and institutional levels;

- support to capacity development continues to be regarded as a technocratic and value-neutral exercise with insufficient attention to political dimensions;
- instead of continuing to use parallel management units to deliver support, efforts should focus on strengthening country systems;⁷
- there is a preference for hands-on or direct approaches whereby external actors perform the role of expert, rather than a facilitator, who would be better positioned to support a *joint learning journey* (Pearson 2011); and
- insufficient attention is being paid to the critical question of the capabilities required of international or outside actors to *support capacity development effectively*.

The reasons for the gap between understanding and practice revolve around a number of characteristics of the aid system: the interventionist nature of aid; the assumption that internal problems can be fixed from the outside; the rigid planning, management, and monitoring and evaluation systems linked to the use of logframes; and an accountability system that is primarily structured to meet the needs of funders. The basic assumption at the core of the aid system remains that interventions will linearly translate into tangible and expected results. This assumption is often profoundly at odds with the complexity of social and political life and the way change occurs.

Can the evolving resilience agenda learn from these lessons and avoid these pitfalls? This is arguably vital in contexts affected by conflict and fragility, where the notion of capacity is so central, and where the resilience to overcome future threats and avoid relapses into conflict is so critical.

Opportunities for mutual learning

This next section⁸ examines the overlaps and differences between the concepts of capacity and resilience from the perspective of the four lessons highlighted in the last section. It suggests ways in which the resilience agenda may be off to a head start because of its own analytical underpinnings, the pitfalls that it may involve, and where and how it can learn from capacity development.

A systemic vision of capacity

The concept of resilience is rooted in systems thinking, and for social systems in particular in the theory of complex adaptive systems. This brings with it a certain way of looking at the world that includes:

- understanding a social system by looking at all its elements and the interactions between them;
- focusing on the dynamics and feedback loops that exist in these interconnections; and
- viewing change as less linear and predictable than more reductionist ways of thinking tend to view change, and viewing the properties of a system as essentially self-organising and emergent (Baser and Morgan 2008, De Weijer 2013).

This language – at least on the surface – appears to resonate well with the way capacity has increasingly come to be understood, and in particular its endogenous and emergent nature.

While the field of capacity development evolved through a long process of learning before adopting more of a systems approach, the concept of resilience is firmly rooted in systems thinking.

Whereas capacity development initially did not see the ‘whole’ because of a focus on the ‘parts’, the opposite holds true for resilience thinking. The risk is that by focusing too much on the whole the individual parts may be overlooked. When the system as a whole is better able to absorb, cope and transform in the face of shocks, this does not necessarily mean that the different actor groups within a system have all increased their resilience. For example, a state that diversifies its export economy and thus becomes more resilient to commodity shocks may do so at the expense of individual farmers. Important questions thus exist on the scalability of resilience: for example, does resilience at the community level scale up to higher levels of resilience – i.e. sub-nationally and nationally – and if so, how?⁹ The experience with urban violence, for instance, shows that organising people into gangs can enhance the adaptive capacity of the gang members but reduce a city’s adaptive capacity as a whole (Davis 2012).¹⁰

Resilience practitioners can learn from the way that issues of scalability are viewed and dealt with in capacity development. Though systems language has not been employed in the same way, UNDP’s decades of work in this area has undoubtedly produced considerable evidence for what works and what does not. This evidence should be extensively studied so lessons can be drawn from it. Its notion of individual and organisational (collective) level capacities operating within an enabling environment (broad social system) that ‘sets the overall scope for capacity development’ undoubtedly can provide a foundation for resilience practitioners to build upon (UNDP 2009: 11).

The ability to thrive

Tensions exist between the degree to which resilience is linked to performance (i.e. delivering results) or to a more generic ability to thrive. The aid community commonly places risk management at the centre of resilience models, resulting in approaches that identify the key risks and try to develop policies that are better able to deal with these risks. For instance, if a main risk is the vulnerability to commodity pricing, economic diversification would be a risk management strategy. The World Bank and OECD use this framing, where the expected outcome of resilience is improved risk management and higher performance (e.g. Mitchell 2013). Sectoral applications of resilience, e.g. food security or climate change, also tend to adopt this approach.

Other scholars and practitioners working on conflict focus more explicitly on factors that allow individuals, households, communities and societies to thrive (UNDP, UNICEF and Interpeace 2014). These might include (less tangible) processes

of decision-making and governance, fostering of innovation and experimentation, exploitation of new opportunities, and structures of institutions and entitlements (Levine et al. 2011), as well as issues related to social capital and collective action (Marc et al. 2012; UNDP 2012). This goes beyond the adoption of risk-sensitive policies, because it goes to the heart of what allows societies to adapt to changing circumstances irrespective of the specific risk at play.

Risk management approaches to resilience mirror the limitations of performance-oriented capacity development. The second type of framing takes an approach oriented more towards getting actors to *thrive*, as described earlier when discussing the 5C approach to capacity development. This framing comes closer to the way capacity development has come to be understood over time. A risk for the resilience agenda, therefore, is that it could fall back to measuring capacity in terms of performance. This would be a lost opportunity.

Sensitivity to issues of power and transformation

Initial understanding of capacity development underestimated the role of power, portraying it as technical and not as political. The resilience agenda may be at risk of falling into the same trap.

The way the concept of resilience is currently used in policy and practice has been criticised because it tends to promote the status quo, focuses on absorptive or adaptive rather than transformative capacity, and pays insufficient attention to issues of power. Historically, resilience was used to describe the ability of a system (or a material) to return to its original state after having been disturbed.¹¹ Though over time the term has moved from referring to a simple return to the original state to the ability of a system to adapt and transform itself in the face of shocks,¹² some concerns remain. For example, will efforts to build resilience simply enable communities to absorb conflict or adapt to it, rather than collectively engage to transform the conditions that drive it, in which (asymmetrical) power relations play a key role?¹³

Yet there is nothing inherent in the concept of resilience that suggests these leanings. The behaviour within a system is determined by what is sometimes called ‘rules of thumb’, the internal logic (norms and social codes) by which actors in a social system operate. But these rules of thumb are shaped by the way that deep structures, policies, mindsets, norms and behaviours interact. Power relations are an integral – if not the most important – contributing factor to these deep structures. It is these deep structures that can either maintain the status quo of the social system (through negative feedback loops) or catalyse adaptive or transformative change (through positive feedback loops). Focusing on the deep structures that either maintain the status quo or that can lever transformative change requires that attention is paid to the power relations that lie at the root of violent conflict, fragility and underdevelopment.

There remains some cause for concern, however, one which constitutes a risk for the emerging resilience agenda. The authors of the 3D resilience framework (Béné et al. 2012) argue that the response to shocks – and the capacity that is drawn upon

– depends on the shock’s intensity. The lower the intensity of the initial shock, the more likely the response will be able to absorb its impact without consequences for its function, status or state. When this absorptive capacity is exceeded by the intensity of the shock, the household will then exercise its adaptive resilience, which will lead to incremental change.

As Béné et al. argue, transformation will happen only when the *intensity of the shock is so large* that it overwhelms the adaptive capacity of the household, community or (eco)system (see Béné et al. 2012: 21-22). Although the authors acknowledge that these shifts typically require changes to entrenched systems maintained and protected by powerful interests, they make little reference to the role of human agency in making these shifts happen. This framework is therefore in danger of promoting a notion of change that is at odds with the undoubtedly more complex and dynamic range of responses occurring in any context, and the role of human agency to make change happen.

Respecting the endogenous nature of capacity

Capacity development thinking recognises that capacity is not something that needs to be created from scratch, but that it emerges through complex interactions between resources, capabilities, assets, incentives and governance arrangements. Support to capacity development has thus started to focus more on finding ways to create conditions for existing capacity to expand, rather than merely focusing on building new capacities.

Resilience, with its grounding in systems thinking, recognises the emergent properties of capacity and therefore the need to build on endogenous processes. Yet there are indications that things are different in practice. For example, international donors are very focused on *building* resilience but do not pay sufficient attention to understanding what actually constitutes resilience in a local context (McCandless and Nilaus-Tarp 2014, McCandless and Simpson 2015). There are some promising trends, however. In the EU, for instance, the resilience agenda has already started breaking down some of the barriers between sectors and instruments, and it has seriously boosted attempts to bring humanitarian and development actors closer together.

Interestingly, the concept of resilience and adaptive capacity in the sphere of organisational development and also climate change has led to new ways of thinking about organising in businesses and organisations. More attention is being paid to creating space for innovation, to having autonomous units operating in more loosely connected structures, to more flat and less hierarchical forms of organisation, to more space for improvisation, and more generally a rejection of tightly controlled systems. These new forms of organising more strongly acknowledge the endogenous nature of capacity and even aim to actively draw it out. The concept of resilience may thus offer potentially new ways of organising, planning and managing development assistance. But these new ways of organising are not very visible within the aid system yet.

Looking ahead

Many of the lessons drawn from capacity development are relevant to the emerging resilience agenda. Though the concept of resilience is already impacting policy at the highest levels, its application is still very much in flux. This offers opportunities to capitalise on this learning.

The resilience agenda also reinforces many of the lessons from the field of capacity development, due to its foundations in systems thinking, and the fact that it places particular emphasis on emergent and endogenous change, takes into account context and recognises the interplay of different capabilities.

There is great potential, then, for the resilience community to learn from, move beyond, as well as contribute to the theory and practice of capacity development. There are a number of risks, however, which will have to be managed carefully if the resilience agenda is to live up to its full potential.

First, the resilience agenda must not be forced into a linear technocratic mode of operation. Resilience advocates must demand that the systems and structures involved in development cooperation be adapted. The current incentive structures, accountability frameworks, planning and management processes, and organisational set-up are not compatible with systemic approaches. Working with the concept of resilience without changing these organisational patterns is likely to erode the very value the concept brings to the table.

Second, there is a need to better understand what *building* resilience means. The endogenous nature of resilience, similar to the endogenous nature of capacity, raises important questions regarding the role of external actors in building resilience. This requires honest reflection on the part of external actors – about how different forms and levels of intervention influence context – that goes beyond notions of doing or not doing ‘harm’. Practitioners will have to change their mindset if they are to move towards the notion of ‘accompanying’ a society on a journey, rather than the idea of bringing solutions.

Third, practitioners need to recognise the different levels and scales of resilience and how these interact with each other. The focus on the system as a whole should serve as a way to better understand how the different parts of the system interact and impact one another, and how resilience at the system level can be manifested in ways that benefit all. At the same time, a narrow focus on one aspect of society (e.g. a household or a community) should not detract from viewing this entity as part of a larger system.

The fourth risk is perhaps the area where continued experimentation and learning around resilience might contribute most significantly to capacity development. Just as capacity development (at least theoretically) moved from value-neutral to value-conscious, the resilience agenda also has yet to embrace more fully the value-driven nature of building resilience. As the discussion above shows, there is still a risk of underestimating the role that human agency plays in bringing about change.

Finally, interesting questions could be asked in relation to the 3D framework and its typology of absorptive, adaptive and transformative capacities. Do they differ in nature or only in degree? Do they occur simultaneously or are they part of a linear trajectory? How do they interact, support or undermine one another? While the authors of the 3D framework argue that the size of the risk mostly determines the type of response triggered, the opposite could be argued as well. It could well be that the type of response depends more on the types of capacity available rather than the intensity of the shock. How do factors such as motivation, politics and power effect the response of the social system against a shock? Might the ability to absorb a shock depend more on individual characteristics, while the ability to transform depends more on collaborative capacity? Analysing such questions can help advance the resilience agenda, as well as contribute to ongoing learning on capacity and approaches to its development.

Notes

- ¹ In September 2014 in New York, UNDP, UNICEF and Interpeace co-convened an expert's roundtable with this goal in mind, resulting in an outcome document entitled *Fostering Resilience in Situations of Conflict and Fragility*.
- ² See Béné et al. (2012).
- ³ See for instance <http://blogs.worldbank.org/futuredevelopment/beyond-stuff-capacity-relational-concept>.
- ⁴ See also http://capacity.org/capacity/opencms/en/topics/context_systems-thinking/thinking-systemically.html 3/7, accessed 10/9/14.
- ⁵ See for instance the GIZ framework for capacity development (Capacity WORKS, <http://www.giz.de/expertise/html/4619.html>) and the Dutch use of the 5C approach for monitoring capacity development, described in: IOB (2011).
- ⁶ See for instance the 2010 joint donor evaluation for South Sudan, Keijzer (2013) and Pearson (2011).
- ⁷ The recent monitoring report of the New Deal showed that progress was lagging behind severely in this dimension. See <http://www.pbsbdialogue.org/newsandevents/specialevents/RD%201%20New%20Deal%20Monitoring%20Report%202014%20FINAL.pdf>.
- ⁸ The insights presented in this paper benefited from the (unpublished, forthcoming) draft discussion document, *Assessing Resilience for Peacebuilding*, by Erin McCandless and Graeme Simpson, Interpeace, Geneva.
- ⁹ See for instance Carpenter, A. (2011) *Resilience to Violent Conflict: Adaptive Strategies in Fragile States*, available at http://www.securitymanagementinitiative.org/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_details&gid=511&lang=en&Itemid=28.
- ¹⁰ This example of gangs also illustrates another important point: resilience is a property of a system and is not inherently good or bad, because it can manifest itself both negatively (think of corruption or mafia, for example) and positively (think of customary mechanisms for conflict resolution or villages organising their own schooling when public education systems break

down, building their own community policing systems, or developing disaster mitigation or prevention plans). International actors tend to use the notion of 'resilience building' in ways that assume its positive value, and fail to critically reflect upon how it can also manifest itself in destructive and harmful ways.

- ¹¹ This last point is made in Béné (2012).
- ¹² This is very notable in the UNDP position paper, that describes building resilience 'as a transformative process of strengthening the capacity of men, women, communities, institutions, and countries to anticipate, prevent, recover from, and transform in the aftermath of shocks, stresses, and change', and very explicitly states that 'resilience-building is about [...] transformational change rather than maintaining equilibrium or bouncing back to original states, as emphasized in other resilience definitions'.
- ¹³ These views have been prevalent in research conducted by author McCandless with local actors in Pakistan and Guatemala.

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