CHAPTER 3

RESILIENCE

A Review of the Literature: Queries Beyond the Promise?[16]

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Abstract: Building on Chapter 2, that explored the definitions and conceptualizations of vulnerability at large, this chapter offers a critical exploration of the concept of resilience and thereby contributes to providing the conceptual foundations for the following chapters. Focusing in particular on the fields of environmental management and disaster studies, the chapter welcomes the notion of social resilience as a way to go beyond the capacities of the formal disaster management sector; bring political and policy dynamics into assessments of resilience; and address potential disempowering effects of the vulnerability notion. Including political economy indicators into our analysis of resilience, however, also demands a problematization of straightforward resilience promotion and merits a deconstruction of the claims of retreating neo-liberal states that everyone can be equally resilient.

Keywords: Resilience, environmental management, disaster studies, policy and politics

[16] This chapter is derived from Frerks (2014) and Frerks, Warner and Weijs (2013).

1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of resilience has rapidly gained popularity in the field of environmental management, disaster studies and emergency management. Improving the resilience of individuals, communities and societies is thought to be an effective and efficient way to reduce prevailing vulnerabilities and thereby the risk of disaster, whether in the field of the environment, the economy, development or socially or politically.

The advantage of strengthening resilience is that it can be seen as an 'all-hazard' approach killing several birds with one stone. It is a medicine for many ills. If you have become 'resilient', you can withstand floods, storms, high interest rates, inflation, social indifference, environmental damage and political arrogance. Resilience seems to have been embraced as the new catchword for the decade to come and at present there is an avalanche of initiatives, workshops and publications on the subject, very much like happened to the notion of vulnerability that dominated the disaster discourse in the 1990s.

In a recent ODI Background Note Tom Mitchell (2012:2) discusses various options for including disaster resilience in post-2015 development goals, including a 'standalone goal on disaster resilience' or a 'mainstreaming approach' incorporating the theme in other sector-oriented goals.

On the other hand, the ascendancy of resilience has also attracted serious criticisms. For example, Ben Aguirre and Eric Best (2015) consider the current widespread usage of the concept of resilience just a 'fad', and in fact redundant when applied to research and management of disasters, as the strengthening of the institutions of society faced with disasters has been already ongoing practice for half a century, they state. While taking a much less radical stance, Kathleen Tierney, also observed several fundamental weaknesses with regard to the resilience approach in

a keynote delivered on the subject.[17] While acknowledging its stimulating force in policy, she wondered whether the concept was really innovative or rather 'old wine in new wineskins' and whether it comprised a sufficiently deep analysis of root causes. She, among others, further critiqued its under-theorization of power and claimed that there was a need to focus much more on the 'pathologies of power' that generated wide-spread vulnerabilities in society, including different forms of policy denial and denigration of initiatives in the face of an unsustainable future. By just jumping over those shortcomings, resilience can never fully address the factors that cause patterns of vulnerability in the first place.

So what to think of the strengths and weaknesses of resilience? Below I give first an overview of the resilience concept and approach and then discuss its significance in terms of policy and politics. Summing up my arguments at the end, I try to conclude what the resilience approach can contribute.

2. THE ASCENDENCY OF RESILIENCE IN DISASTER STUDIES AND ITS DEFINITION

Since the 1990s the field of Disaster Studies has taken on board some ideas from environmental systems analysis. Resilience being one of them was based on the work of the ecologist Holling. Holling defined resilience as "the ability of a system to maintain its structure and patterns of behaviour in the face of disturbance" (Holling, 1986:296). The envisaged stability is the "propensity of a system to attain or retain an equilibrium condition of steady state or stable oscillation ... resist any departure from that

[17] Keynote Kathleen Tierney, 3rd Conference on Community Resilience, organized by The Center for Community Security and Resilience, Virginia Tech, Arlington, USA, in collaboration with the Metropolitan Institute, Congress Center, Davos, Switzerland, 24-25 August 2012.

condition and, if perturbed, return rapidly to it" (Holling, 1986:296). It is clear that this ecological line of thinking departs from a strong sense of equilibrium and aims at a restoration of the original situation.

However, in disaster management as well as in socio-political and economic 'systems', this re-equilibricizing trend may not be desirable, as the earlier situation was often characterized by vulnerabilities that enabled the disaster or problematic situation occurring in the first place. That earlier situation should preferably be transformed and not reinstated.

In disaster research, the definition of resilience initially meant the ability to survive and cope with a disaster with minimum impact and damage. However, it was slowly further expanded to include additional social and institutional aspects. Harrald and Veldhuis (2010) provide an overview of the recent debate on resilience in the United States (US) and include a series of definitions in use by US departments and in academic literature. Box 1 provides three of them showing an increasing complexity.

Box 1. Definitions of resilience

Community resilience "is defined as the sustained ability of communities to withstand and recover - in both the short and the long terms - from adversity" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009: 5).

"Resilience refers to the ability of human systems to respond and to recover. It includes those inherent conditions that allow the system to absorb impacts and cope with the event, as well as post-event adaptive processes that facilitate the ability of the systems to recognize, change and learn in response to the event" (Cutter et al, 2008).

> Resilience is "a process linking a set of adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation after a disturbance. Community resilience emerges from four primary sets of adaptive capacities – Economic Development, Social Capital, Information and Communication and Community Competence" (Norris et al, 2008).
>
> (Derived from Harrald and Veldhuis, 2010: 9-10)

These definitions emphasize the capacity or ability to anticipate risk or disturbance, absorb or limit impact, and bounce back after a crisis but -more importantly- they include adaptive community capacity, and processes of change, as evidenced in the definitions of Cutter et al (2008) and Norris et al. (2008). It must be stressed that these capacities and abilities mentioned are not some mysteriously in-built systemic property of individuals or organizations, but are based on interactive and contingent community-level and societal processes involving change, entrepreneurship, learning and increased competence. Hence, these definitions move far beyond the ecologists' traditional equilibrium thinking. In that sense resilience does not need to be only a return to a previous equilibrium, but can aim at a different, improved state of affairs.

In effect, the current debate about disaster rehabilitation asserts that rather than 'building back' we should be 'building back better', giving disaster survivors more capabilities, options and flexibility in their coping with future adversity, and also making progress by structural vulnerability reduction and the increase of institutional capabilities. In this connection, the strength of an effective resilience approach is that it is ideally human-centred and community-focused, but simultaneously situated in a larger macro-setting of environmental, macro-

economic and policy processes and cognizant of global-local dynamics. It is also interdisciplinary and multi-layered, requiring new forms of stakeholders' engagement and public-private partnerships.

One critique on the earlier vulnerability approach in disaster management pointed out that it victimized and disempowered people. It would engender a fatalistic and passive outlook and take away the agency from people, thereby creating external dependency. In fact, vulnerability was and still is often externally attributed to groups of people, who rarely label themselves as vulnerable. Anderson and Woodrow (1989) highlighted already two decades ago that people have important physical, social and motivational capacities that can offset their vulnerabilities. Accordingly, the vulnerability approach increasingly paid attention to (individual, group or community-level) coping capacities that came to be seen as a major counter force to vulnerability as exemplified in a variety of vulnerability and capacity analysis (VCA) tools that emerged in disaster policy practice. Cannon, Twigg and Rowell (2003) have made an inventory of over fifty instruments that deal with such vulnerability and capacity aspects.

The thinking on local disaster capacities has sociologically been further influenced by debates on actor-orientation and the role of agency. Actor-orientation is a constructivist perspective focusing on the making and remaking of society through the self-transforming actions and perceptions of a diverse and interlocked world of actors (Long, 2001). Actor-oriented approaches form a counter-balance to approaches that basically see human behaviour as externally determined.

In relation to earlier paradigms in disaster studies the resilience approach moves beyond the vulnerability and victimization discourse towards agency and capacity, and from

short-term coping towards longer-term adaptation and innovation. It focuses on process rather than being a static state of affairs, as evidenced in the definitions referred to above. It also changes from mere adaptation to what can be called a transformative approach. This implies that it includes response and coping, but simultaneously goes beyond it and is also more geared to social and systemic aspects of dealing with disaster rather than only to individual and household capacities. In this connection Dovers and Handmer (1992) have proposed to differentiate between proactive and reactive social resilience. Reactive resilience seeks to perpetuate and reinforce the status quo, whereas a proactive system accepts change and adjusts to it.

3. RESILIENCE AS A POLICY APPROACH

Turning to the policy world, it seems to make sense to invest in resilience in view of its merits outlined above. This explains that the concept is embraced by i.e. the Government of the United States, the European Union, several donor agencies and government departments in a variety of countries. On the other hand, there is as yet fairly little insight in how to translate resilience into a workable concept and policy approach. We need more substantive work on the operationalization of the concept and its use in policy practice. The resilience approach is associated with a clear shift in responsibilities and roles in public disaster policy and with regard to the composition of the actor alliances involved. In the field of disaster management collaboration between authorities and citizens was already promoted in the 1994 Yokohama and 2005 Hyogo frameworks.

It is however necessary to ascertain the impacts of such policy shifts on the anticipation and prevention of, and recovery after shocks. As grassroots or community-based perspectives have often been welcomed merely on ideological grounds or ‘feel-

good' sentiments, it is essential to provide for a critical and evidence-based framework to inform policy and practice on resilience initiatives and enhance their effectiveness. Such a framework should include: a) a further definitional delineation and conceptual elaboration of resilience, building on the ample literature that exists today; b) define descriptive-analytical benchmarks or indicators for resilience (also here much work is ongoing already); c) collect empirical evidence on the application of the resilience approach in practice or work with pilot cases (this evidence is still weak); d) analyze the larger policy and political context and its impact (see my remarks below) and e) propose policy measures to enhance resilience.

Though such steps can help and promote community and societal resilience in disaster-prone or environmentally fragile areas, there still remains a need to critically approach the resilience paradigm. Whether or not such interventions may have a beneficial impact in terms of risk governance and the target population also depends on the broader political and economic context, as already mentioned by Tierney in her keynote referred to above. Therefore I suggest that alongside the policy work outlined above, a more politically informed analysis takes place that looks at and deconstructs the resilience discourse as a political project.

4. RESILIENCE AS A POLITICAL PROJECT

What are in effect the political underpinnings of the resilience approach? It can -in my view- be considered as part of the larger neo-liberal project that is taking hold of contemporary society. In terms of (risk) governance it relates to a model that includes parliamentary democracy, a liberalized economy with a retreating state, and western model of security provision based on the securitization of certain external threats. Some authors have

claimed that this neo-liberal ordering of the world has led on the one hand to an interventionist attempt to govern and control parts of the globe, implying the erosion of civil rights and liberties, while on the other hand it is excluding and marginalizing those people deemed useless, who have been called the 'insecured' or 'surplus life' (Duffield, 2007) or 'wasted lives' (Bauman, 2004).

The emphasis on resilience indeed seems to be the product of a political discourse that seeks to shift the responsibility for mediating the impact of disasters from the state to the society and therefore may engender the same problems and feelings of disenchantment as the neo-liberal project creates in other societal domains and the economy at large.

Reid (2010) suggests that 'the resilient subject is a subject which must permanently struggle to accommodate itself to the world". By doing so resilience backgrounds the political, the imagining of alternatives and foregrounds adaptivity, accepting "the imperative not to resist or secure themselves from the difficulties they are faced with". Coaffee and Rogers (2008) claim that the notion of social resilience has been instrumentalized, leading to a new governance and policy structure exerting domination and causing inequality. They talk in this connection about a 'dark side' to resilience planning. In a recent keynote speech[18] Duffield observed that the resilience project approach under the neo-liberalist project in late capitalism in fact amounts to a form of adaptation, avoidance and working around a fragmented world in crisis, …. to an endless adaptation or *bricolage* without offering a solution. According to Duffield resilience thus boils down to 'surviving at the edge of extinction', or to 'living on the ruins'.

[18] Keynote by Mark Duffield at Conference 'Remote Control, Violence, Containment, Technology', organized by the Centre for Conflict Studies and Centre for the Humanities, Utrecht University, 12 December 2014, Utrecht.

Though those warnings help us to focus on potential risks and dangers resulting from the political context, the ultimate test of the resilience approach lies in what it achieves in practice. As I said above, evidence is still largely absent or patchy and hence, the jury is still out.

5. CONCLUSION

In recent years, resilience has rapidly become a mainstream notion as a useful addition to hazard and vulnerability. The concept of social resilience focuses our minds on the social capacities available well beyond the capacities of the formal disaster management sector, and is also redressing the victimizing and disempowering effects of the vulnerability notion. While having a number of strong points, the resilience project also carries risks to society. Whether promoting resilience reduces people's vulnerability to disaster is highly dependent on a person's socioeconomic standing. Here, a more differentiated approach is called for than the current generalized one to promoting resilience implies. In this connection, we should be critical about the fiction promoted by the retreating neo-liberal state that everyone can be equally resilient. We have to study the potential negative political effects the neo-liberal project inheres in order to fully gauge its impact on vulnerable disaster-stricken individuals and communities, and how it may affect the governance of risk ultimately.

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