

## Resilience: buzz word or critical strategic concept?<sup>1</sup>

The currently fashionable term of 'resilience' is a positive antidote to the negative connotation of 'vulnerability' as it refers to the potential and capacities of each community. Nevertheless, the concept remains controversial. Everyone seems to have their own definition of 'resilience', and there is a risk that rather than bringing clarity, it will only bring confusion. Though improving the capacity of communities to resist shocks is a common objective of organizations working in different operational sectors, does this concept help them to work together and improve their coordination? Rather than considering climate change, natural disasters and poverty to be independent problems, combining and linking these three areas could, theoretically, contribute to meeting the challenges related to risk and change which have a direct impact on the lives and work of local communities. But to what extent can these three areas be combined? What are the risks and opportunities of doing so? Will this allow resilience to be strengthened? With each community seeming to have its own specific way of understanding what is behind our labels, what effect do these concepts have at the local level?

In the last few years, there has been a growing number of disasters, often the consequence of "extreme climatic events", be it violent hurricanes, large scale floods or repeated devastating droughts. Climate change may well augment the magnitude of these events, increase their frequency and aggravate their impact. In many areas, the poorer the population, the more it is affected by these events: slum dwellers in the typhoon belt of Asia, destitute pastoral populations, migrants, etc. Similarly, large-scale destruction has been caused by tectonic phenomena affecting planned and unplanned densely populated urban settlements, where establishing codes of construction and norms has been the least of the concerns of the national and local authorities. In addition, many smaller events of all kinds pose considerable challenges that disrupt livelihoods, especially for those who have few resources and alternatives to fall back on.

In this context, integrating Disaster Risk Reduction, Climate Change Adaptation and Poverty Reduction initiatives under one umbrella seems a timely idea, in that it seeks to counter a fragmented, project-based approach. In principle, integrating these three areas could help to tackle the challenges of every-

day risk and change which are affecting people's lives and livelihoods in a more coordinated manner, rather than seeing them as separate problems.

A number of initiatives have currently emerged to put this idea into practice, such as Climate-Smart Disaster Risk Management ([community.eldis.org/scr](http://community.eldis.org/scr)) and the integration of adaptation, mitigation and sustainable development (Southampton). IRC, the water and sanitation people at Delft, recently published a report entitled 'Adaptation... to climate change and other sources of risk' (Batchelor *et al.*, 2011).

Not all of these approaches are equally successful. For example, the IPCC's recent attempt to integrate climate change and disasters in their 2010 report, while commendable, was limited to an economic perspective. Yet, clearly something is going on: the growing literature on integration is bound to have an impact on the way aid is programmed and organizations are designed. Is this a good idea, and how far can it be taken?

### Exploring the possible synergies between Climate Change Adaptation, Disaster Risk Reduction and Poverty Reduction.

Our RESILIENCE consortium, funded by EuropAid was set up in 2010 to explore the potential for synergies between these concepts, to analyze the institutional disconnects that hinder these synergies, and finally to identify possible areas for policy development in European institutions. Comprising a non-governmental organization linked to a series of international networks (CARE Nederland), an academic institution (the Disaster Studies Center of Wageningen University) and an operational research and evaluation think tank (Groupe URD), the RESILIENCE consortium has been exploring the different facets of these issues, their possible integration and the institutional prerequisites to make integration work. Our research has shown that integrating Disaster Risk Reduction, Climate Change Adaptation and Poverty Reduction is far from obvious: though an attractive idea, there are also some drawbacks. When we started the RESILIENCE project in 2010, the idea of integrating the three fields was relatively new, and even today it is not yet part of the mainstream. Our three field studies in Indonesia, Bolivia and Ethiopia and the series of workshops we carried out in these three countries and in Brussels helped us to identify a number of lessons in relation to what works and what does not.

## Diagnosis: why integration is needed

Compartmentalization is a state of mind: it allows us to see concepts in isolation from each other rather than in relation to each other (Kemp, 2004). This is typical of organizations structured like machine bureaucracies, which function on the basis of categories or 'boxes' (Mintzberg, 1983). Not only European and national agencies but also NGOs and large businesses can work in this way. This logic has been adopted by a host of organizations in order to access funds and organize their accountability system; it is a way of getting things funded and being accountable. As a result, it can easily incite project workers to look 'upwards' to please donors, rather than 'downwards', to optimize links with the realities on the ground. Of course people working in said 'bureaucracies' are not ignorant of the problems of compartmentalization. They themselves need to be increasingly resilient: donors and NGOs will need to adapt to a changing political climate (CCA); they themselves are faced with budget cuts (PR) due to declining popular and financial support; and they themselves need to prevent disastrous projects (DRR).

However, a conceptual change seems vital as, in practice, the reality on the ground is more integrated and holistic. At the operational level, adhering to separate domains can lead to counterproductive contradictions and duplication of efforts (Gero *et al.*, 2011).

Thus, sending different teams to the field, each working separately either on DRR, on CCA or on PR projects, without linking with each other is a) very confusing for local communities who live in multi-risk environments and are simultaneously impacted by interrelated shocks, b) not very efficient for organizations who multiply efforts by working in the same area, towards the same goal, but with different conceptual backgrounds, approaches and sources of funding and c) masking some of the real issues. There is increasing evidence that climate change is taking place, but debates continue in some circles about its causes. Many believe in the hypothesis that climate change is responsible for the increased number of extreme climatic events, the growing vulnerability of many agro-ecosystems, the degraded resilience of many urban contexts and poverty while others still feel that there is not enough evidence to support this idea.

Moreover, the separation of DRR, CCA and PR projects during a response can seem artificial. A project like building a water tank or basin may be funded

under each of the three headings - as Climate Change Adaptation (storage for future scarcity), as Disaster Risk Reduction (to counter effects of drought) and as Poverty Reduction (for tank-irrigated agricultural production). This example illustrates the discursive flexibility and fungibility of the three areas, which as policy fields are much more distinct. The distinction is even less obvious if we stop looking upward, to what we think donors and policymakers want, and instead look at the intended beneficiaries of aid projects. A growing literature (e.g. Van Aalst 2006, O'Brien *et al.* 2004, Gero 2011)



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Borona region,  
Ethiopia, 2011

is starting to address the integration between climate change and disaster risk reduction, at policy and operational levels: community-based CCA and DRR and climate-smart DRR. Another trend in the literature is to link disaster relief and rehabilitation to development (LRRD) and climate change to development. As the practitioners from the fields of DRR, CCA and PR we interviewed between November 2011 and February 2012 told us, it is not enough to provide weather forecasts and to build cyclone shelters, livelihoods need to be taken into account. And clean drinking water needs to be available or the people will be too ill to organize themselves... to tackle hazards.

While we commend the conceptual breakthrough, based on our experiences in the field as part of the RESILIENCE project, we argue for a more radical desegregation of these domains. The aforementioned literature implicitly tends to assume that local people (have to) recognize and experience climate change and disasters the way aid workers do, or would like them to do. We encountered 'climate awareness' in Ethiopia but not in Indonesia, whereas in Bolivia people did not always experience floods as 'disasters', especially when they are frequent. Indeed the cosmology of local people may not differentiate between nature and culture, between internal and external sources of risk. Planned interventions may therefore not resonate with the intended beneficiaries. A local focus, talking to various local stakeholders, putting project beneficiaries at centre stage, also compels us to question taken-for-granted categories. While aid practitioners and donors routinely assign labels such as 'vulnerability', 'disaster', 'climate change', 'resilience', these concepts may have little local resonance, or

take on a different meaning. It would therefore be essential to have these conversations before a project gets tendered and funded.

This is all the more relevant since, as noted in the workshop organized by CARE Nederland, Groupe URD and WUR Disaster Studies in Brussels in November 2011, it is vital to invest funds intended for crisis relief beforehand, before crises unfold, rather than needing to do the paperwork in the midst of an emergency. This requires ongoing dialogue with communities at risk and a willingness on the part of donors to take risks. Above all, it also calls into question the enduring disconnect between humanitarian and development donors, who will have to overcome considerable institutional hurdles, historical claims and 'path dependencies'.

### Drawbacks and remedies: modalities of integration

While we see great potential for synergies, based on our experiences, there are also some drawbacks.

One is the issue of integration itself. Integration is the operative word in popular concepts like Integrated Water Management (Mitchell, 1989), Integrated Flood Management (ADPC), Integrated Risk Management (Fester, 2006), Integrated Disaster Management (Sabhok, 2009), Integrated Adaptation (Fischhendler and Heikkala, 2010). It makes intuitive sense, as a sectoral approach creates inefficiencies and conflicts. While disaster experts are focused on present events, on the 'here and now', climate specialists 'zoom out' to the long term and a wider (systemic) scale, while poverty alleviation requires a community focus. Local people have to contend with many more risks than major disasters and the possibility of climate variability - unemployment, poor governance, diseases, conflict and crime, leaving aside everyday hazards like traffic.

The sixteen interviews held by Nienke Bilo with Dutch and international practitioners from various aid, humanitarian and climate-change organizations showed two key concerns related to integration:

- \* A risk of losing focus, thus creating indistinctiveness and blurriness.
- \* The exclusivity of the approach. Integrating domains may risk overlooking the distinctive nature of each domain. Foregrounding certain relations means backgrounding other, potentially crucial

concerns, such as environmental sustainability, focusing exclusively on the commonalities and leaving out what is exclusive to each domain. An ecosystems approach may even be a basis for climate-change adaptation, disaster risk reduction and poverty reduction. It was pointed out that the domains identified for integration are themselves partial: adaptation reduces the emphasis on mitigation; integrating climate and hazards excludes non-weather events such as earthquakes and volcanoes; while poverty alleviation remains essential in areas experiencing non-disastrous climate change.



Focus group of women affected by a disaster, Bangladesh, 2010

The problematic practicality of integration was also highlighted. A practical problem is that donor procedures, sector specialists' hobbyhorses, NGO habits and even scientific paradigms more often hinder rather than support the crossing of barriers. François Molle (2008) has categorized labels like 'integration' as 'nirvana concepts' - they assume that all the different objectives subsumed under the label can be maximized

simultaneously, when in reality there will always be trade-offs and, at best, only a pragmatic balance can be achieved. Such concepts are elastic and amorphous (Biswas, 2004), a melting-pot in which everyone can put their ideals and hopes.

It is therefore preferable to conceive of more achievable goals, such as integration-*lite* (Butterworth *et al.*, 2010). Integration-*lite* does not try to achieve the unachievable, that is, full integration, but accepts partial modalities where synergies are obvious. This includes breaking through departmental walls of aid agencies and NGOs, without necessarily forcing everyone to work in the same open-plan office. Put differently, translators between different dialects of project language, between different scales of time and space are required, without the need for everyone to speak the same official discourse all the time. Partial integration and interaction may be the best achievable result.

In this context, so-called 'boundary spanners', with entrepreneurial mindsets (Williams, 2002, Bressers and Lulofs, 2010), positioned at intermediate levels at the outskirts of their division may have regular interaction with counterparts in other divisions and in society, and develop sensitive 'feelers' for what is going on outside, sensing joint opportunities and anticipating obstacles to co-operation. They are however at risk of stretching their mandates too

much and losing their internal constituency if they venture too far outside their comfort zone (Warner, 2010; 2012).

Accepting difference is therefore not a bad thing. Although it may sound contradictory, integration can work exactly through compartmentalization (Warner, 2011), that is: to emphasize rather than dilute the constitutive elements of the ensemble. It may be preferable to view integration like a Thai dish, in which the key component flavours (sweet, sour, bitter, salty..) are not thrown together in a hotpot to produce a generic taste, but are still distinguishable, they do not lose their identity and strengths in the mix and can create very tasty, synergetic results. This as opposed to a process that would resemble a different (let's say Chinese?) cuisine, in which the original separate flavors all blend into one<sup>2</sup>. This also makes it easier to monitor and assess what still needs to be improved in the constitutive elements.

It may seem obvious that local multi-stakeholder participation would be a good way of achieving integration between organizations, as it offers space for a wide range of interests, perspectives and capacities as well as social learning. Yet Green and Penning-Rowsell (1999) have made a plausible case that integration and participation pull in different directions: while integration requires a broad, synoptic view, participation tends to be narrower, more parochial. To achieve integration, we do need a coordinating mechanism that brings together the range of voices and perspective into a coherent whole. Bringing together different groups while overlooking differences in power and knowledge between elites and commoners, rich and poor, men and women, also creates the risk of cooptation of local stakeholders into designs that best suit the already powerful.



© C. Raillon Cattle farmers faced with extreme weather conditions, Borona region, Ethiopia, 2011

Integration therefore also requires co-ordination and a form of mediation/facilitation. In the various multi-stakeholder workshops we held in Indonesia, Bolivia, Ethiopia and Brussels in 2011, coordination

among agencies and sectors, between aid NGOs, between neighboring communities and between top and bottom layers of government turned out to be very poor, and a desire for better coordination clearly emerged. But given the project-oriented nature of the current funding system, long-term lead actors are unlikely to emerge spontaneously. Yet coordination cannot be planned in advance, but is the emergent outcome of centralized and decentralized action, and of struggles and cooperation (see also Kooiman, 1993). The outcome won't necessarily be sustainable and equitable; one can only seem to influence (not control) institutional boundaries and connections. Yet, it makes sense to pose the question and facilitate communication that can be conducive to better coordination.

Operational opportunities mentioned in the interviews zoom in on the cross-cutting concept of risk. Mainstreaming risk awareness in development projects, including its monitoring and evaluation, and participatory risk mapping to get a full picture of the 'risk landscape' (Heijmans, 2012) people are faced with on different time scales may point the way forward. The three domains have different time dimensions: while DRR looks at the past and how not to repeat it, CCA looks at a worst-case future scenario and how to prevent it. These time scales are not necessarily in people's cognitive framework, neither on the donor nor recipient side. Looking further into the future while at the same time linking future-oriented activities with the here and now is of the essence. Scenario planning can be helpful here. Although the information is uncertain, scenario planning will likely increase the flexibility of programs and the preparedness of people. This relates to dealing with uncertainties, which not only local people but also operational staff and, especially sponsors, who demand predictability and accountability are not always used to doing.

## Towards resilience?

'Resilience' is an interesting label to describe the integration of CCA, DRR and PR, as it starts from people's own capabilities and potential. It is being hailed as a welcome positive antidote to the negative fixation on people's 'vulnerability' which dominated the disaster sector in the 1990s and early 2000s and a certain view of people as passive victims.

The interviews, however, revealed resilience to be a controversial concept which might create more confusion than enlightenment. It seems to be going the way of "sustainable development" or "governance", meaning all things to all people, and as a result, there is a risk that it will become an empty shell. While in ecology it is descriptive and rather

Darwinian - adapt or perish - in development circles it has taken on a prescriptive, normative meaning, as a desirable quality (cf. Brand and Jax, 2010 for a typology of usage). A very practical finding from our workshops is that resilience does not translate very well into other languages: whether in Indonesia, Bolivia or Ethiopia. Moreover, you always need to ask what form of resilience (resilient to what?) and whose resilience we are talking about?. The resilience of the whole does not mean the resilience of its parts, and *vice versa*. Moreover, we cannot assume the 'parts' to be closely coupled to the 'whole' The remote areas we visited in Indonesia and Bolivia have little or no links with the formal state and NGO support system, or to markets: when the radio is broken, that's it. The formal money economy has little importance in the local subsistence economy. We therefore prefer to take a local focus.

In a descriptive sense, resilience is a sign of realism: even in welfare states, the burden of adapting and responding to risk always lies with the local people first (Kirschenbaum, 2004). Yet as a normative concept, resilience has conservative connotations (bouncing back rather than facilitating change; the assumption that people need to adapt rather than facilitating the adaptation of circumstances to people), while the 'development trap' has admittedly left certain beneficiaries dependent and opportunistic, leaving people to their own devices is not necessarily liberating for those who do not have a great degree of freedom of action when faced with risk.

A facilitating approach to 'resilience', helping people to help themselves (also cf. O'Brien, 2008) might do more justice to the concept, as it points at the role public- and private-sector actors can play in supporting these local capabilities.

## Conclusion

There is a strong case to be made for conceptual and practical integration of DRR, CCA and PR - a development that seems long overdue in a compartmentalized aid community. However, though breaking through boundaries is appealing as a goal, it is very hard to achieve. Different types of organization have different integration needs, capabilities and logics, and the transaction costs of breaking with the past are considerable. While sensible and attractive as an idea, there is still scant empirical evidence of successful integration. Radical decompartmentalization carries transaction costs and implementation challenges. We should perhaps therefore refrain from pursuing an all-inclusive, integrated 'nirvana' and explore the merits of integration-*lite*.

Resilience is the flavour of the day, and represents a welcome positive outlook on human potential to cope with past, present and future adversity. It does not cover everything we need, but as we cannot ignore its current dominance, we will stick with it for want of something better and we will advocate a facilitating, programmatic approach. Let us keep in mind that resilience is the goal, not the means - and that integration is the means, not the goal.

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<sup>2</sup> This symbolization of cuisines and flavors was brought forward by one of the participants during the RESILIENCE workshop in Brussels on November 2011.

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### Fast facts on Project RESILIENCE:

- **Partners:** CARE Nederland, Wageningen University, Groupe URD
- **Aim:** To improve North - South Development Cooperation towards enhanced integrated poverty reduction programming and practices that will better assist poor people improving their livelihood security, while also strengthening their resilience to climate change and other man-made and natural hazards.
- **Case studies:** Kalimantan - Indonesia, Pando - Bolivia, Borana - Ethiopia
- **Beneficiaries:** communities of case studies, aid practitioners, policy makers
- **Implementation period:** Spring 2010 - Autumn 2012
- **Donor:** EuropeAid

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Rebuilding of dykes to protect villages from erosion and the rising sea level, Khulna region, Bangladesh, 2010