

**Entretien avec Frauke de Weijer
(ECDPM)**

Cette interview fait partie d'un panel d'entretiens réalisés par Inter-réseaux sur la thématique de la résilience aux crises alimentaires au Sahel.

Frauke de Weijer est expert à ECDPM (*European Center for Development Policy Management*).

Inter-réseaux: Do you use the resilience approach and how would you define it?

Frauke de Weijer: For a few years now, I have used it a lot in my own thinking, with regard to the fields of international development and state-building in particular. At the same time, resilience has become also a buzzword in development circles.

Resilience is the ability of a system to cope with shocks in a dynamic way. There is a consensus on this basic definition, but the definition in question is not very helpful. The type of resilience depends on the risk: food security or health entail different types of resilience. Resilience as such is not very relevant: it needs to be operationalized. Simply putting resilience in itself as a goal is not very helpful; instead we need to answer these questions: Resilience to what, when, and for whom?

The strength of the concept of resilience lies in its systemic nature: it is a combination of a number of factors. It consists in assessing and improving systems' ability to absorb shocks and to renew itself if necessary in the light of these shocks. For instance in can stand in contrast to maximizing production; maximizing production does not always enhance resilience, in fact it very often makes a country / a farm / an organization very vulnerable to particular shocks because it is less diversified. What matters is what the effects are on the systems, and how the systems can react.

IR: Is resilience really a new approach? What does it bring, especially in operational terms?

FW: Yes, I think resilience is a totally different way of thinking. In the horn of Africa, the introduction of resilience-oriented programs has opened up opportunities for cross-disciplinary thinking and collaboration. Production, the climate, political institutions, governance systems interact with each other. You cannot look at production in isolation, you need to look at it in combination. That awareness is coming, and resilience does help in that respect.

However, when programs advertise resilience without challenging the way of thinking, then the newness of the concept gets lost, which is problematic.

Of course not everything is new in this approach: the livelihoods approach is based on similar ideas. But resilience is a more dynamic term, since coping strategies evolve over time.

IR: Are there limits or risks associated with resilience?

FW: There is nothing wrong with the concept of resilience; as it is in itself a descriptive, not a normative concept. The risk would lie in the way it is used, especially if it is understood as necessarily positive. Here is an example: corruption is extremely resilient. So the question is: whose resilience do we want to promote, and which functions do you want the system to continue to perform in the face of shocks?

There is a limit to how broadly you want to make your analysis. You always have to draw boundaries, because you can not take everything under the sun into consideration. Yet, at the same time everything is embedded in a larger system. There is therefore a risk of getting paralyzed because of the intricate and complex interactions between the system and the larger system in which it is embedded. Somehow, boundaries thus need to be drawn between the system you are looking at and the environment around the system. They are both important, and it is especially the interaction between them where resilience lies. The social system under consideration could be a community within a country or a country within a region, for example.

IR: How do you operationalize a resilient-friendly approach, and where to start?

FW: You need to take existing sources of resilience as a starting point, and build on what constitutes resilience in a specific context. For instance, what are the biggest risks that a society faces, how are its systems set up to manage and mitigate that risk, how well do its decision-making abilities function (and in particular in relation to that particular risk). Then, the second really important aspect is to look at a system in a more holistic way; not look purely at economics, or at social services, or security, or whatever other one-dimensional silo. You need to understand how these different aspects interact with each other, and how interventions in one sector can have a positive or negative effect on each other. As an example: I have worked with pastoralists in East Africa: mobility is the key to them. And yet, many of the policies that are being formulated reduce it. A lot of policies are therefore resilience reducers. The question that should be asked is the following: what enhances resilience and how could we conceive programs that would enhance it? A lot of programs are about maximizing production, instead of looking for a better management of risk. A shift towards the latter would be very helpful. The bureaucratic structures in place sometimes make it difficult to move towards resilience management. Taking building resilience seriously implies a bottom-up approach, not a top-down one: identifying the existent source of resilience (like mobility for pastoralists) and trying to improve it, or rather create the conditions in which these sources of resilience can flourish.

IR: Are there instruments and tools to measure and assess resilience?

FW: This is a difficult question. I think you can only operationalize risk in terms of a specific function. If you look at resilience to drought, you can measure how many animals have died, how the income has suffered, or the ability to come back to a certain livelihood. For every situation, you can come up with proxy indicators.

Some things are harder to measure. For instance, in the West, political systems are able to deal with change; they can cope with changes as they occur. As such, the decision-making systems and our capacities for collective action are quite well able to deal with change in a constructive manner. Many African political systems are less able to do so. Yet, we are a long way ahead before we can measure this ability of a state or a society to deal with change.

For now, the priority should probably be to see whether our policies or programs are damaging or enhancing the sources of resilience of the targeted.

IR: Are there existing programs that can be used as blueprints for a resilience-friendly approach?

FW: Some NGOs do a relatively good job, be it at a micro-level. These approaches, that do take existing practices and coping mechanisms as a starting point are very helpful, but they need to become less insular and more connected to more macro-institutional aspects.

In the field of pastoralism some good examples can be found, as well as in the peacebuilding sphere. The current initiatives around infrastructures for peace are moving in that direction.

Even though I am not deeply involved myself, I feel that the new IGAD initiatives for enhancing drought resilience in the Horn of Africa have some potential in pursuing a more resilience-friendly approach, although the jury is still out.

IR: Donors are interested in value for money, but they sometimes also want results in the short term and simple solutions. Is this an obstacle to a renewed approach of foreign aid?

FW: Yes, most definitely. This is one of the biggest challenges at the moment. This requires a two-pronged approach;

- (i) education of the public that there are no easy answers, and that interventions that have the potential to be the most transformative are often the hardest to measure, and the other way around.
- (ii) finding other ways of measuring proxies that capture the progress, but are less stifling. Perception surveys is one such mechanism, as well as behavioral outcomes.

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