

Entretien avec Malcolm Ridout (High Level Task Force on global food security)

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

I am employed by DFID but seconded to the High Level Task Force co-ordination team on global food security, which consists of the UN agencies plus WB plus OECD, under the chairmanship of the secretary general. The task force is coordinated by David Nabarro. My particular area of focus is on recurrent crises and resilience.

Inter-réseaux: How would you define resilience?

Malcolm Ridout: I try to resist definitions, although people certainly like them! Most of the definitions of resilience currently in use are not bad. They have in common the idea of a shock, and the ability of communities and people to absorb and change in some ways to accommodate future disturbances. "Bouncing forward", "improving" are often heard when it comes to resilience.

Resilience ties together a lot of the talk going on in DRR and climate adaptation. Resilience is in between: it has in it the idea of a shock, but it is also more specific – you need to determine who is resilient to what.

"Let's increase resilience" does not make much sense by itself. If you want to make the concept practical, you need to get specific: who needs to be made resilient to what?

Another part of the equation is seeing resilience not as a thing you can buy, like for instance better flood defences, but something that you are, that emerges from a set of technical, political, social actions or policies. It focuses attention back on communities on people rather than technocratic solutions. So with resilience, we shift from exclusively external technical inputs to people's ability to use that information and adapt it to their own situation.

Moreover, if we say that resilience is an emergent property, then it enables people to react to shocks that were foretold, but also able to take new, often unforeseen opportunities..

For instance, DFID and SCF put together a cash distribution in Swaziland, done through banks. So people needed a bank account and an ID to receive the cash. So one of the spin-offs of the programme is that they got ID cards: and with these ID cards, they felt they had a stake in society and 'became real people'. A second consequence is that a lot of them were able to get access to loans and start a business. Resilience is not all about productivity and the problem right in front of you, but starting a journey: being open to change.

IR: What are the origins of the concept?

The concept of resilience emerged from a number of places. DFID's Emergency Response Review identified it as a major issue, but it was circulating before that. It is based on the observation that humanitarian needs continue to rise; as a result, the response is becoming more and more expensive. There seems no end to the needs, or the suffering. That is why there was a need to address some of the root causes to get off this deadly merry-go-round. The great success obtained in DRR programmes in Asia, especially in Bangladesh, also contributed to the coming to the fore of resilience. It is difficult to pinpoint where it emerged and who was the first to use the word.

From a theoretical point of view, if you go back to the early emergence of resilience, which was about ecology, it was very much looking at how complex systems adapt. Some changes can be absorbed, in other situations simple changes can have large effects. For instance, when they reintroduced wolves in Yellowstone National Park, the wolves ate the elk, letting woodland recover, encouraging back beavers and leading to the rebirth of a whole wetland ecosystem.

I think it would be foolish to think you can produce resilience by looking at one piece of the system. If it comes out of the interplay of many different forces, intervening in a part of it may make a difference, but it can sometimes be hard to predict results in advance.

IR: How do you operationalize resilience? For instance, how can we increase the resilience of a pastoralist community to drought?

There are a lot of good examples of the kind of things that increase resilience. In terms of pastoralists, it's about preserving access to grazing regions in dry season, reducing conflicts with farmers, allowing people to de-stock more quickly, but less about animal health. Well tried soil and water conservation techniques are also known to be good at increasing ability of pastoralists to cope.

What is less clear is how these different initiatives add up to resilience. Sometimes, things can be a bit counterintuitive: they don't quite work as you thought. For example, drilling boreholes to provide more water in dry areas can lead to overgrazing of wet season grazing, actually reducing the overall carrying capacity of the rangeland over time. Resilience is about thinking how we add up some of the technical stuff. Do people have ways of marketing surpluses, financial services to enable them, education to diversify income streams as the population grows? These are many different things that need to work together. Being able to put together those building blocks and predict that they'll increase resilience is very difficult.

IR: How do we measure resilience?

This is a question that is starting to preoccupy people. Some think it's not important, on the grounds that all you need is everything to be ok when a disaster comes along. Here's an example: building an earthquake-resistant school in Katmandou. Any increase in the ability of schools to earthquakes is likely to save lives.

But if you're investing in resilience in a food-insecure area, you may put a lot of investment in it and yet not be able to avoid the tipping point to dangerous levels of food insecurity. Say you improve productivity on 20,000 hectares but it is not enough: there is still a famine when the drought comes along. Then you've failed, and wasted your money. That is why, in this case, you need to know and measure where the tipping point is, and calibrate your investment accordingly.

There is a great deal of knowledge about food insecurity, which can help you define where the tipping point is, but this is only a marker: it doesn't tell you *how* your activities will avoid it. That is something that people have to wrestle with: because you deal with uncertain futures and complicated systems, prediction becomes difficult – and political systems like simple solutions. Agencies need to come up with simple narratives.

IR: On what instruments should resilience policies rely?

I am not convinced we need more indicators. People are already counting obsessively! Resilience refocuses on the communities, their ability to start articulating their constraints and needs. Systems need to be treated as a whole; stakeholders will need to start talking to each other. A lot of agencies have written about resilience: now we need to build a consensus, which would save time and effort. In Somalia: UNICEF, WFP and FAO are working together and it goes well. People need to share more and be more relaxed about the fact that they do not know everything. Building resilience is about addressing "wicked problems": problems that keep changing as you go along.

IR: How is resilience affecting programme-planning? Are there existing initiatives that can be termed "pro-resilience"?

The aspiration towards resilience, the idea that we can no longer look backwards on the programs, counting activities and outputs but need to think forward is a huge step, a general shift in mindset. Of course the understanding varies, there's a temptation to use the word loosely.

I would cite the 3N programme in Niger as a model. Its director, Amadou Diallo, says there are basic things like roads, markets, education, that we know help us to achieve resilience. From there, a hundred things that will happen and we need to keep up with them. We're starting on a journey. The endpoint will be a better understanding of what need to change. Basically, it is crucial to start.

IR: How does a "resilience" mindset impact governance? Do we need a rethink of the existing programmes?

I am not an expert on West Africa, but what governments do together is likely to be increasingly important. For instance the closure of the borders in Northern Nigeria had immediate knock-on effects right across West Africa.

I do not think we need to start over or reinvent the wheel: with ECOWAS we are where we are, and we should start from there.

Moreover, I'd like to point out that when governments are faced with important threats, they do act well. For instance, the Locust control organization in the 90s continued to operate in the middle of the war in the Horn of Africa. You could say that this is an example of policy resilience.

IR: What about the limits of the concept and the risks associated with it?

Some programs are designed to increase resilience but we don't know if they will. One of the difficulties I foresee is that there may be a lot of things that have the potential to increase resilience but to actually produce they need to add up logically, have some synergy. Getting the timing and the sequencing right, understanding the constraints is not going to be easy. It is challenged by the current aid system, one that loves logic: A to B to C. It's difficult to change that. In fact you need to adjust and change what you do in the light of information as it comes forward. I'm confident that it will, because there are enough donors and governments that are interested in better programs.

IR: How do you "sell" resilience at the political level?

It's a challenge, because aid and budgets are short term. Still, governments are sometimes able to think forward, if you look at what countries do in their own jurisdictions in terms of long-term planning. For instance, in the UK, the government invested in flood defences. Western governments are used to dealing with complicated political problems; now the challenge is extending that to aid!

I also think that aid agencies are going to get better at telling the story about the journey towards resilience. You cannot be content with "We built 20 dams' any more. Instead they need to show how those dams fit into a sustainable and viable livelihood for the people they were meant for. This will mean that agencies and different technical disciplines will have to work more closely together. They also need to resist putting resilience into every proposal they make and be more disciplined about the use of the concept. This will put decision makers off as decision makers know a buzzword when they see one. Agencies need to tell the whole story better, illustrating how actions now will bring about lasting change, avoid catastrophe and save money in the long run. If they tell the story better, governments will see how it works.

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