

# Making Sense of Resilience in Peacebuilding Contexts: Approaches, Applications, Implications

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Based on a speech delivered at the 2012 Annual Meeting of the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform on “Operationalising resilience in peacebuilding contexts: approaches, lessons, action points,” this paper aims at providing a basis to better understand the idea of resilience in peacebuilding. This paper specifically focuses on four key issues: (1) resilience as a multi-disciplinary academic concept; (2) the relationship of resilience to the concept of transformation; (3) the significance of resilience as a conceptual tool in peacebuilding as well as peace and conflict analysis; and (4) the policy implications of the notion of resilience in peacebuilding work.

These issues are considered from the perspective of an academic-practitioner in peacebuilding – someone who aims at grasping resilience in theory but who also considers its applied utility in the field. The latter optic focuses our attention on practical but critical questions: what does resilience actually look like in conflict-prone communities? What if anything can we do to strengthen it? When is resilience a good thing to promote, and when is it an impediment to durable solutions to conflict?

*Different approaches to resilience are loaded with opportunities to borrow and adapt, in ways that can enrich our use of the term when applied to peacebuilding work*

The Geneva Peacebuilding Platform is a joint project of four institutions:

***The concept of resilience is difficult to define due to being stretched by a wide range of stakeholders in order to cover their mandate and being a term that is borrowed from various other fields***

As a feature of communities in conflict zones, resilience may be difficult to measure, but is very real. For those of us who work in conflict zones, who watch local communities struggle with insecurity, political violence, armed conflict and displacement over long periods of time, the resilience of some neighbourhoods and districts is extraordinary. This is not true everywhere, though – the capacity to prevent, mediate and resolve conflict varies greatly from one locale to the next. The feature of resilience springs primarily from the strength of internal social capital, trust networks, and leadership. Carefully calibrated external assistance from international actors and national government partners can strengthen local resilience, but at best plays a supporting role.

## **Understanding resilience**

In order to make sense of the relationship between resilience and peacebuilding, we must first attempt to define both terms. Both concepts are, of course, notoriously slippery and hard to define. The parameters of peacebuilding as a concept and a practice have proven to be almost limitlessly expansive and elastic, encompassing – at least in the field – almost every type of aid and intervention imaginable in pre-conflict and post-conflict settings. Analytically, a highly inclusive approach to defining peacebuilding is a nod to the complex and numerous underlying causes of armed conflict and political violence. But generating expansive lists of causes of armed conflict is not the same thing as prioritising them.

And that leads us to the second reason for wide definitions of peacebuilding – the political economy explanation. The process of prioritising causes of conflict leads to the creation of priority peacebuilding programming, which in turn determines the direction of funding, a matter of immediate and existential importance to the many local and external aid agencies working in conflict settings. Inasmuch as peacebuilding – as well as its cousins ‘statebuilding’ and ‘stabilisation’ – have become the principal objectives in post-conflict interventions, everyone is eager to re-hat their programmes as an essential component of peacebuilding. Aid agencies are, it turns out, ‘complex adaptive systems,’ that have proven quite resilient in the face of new approaches and priorities.

Resilience is equally slippery to define, and also equally susceptible to the political economy of re-branding, as various actors scramble to ensure that their programmes hit all the right notes in order to secure funding in a field that seems exceptionally susceptible to new trends and buzzwords. “Resilience has become the zeitgeist,” notes one commentator in a recent paper<sup>1</sup>. It goes on: “The concept has intuitive appeal, which in part accounts for its prevalence and uptake.” Then it warns: “Any slippage into rebranding existing work as ‘resilience’ without an adequate step change in thinking or approach is a false economy. ... Amalgamating funding could provide leverage – unwelcome for some – to force more collaborative efforts in the pursuit of a common goal. The challenges that are likely to arise relate to the age-old problems of different mandates, priorities and willingness to engage in national politics.” I stress this political economy and organisational reality as someone who conducts conflict analyses for various

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<sup>1</sup>K. Harris (2013) *Financing for Emergency Preparedness: Links to Resilience*. Background Note. London: Overseas Development Institute, p.1-2, 6.

donors and the UN, and who finds that at times the process comes under pressure from a wide range of 'stakeholders' arguing that their particular mandate be given prominent place in the conflict assessment. If we are not insistent that some sources of resilience to conflict are more important than others, conflict assessments and identification of sources of local and national resilience run the risk of being reduced to UN Inter-agency Consolidated Appeals.

Resilience is not just difficult to define because everyone is looking to stretch the definition to cover their mandates and programmes. It is also difficult because it is a term borrowed from other fields. It was first utilised in engineering and material science, then ecology, medicine, psychology, economics, among others -- and most recently livelihoods, humanitarian response, statebuilding, stabilisation, and peacebuilding. The application of resilience in material science – where it is understood to be a measurable physical property of metals, plastics, and other materials that determines their ability to resume their original size and shape after being subject to stress – is quite different from its meaning in ecology – where it involves the ability of an eco-system to recover from or adapt to short-term disturbances or longer-term changes in the wider environment. It is even more distinct from its application in psychology, where resilience is understood as the coping mechanisms and state of mind which allows an individual to 'bounce back' from negative events or stress, or even to 'bounce back better.' In consequence, resilience is not a concept – it is a conceptually-loaded word, one that carries many potential meanings from a variety of fields. This gives it very interesting potential, but also carries risks of misapplication and miscommunication. In the literature on resilience, many have voiced concern about the proliferation of different meanings of the concept across different fields of study, and have called for a common definition of resilience. This is simply not possible. Moreover, it is not clear that it is even a problem to be solved. Instead, it may be an opportunity. That is to say, the different definitions and approaches to resilience in different disciplines are loaded with opportunities to borrow and adapt, in ways that can enrich our use of the term when applied to peacebuilding work.

For instance, from the study of material science, the relationship of resilience to brittleness serves to remind us that flexibility, not mere strength, is often the key quality of resilience. From mechanical engineering, system redundancy as a source of resilience underscores that communities are most resilient when multiple actors are able to assume a critical function. From ecology, the distinction between conservationism (preserving conditions that facilitate ongoing processes of adaptation and change) and preservationism (maintaining conditions 'as they are') is of potential use in peacebuilding strategies, reminding us that resilience is not and should not be about imperviousness to change, and that imperviousness to change can be, in some settings, a recipe for extinction. The field of ecology's vibrant debate on equilibrium versus dis-equilibrium theories is also a reminder that for, at least some types of systems, non-linearity and seemingly chaotic relationships are the norm, and disguise complex forms of equilibrium. From psychology, studies investigating why some individuals are more resilient than others after experiencing similar trauma highlight the fact that the sources of resilience appear to involve complex and variable combinations of factors. There is simply no parsimonious inventory of sources of resilience on which to draw.

***Resilience is a conceptually-loaded word rather than a coherent concept***

***Different approaches to resilience are loaded with opportunities to borrow and adapt, in ways that can enrich our use of the term when applied to peacebuilding work***

*Most studies on resilience focus on the ability of systems to cope, adapt and reorganise in response to a chronic challenge*

Many, if not most studies of resilience, focus on systems, including 'complex adaptive systems.' Their attention is on the ability of any kind of system to cope, adapt, and reorganise in response to a chronic challenge. In this regard, the emphasis on resilience is not a property allowing a system to resist change, or bounce back, but rather to adapt. Consequently, this focuses our attention on the issue of change – how systems respond to change.

## **Applying resilience to peacebuilding**

Reflecting on how this idea can be applied to peacebuilding, two concerns come to mind. First, what is the relationship between *resilience to conflict* and *change*? There are several possibilities:

- 1. Resilience defined as the ability to maintain a positive peace.** This is, in essence, local conflict prevention. In this instance, a community is at peace, and enjoys a 'positive peace' (not an imposed negative peace), but is then confronted by conflict pressures arising either from without or within. A resilient community is one which is able to successfully resist pressure to resort to violence as it resolves or manages the tension. In this scenario, the status quo is the goal, and is perceived as good. Efforts to support this type of resilience are best described as akin to the public health goal of 'inoculation.' It frequently manifests itself in extraordinary instances of neighbourhoods, towns, or regions in conflict zones that are able to maintain high levels of peace despite surrounding violence, even to the point of becoming safe havens.
- 2. Resilience defined as the ability to manage the process of transforming a negative peace into a positive peace.** This is also a form of conflict prevention, but involves a very different set of circumstances and strategies. Communities living in a context of negative peace require different types of resilience to help them both catalyse and then manage change toward positive peace. First, where communities are pressing for government reforms aimed at transforming a negative peace to a positive one (typically involving calls to end authoritarianism, ethno-hegemony or police repression) they must be resilient to government efforts to stoke local tensions as a form of divide and rule. Second, when reform efforts begin to succeed, communities need resilience to manage peacefully the expression of pent-up anger over past injustices, and, in new democracies, build immunity in their communities against ethnic and sectarian mobilisation by political opportunists. Third, in instances where a repressive government begins to fail in the face of insurgencies or popular protests, resilience manifests itself in the ability of communities to maintain peace and order in their towns and neighbourhoods even in the absence of police and the government security sector.

**3. Resilience defined as a quest for status quo ante bellum.** This scenario involves communities that have been overwhelmed by armed conflict, emanating either from without or within. When the conflict is over, the community works to consolidate peace with the aim of returning to the pre-war dispensation. However, this goal is usually both unobtainable and undesirable. Conflicts create new political dynamics, heighten grievances, erode trust, undermine credibility of authorities, and damage networks. 'Negative' resilience – the type that resists adaptation to the new post-conflict setting – risks rendering the community more vulnerable to renewed violence. 'Positive' resilience in this context allows communities to embark on trust-building and confidence-building measures, address war grievances fairly, and, as discussed below, have the vision to build new patterns of local governance and representation, rather than seek to recreate conditions which may have contributed to the armed conflict itself.

**4. Finally, resilience can be viewed as transformation.** This is the most challenging notion arising from discussions of resilience, conflict, and change. Some conflict situations require transformational, rather than incremental change, in systems of representation and structures of power, such as in the case of the Arab Spring. Still others – the many cases of state failure in conflict zones – require the building or revival of the state itself. The move from a failed to functional state may be transformational in nature. However, transformational change in politics is very often the handiwork of war and political violence, rather than gradual negotiated change. There are exceptions – for instance, one thinks of the end of apartheid in South Africa as transformational change that was peaceful – but more often than not political violence, rather than peacebuilding, is the central driver in transforming conflict situations. This is an interesting problem for peacebuilding programmes, which typically assume that armed conflict is a problem to be prevented – not a tool of transformation and change.

When resilience is discussed in a context of transformation, it is very often addressed in the context of stabilisation strategies, after an undesirable regime or armed group, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Al-Shabaab in southern Somalia that has been pushed out of what subsequently becomes a 'liberated area.' Resilience in that narrow context involves the consolidation of a transformational change after the use of armed conflict.

Another question stemming from the idea of 'complex adaptive systems' is this: are local peacebuilding capacities accurately understood as systems, or is the notion of a network a better metaphor? One can certainly speak of livelihoods systems, eco-systems, and governmental systems. However, peacebuilding as a function, especially in the places we are most concerned about – local level communities in weak or failed states – is typically a process that is informal and unsystematic. At this point, at least some of the utility of the concept of resilience seems to get lost in translation when imported from other disciplines.

*In the context of transformation, resilience is often discussed as stabilisation strategies after an undesirable regime or armed group*

The network-driven, informal nature of peacebuilding in most conflict prone areas is still amenable to the concept of resilience – only in a different way. Networks can have variable levels of resilience themselves. They can be rich in redundancy and alternative channels of communication; they are eminently flexible and fast in response; they can rely heavily on social capital of local civic leaders – a value that can be built up and stored.

For peacebuilding, the bottom line on resilience can be reduced to a simple question: is this word, this freighted concept, useful in organising and clarifying one's thinking about peacebuilding, or is it just the latest buzzword in the already crowded lexicon of our field?

In some ways, skeptics are correct to point out that a lot of what we mean by resilience is just another way of describing what most good peacebuilding has already been doing. Yet in the context of peacebuilding, the notion of resilience may have some unique analytic utility. It highlights that successful conflict prevention, mitigation and transformation is dependent on a syndrome of qualities that local communities must possess, rather than necessarily externally engineered processes. The qualities that make up resilience are deeply embedded, not virtues that can be quickly transferred in a workshop. They involve dense patterns of trust networks, hybrid coalitions forged across a wide range of actors, shared narratives, common interests, multiple lines of communication, good leadership, and a commitment by local leaders to take risks for peace – whether this includes negotiating with or confronting potential armed spoilers.

### **Implications for aid agencies**

Several major challenges loom for aid agencies seeking to promote resilience as a peacebuilding objective. Addressing these challenges constitutes the main actions points the international community should focus on.

The first is analytic – developing a better capacity to understand local resilience to conflict, and to disseminate what we know. Analysis of resilience has been built into current conflict assessment frameworks. However, most of what we look for by way of local resilience tends to be boiler-plate 'capacities for peace.' Effective conflict-sensitive programming needs much more granular, contextual knowledge of local resilience. Local resilience is dynamic and prone to sudden shifts. In consequence, it must be monitored constantly, instead of being taken as a snapshot every five years. In addition, local resilience can vary from village to village, from neighbourhood to neighbourhood. Getting this kind of analysis right requires a significant investment of time and expertise. The United Nations itself does make such investments. However, they tend to be routinised security assessments by the United Nations Department of Safety and Security focussing on security threats rather than on resilience. Put another way, the international focus is much more heavily weighted toward identifying threats rather than on local capacities to manage them. Moreover, even when we succeed in capturing 'granular' knowledge of local resilience and local capacities for peace in the context of a conflict analysis, it is almost always politically sensitive and therefore rarely shared beyond the confines of the agency which commissioned the study. Disseminating



knowledge about local resilience is sometimes as great an obstacle as generating that knowledge.

The second challenge is operational. Do we have the tools to strengthen local resilience? This is especially important because most of what passes for local resilience to conflict involves informal hybrid governance arrangements. These are largely invisible to outsiders, and possess no obvious 'plug-in' feature for aid agencies. In cases when local resilience is recognised, there is the risk of investing too much money and attention to these informal networks, in the process inadvertently undermining them. To be sure, there are some cases where international agencies have been able to provide critically important support toward local resilience and peacebuilding. Such success stories involve several critical variables:

- (1) a commitment of time – to get to know the conflict dynamics and to build a knowledgeable national staff on the ground;
- (2) surgical, careful interventions designed to support, not drive, what must be a locally owned process;
- (3) a willingness not to 'projectise' local resilience, which can unintentionally undermine the credibility of local peacebuilders by making them look like yet another externally-funded local NGO.

The third challenge is strategic. When is it appropriate to assist local hybrid peacebuilding networks and build their resilience? And when does it risk creating more problems than it solves? In the context of local resilience, we are not just talking about a peacebuilding network but typically local actors – actors that have local authority, power and legitimacy that may or may not coincide with the interest of an emerging revived central government in a post-conflict setting. Determining when to work directly with the local community, when to build resilience through the central government, and when it is possible to work with both simultaneously is not easy, and can be politically sensitive.

Most of the literature on the subject, including The World Bank's World Development Report 2011, suggests that it is ultimately the capacity of the state and its rule of law that is going to prevent conflict. The challenge is the transitional period between the end of a conflict and the rebuilding of a government's capacity to play this critical role. Statebuilding is, of course, a very slow process. It may take a generation for so-called failed states to reach a level of institutionalisation allowing it to provide law, order and security. In the interim, local communities have a right to protect themselves and prevent local conflict themselves. In these settings, it is crucial to develop better transitional peacebuilding strategies that help build local capacities for peace without contributing to the marginalisation of weak governments.

*The international focus is much more heavily weighted toward identifying threats rather than on local capacities to manage them*

***Peacebuilding in local communities is highly informal and unsystematic***

A fourth challenge is learning. How do we learn about what is working, where resilience occurs and about how to build resilience? How can local communities be given a chance to learn from one another providing an opportunity of cross-fertilisation of ideas both within and across countries? We have only begun to document and compare local resilience to conflict.

A fifth and final challenge is evaluation and monitoring. What does resilience actually look like, and can you measure it? Ultimately, the problem with resilience comes back to the broader problem of reporting on conflict prevention. The best indicator of success in conflict prevention is when conflict does not happen, yet it is also impossible to prove that a programme promoting resilience had anything to do with that non-event. Our interest in promoting resilience rests uneasily beside our commitment to make aid programmes more measurable and hence more accountable. This is especially problematic for programmes with long-term horizons, not quick impact.



## Concluding observations

Let me conclude these remarks with two final observations about the utility of resilience in the field of peacebuilding. For two decades now, conflict early warning systems have encountered the same problem – the puzzle of wars that did not occur. A host of countries and sub-state regions have exhibited all of the warning signs of impending armed conflict – they form part of an expansive inventory of ‘at risk’ states. But in the end, only a small fraction of them actually slide into armed conflict, and some of the most vulnerable states somehow manage to walk to, and stay on, the edge of the conflict cliff without ever going over. The conventional response has been to point to the fact that precipitating causes of conflict also must be present, and that those are much harder to predict. This is true. But it is also the case that some countries, and local communities, are simply more resilient than others to the pressures that push societies into armed violence. Resilience must be taken into account as a contributing factor when explaining why so many countries possess all of the hallmarks of states on the verge of communal violence or civil war, yet never descend into war.

Second, as we learn more about resilience to conflict, we must stay acutely aware of the fact that most networks and cultures of local resilience are not equipped to cope with some of the seismic changes reshaping the environment and livelihoods of many communities around the world. For instance, the new and unprecedented pressures on local resources emanating from a combination of climate change, rapid population growth, land concentration, and other factors may constitute a ‘force majeure’ that overwhelm local resilience. While acknowledging the impressive capacities of some local communities to withstand the pressure to resort to or succumb to armed violence, we must not be complacent about their ability to cope with new conflict pressures which could easily overwhelm them.

***In cases when local resilience is defined by hybrid governance arrangements, there is the risk of investing too much money and attention to these informal networks, in the process inadvertently undermining them***

## About the author and the paper

Ken Menkhaus is Professor of Political Science, Davidson College, Davidson, United States of America. The brief captures the key-note speech delivered at the 2012 Annual Meeting of the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform on "Operationalising Resilience in Peacebuilding Contexts: Approaches, Lessons, Action Points". The author would like to thank Oliver Jütersonke, Moncef Kartas, and Achim Wennmann for comments and Antonia Does for Editorial assistance.

## About the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform

The Geneva Peacebuilding Platform is an inter-agency network that connects the critical mass of peacebuilding actors, resources, and expertise in Geneva and worldwide. Founded in 2008, the Platform has a mandate to facilitate interaction on peacebuilding between different institutions and sectors, and to advance new knowledge and understanding of peacebuilding issues and contexts. It also plays a creative role in building bridges between International Geneva, the United Nations peacebuilding architecture in New York, and peacebuilding activities in the field. The Platform's network comprises more than 2500 peacebuilding professionals and over 60 institutions working on peacebuilding directly or indirectly. As part of its 2012-2014 Programme, the Platform provides policy-relevant advice and services, ensures the continuous exchange of information through seminars, consultations, and conferences, and facilitates outcome-oriented peacebuilding dialogues in five focus areas. For more information see <http://www.gpplatform.ch>.

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## Other Platform publications on resilience

Oliver Jütersonke and Moncef Kartas (2012) *Resilience: Conceptual Reflections* (Platform Brief 6).

Jennifer Milliken (2013) *Resilience: From Metaphor to an Action Plan for the Peacebuilding Field* (Platform Paper 7)

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