On the Nature and Determinants of Poor Households' Resilience in Fragility Contexts

Christophe R. Quétel, Guy Bordin, Alexandre Abreu, Ilektra Lemi & Carlos Sangreman

Published online: 31 May 2021.

Submit your article to this journal ⬚

Article views: 849

View related articles ⬚

View Crossmark data ⬚

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

On the Nature and Determinants of Poor Households' Resilience in Fragility Contexts

Christophe R. Quétel[a], Guy Bordin[a], Alexandre Abreu[b], Ilektra Lemi[a] and Carlos Sangreman[b]

[a]European Commission – Joint Research Centre, Unit E7, Knowledge for Migration, Security and Space, Brussels, Belgium; [b]Universidade de Lisboa – Instituto Superior de Economia e Gestão, Centro de Estudos sobre Africa e Desenvolvimento, Lisboa, Portugal

ABSTRACT

Several global policy frameworks focus on managing (risks of) disasters affecting broad populations. In those frameworks resilience is a conceptualisation that possibly has important ideological implications. It is often opposed to fragility, and used to validate the notion of recurring insecurity, promote individual adaptability almost in the form of an obligation, and push the idea that crises/catastrophes are opportunities for profound changes. While effects from the COVID-19 pandemic have brought the protective role of the state to the fore, applying the word resilience to poor people requires clarification, especially in contexts of weak state public services and because assessment of complex poverty situations too often remains oversimplified and error-prone. We argue that to build capacity for resilience poor households need policies that protect and help them out of poverty, and that policy-making processes require engagement with people. Individuals must be asked about their perceptions and management of risks and threats, both in daily life and under exceptional circumstances, especially if the resulting stress factors accumulate and interact. This socially informed, place-specific, and multi-level approach could contribute substantially to identifying interventions, reducing poverty and poverty related risks, enhancing well-being and promoting development and cooperation programmes that meet people's expectations.

Introduction

This paper questions the meaning of resilience as it is applied to poor people in fragile contexts. Many policies advocate the value of resilience – in a nutshell, the ability to overcome destabilising evolutions and shocks. This is typically the case in recommendations/orientations at the global level on disaster risk

mitigation and disaster management. These policy frameworks, such as the United Nations' Paris Agreement on Climate Change (UNFCC 2016), are important to poor people in fragile contexts for obvious reasons. More generally, vision statements and methodologies on development and cooperation (that have adopted resilience as one of their key tools and/or objectives) also often directly address poor people in fragile contexts. High profile examples include the Agenda 2063 and priorities of the African Union (AU 2015 and ISS 2020), the strategic approach to resilience and priorities of the European Union external action (EU 2017a, 2017b), and proposals to put social protection across the humanitarian-development nexus (European Commission, EC 2019).

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the fragility of living conditions results from 'the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacities of the state, system and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks' (OECD 2019a). A few years ago this organisation moved from the notion of 'fragile states' to that of 'states of fragility' while introducing a five-dimensional framework for the analysis of fragility encompassing societal, political, economic, environmental, and security aspects. In fact, fragility and poverty are closely linked, and estimations are that by 2030 80% of people in extreme poverty could be living in fragile contexts (OECD 2018, 6). The g7+ association of countries experiencing fragility and/or recovering from conflicts emphasises the complexity of these situations and campaign for donor monitoring frameworks 'that are more attuned to the realities of fragile contexts and that take account of the stage of fragility a country is in' (g7+ 2013). For the OECD (2018) too, development programmes that meet people's expectations need to be built from data documenting people's perceptions of risks and people's capacities to cope, as well as the quality of life that people experience. This approach is also close to the methodology described in the European Consensus for Development adopted by the EU and its Member States in 2017.[1] Concretely, however, 'this type of data on [people's] perceptions is hard to collect [in the field] and even harder to integrate into programming' (OECD 2018, 17).

In addition, it appears that while resilience plays a central role in these policies, this terminology remains the subject of intense discussions, debates, and controversies. There is no consensus on the definition: is it an outcome, a state, a property, or a process? There is not even an agreement on its relevance for human societies (*cf.* Manyena 2006; Fleming and Ledogar 2008; McAslan 2010; Béné et al. 2012 and 2014; Reghezza-Zitt et al. 2012; Rufat 2012; Alexander 2013; Kindra 2013; Olsson et al. 2015; Doorn 2017; Carr 2019).

Our paper discusses the meaning and the applicability of the idea of resilience to poor people, and why these need clarification, especially in contexts of weak state public services. We look at key aspects of the complexity arising from and associated with situations of fragility. We argue that policy-

making processes should include engagement with those who are the targets of such initiatives through participatory approaches, and collect qualitative information on people's perceptions, experiences, and expectations regarding both daily circumstances and exceptional challenges (disasters). Based on Amartya Sen's capability approach and the more recent work of Wolff and De-Shalit (2007), we discuss how resilience could be envisaged as 'secure functionings' (*ibid.*) that people would have the genuine opportunity to achieve.

The following main section addresses more closely the discourse on resilience in global policies, and looks at what this may imply for the poorest and marginalised people. Examples are given to illustrate the ideological dimension of the narrative on resilience and the way in which this discourse can be detrimental to poor people (at least if efforts are not made to reduce poverty and offer protection simultaneously). This last point is examined in light of the situation created by the on-going COVID-19 pandemic. We observe that the aid and institutional support mechanisms provided in response have so far been vital to people and the integrity of societies benefiting from them. Whereas, by contrast, we also see that the millions of greatly disadvantaged people living in contexts of informal economy without income security and without adequate social protection do not have the support and financial means to adapt to the lockdowns and changes brought about by this crisis. These latter persons are in great danger of falling into extreme poverty and dead-end situations.

In the third main section we introduce our proposal for an evolution of the concept of resilience, especially as it is applied to poor people. We discuss why shaping interventions and policies in support of the most deprived populations, in both the short and long terms, calls for understanding the importance of the historical and cultural context at the household level, and the way in which poverty (and also local knowledge, values, beliefs, and interests) shape coping behaviours and (perceived perspectives on) the quality of life.

Resilience of the Poorest and Marginalised Within the Context of Global Policies

Alexander (2013) traces the history of the term resilience back to legal texts from the beginning of the 1st century AD. In the twentieth century the term was applied to a wide range of areas, including the social sciences in the 1950s, ecology in the 1970s, disaster risk reduction (DRR) in the 2000s, and climate change adaptation from 2010 on (*ibid.*). In recent years international organisations and institutions managing and contributing to international cooperation and development programmes, such as those from the UN and the EU, have multiplied strategies, policies, and global treaties based on the notions of resilience, adaptability, and recovery.[2]

Considering that exposure to major crises is inevitable, many of the UN policies are linked to preventing/managing risks and recovering from disasters.

UN definitions for resilience and recovery related to DRR are as follows. Resilience is 'the ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate, adapt to, transform and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions through risk management' (UNDRR 2016, 22). Recovery is 'the restoring or improving of livelihoods and health, as well as economic, physical, social, cultural and environmental assets, systems and activities, of a disaster-affected community or society, aligning with the principles of sustainable development and 'build back better', to avoid or reduce future disaster risk' (*op. cit.*: 21). Several authors make analogies to ecological studies in which exposure to threats is described as a constitutive process in the development of living systems, and thus the problem is never simply how to secure oneself but how to adapt (Reid 2012; Joseph 2013). For Reid (2012), a resilient person must start by accepting the disastrous-prone nature of the world (s)he lives in as a condition for taking part in that world. Resilient persons are expected to be prepared and demonstrate flexibility and the ability to bend without breaking. They must be able to find ways proactively to pull themselves out of crises and seise opportunities to improve or 'build back better'. As the examples below show, disasters are even seen as opportunities for profound ideological changes.

The Ideological Dimension of the Narrative on Resilience

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union resilience was considered to be a more positive qualifier than 'vulnerable' in the discourse on disasters, and started to prevail (Bankoff 2019). This evolution was also political and took place with the rise of neoliberalism. With the consequent change of the environmental and societal conditions – such as the privatisation of public services and infrastructures to enable a fully functioning market that placed many services beyond the reach of the poor –, 'it was expedient to stress what made people resilient rather than what made them vulnerable' (*op. cit.*: 226). Anglo-Saxons introduced resilience into the discourse, political vocabulary, and policy documents to serve as a governance tool that emphasises individual responsibility and adaptability (Joseph 2013; Joseph and Juncos 2019). The underlying logic was the opening up of new areas to 'destatification', active interventions into civil society and the institutionalisation of a rationality of competition, private enterprise and individual initiatives (*ibid*).

Processes that generate long lasting and large-scale destabilisation include trade liberalisation and globalisation, religious tensions, struggles for power, bad governance, protracted conflicts, pandemics, industrial accidents, ecological damage, climate change, and natural hazards. Many of these processes can and often do lead to life-threatening situations, loss of livelihoods, (increases in) poverty, or social and economic inequalities. At the same time, people

obviously wish for more optimistic perspectives, such as the capability to send children to school, and to enjoy food security, proper health care, safe and fulfilling living conditions, and more opportunities in life in general. Klein (2007) provides an ample overview of how, in the context of neoliberalism, natural and man-made shocks, crises, and states of emergencies have been opportunities to implement specific policies that would otherwise (under normal circumstances) encounter popular resistance (*e.g.*, extensive privatisation and deregulation), and re-engineer societies in line with free market principles. Through the examples of post-disaster situations in Haiti and New Orleans, Rufat (2012) examines how the notion of resilience can be used politically and for the purpose of manipulation to circumvent the historical perspective or promote societal choices on a non-democratic basis. The author recounts that following the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti the dominant international discourse was focussed on the fatality and the obligation for Haitians to show capacity for resilience, while avoiding mention of the vulnerabilities of the island linked to two centuries of isolation by former colonialist countries. The author also explains how after hurricane Katrina the discourse on resilience was used to justify the focus of reconstruction efforts in New Orleans on creditworthy homeowners and residents, while neglecting social housing and abandoning the poorest victims to their fate (*ibid*.).

Resilience is not necessarily synonymous with strength or (recovered) wellness, as underlined by Witter and Hunter (2017), particularly for poor people. Béné et al. (2012, 13–14) give the example of when a 'head of a household resolves to move their family to a less expensive but also less secure part of town (where rents are lower but street crime is higher) in order to cope with the recent loss of their job. By moving to a less expensive place, they certainly increase their ability to cope with the loss of their job (what we would consider a sign of resilience), but at the detriment of some elements of the well-being of the family'. For poor or marginalised people, surviving a disaster that has taken away most or all of their property may be seen as a sign of resilience, though in the longer term it is obviously more complex than that (for instance, the case of people transferred to refugee camps where they end up living for years). Hallegatte et al. (2017, 1) point out that in the aftermath of disasters triggered by natural hazards the same financial loss will affect poor people far more than others, and argue that estimations of the economic consequences provide information on the trends and overall costs but fail to detail how disasters affect people's well-being. These authors think that efforts to reduce poverty and DRR are complementary, and that 'policies that make people more resilient—and so better able to cope with and recover from the consequences of disasters that cannot be avoided—can save $100 billion a year' (*op. cit.*: 2-3). The far-reaching consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on-going at the time of this writing give us an opportunity to look at the limitations of the idea of capacity for

resilience in absence of institutional support, and what this means for the most vulnerable specifically.

Resilience and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore the effectiveness of measures taken at the state level to address the crisis and support the population. The purpose was indeed to help people overcome problems on essential issues such as healthcare, jobs, income, food, mortgage relief, etc. The life of billions of individuals was disrupted, and many governments have found it necessary to intervene with massive funding to mitigate the impact at both health and socio-economic levels. In the EU the 'total firepower' mobilised over a few months to address the public health crisis and 'to support workers and businesses' amounted to more than 30% of the EU's gross domestic product (EC 2020). This crisis led to political declarations from heads of states on the need to rethink Europe's political economy, with more interventionist roles for the states and the reallocation of resources towards spending that improves societal resilience (*e.g.,* healthcare, education and social welfare) (Bergsen et al. 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also exposed people's vulnerabilities to a great extent in countries with insufficient coping capacities and high economic informality. In ordinary times most informal workers do not have the benefit of institutional health and social protection systems, and infrastructures for basic needs (*e.g.,* healthcare, potable water, sanitation) might be lacking or insufficient. Lockdown measures to prevent the spread of the virus have tended to exacerbate the situation socio-economically. They have led or will lead many of those making a living on a day-to-day basis to lose their livelihood, and perhaps, to eventually fall into poverty and food insecurity. According to the World Bank (WB 2020a, 2021), this pandemic could push up to 160 million people below the '$1.9 poverty line' by 2021, in addition to the approximately 590 million people already living in conditions of extreme poverty. These catastrophic figures indicate that poverty reduction remains an essential goal (and that the SDG1 will not be achieved), and show the limits to the notion of putting the onus of adaptability to crisis on individuals, and on the most vulnerable ones more particularly.

Applying the word resilience to poor people thus requires clarification, especially in contexts of weak state-provided services and protection mechanisms. This discussion might be especially relevant regarding the sub-Saharan region, where most of the population live in fragile contexts and where 90% of all poor people will be concentrated by the year 2030 (WB 2020b). In the next section, we discuss how resilience could evolve from the expectation to adapt to capacities people can build (and turn into secure functionings) with the support of policies addressing the root causes of vulnerability (in relation to situations of *e.g.,* poverty and insecurity).

Accounting for the Social, Economic, and Cultural Dimensions of Resilient Outcomes

The Capability Approach and the Need for More and Comparable Field Data

In a recent literature review on resilience indicators in the field of DRR, Doorn (2017) observed a lack of 'a clear sense of what equality or distributive justice should mean in the context of resilience and disaster management'. As a way forward, she elaborated on a proposal by Murphy and Gardoni (2012) to apply Amartya Sen's capability approach (doings and beings – functionings – that people have the opportunity to achieve if they wish to) to risk analysis and to the distinction between acceptable and tolerable threshold levels for risks. Doorn (2017) stressed the relationship she sees between resilience as a capacity to do something and the capability approach. Wolff and De-Shalit (2007) also introduced the dimensions of risk and security to the capability approach to examine the idea of vulnerability. In the terminology relating to DRR, vulnerability is the 'conditions determined by physical, social, economic and environmental factors or processes which increase the susceptibility of an individual, a community, assets or systems to the impacts of hazards' (UNDRR 2016, 24). For Wolff and De-Shalit (2007), vulnerability is a consequence of being disadvantaged in a number of ways. Having the capability to achieve chosen functionings reflects the person's freedom to lead one type of life or another, while not being able to achieve a given functioning is being disadvantaged in a particular way. They describe disadvantage as a 'lack for genuine opportunities for secure functionings', in order to account for the possibility that exercising certain opportunities, depending on circumstances, may involve undue cost or risk to other functionings (*ibid.*).

These authors developed their reflection based upon semi-structured interviews in Israel and the UK of both disadvantaged people and people involved in forms of service delivery and support to the disadvantaged. Using as a starting point Martha Nussbaum's list of ten central human capabilities, they found that the most disadvantaged of the society are those who experience a 'clustering' of all of the following six disadvantages: doing badly on life, on bodily health, on bodily integrity, on affiliation, on control over one's environment, and on sense, imagination, and thought (*ibid.*: 132). These disadvantages are so handicapping that overcoming at least some of them, and avoiding their clustering, is essential to people. Wolff and De-Shalit (2007) underline the case of those very poor for whom there is no sign that the future might be better than the present, and emphasise the 'corrosiveness' of extreme poverty when it leads to the clustering of more disadvantages (*ibid.*). In addition to deprivations arising from the lack of money, 'the steps taken to increase income can make things worse through exposure to risk' (*op. cit.*: 148), and eventually bring people into dead-end situations that preclude any form of resilience. The dismantling of collective

institutions of social protection leading to a proliferation of risks in people's everyday lives, identified in studies for EU countries (Wright 2016), could also be described as a corrosive disadvantage. More examples are provided below. They illustrate how greater risk propagation and greater poverty can reinforce each other, whereby poor people living in fragile contexts are easily/chronically exposed to stressful circumstances and high risks in their struggle to survive, for themselves and people around them.

Based on the above, we suggest the following evolution of the UNDRR definition for resilience and link it to the introduction of aid and support mechanisms at the institutional level. *Resilience is the ability to cope with both daily and exceptional challenges, insofar as genuine opportunities are available to achieve the necessary functionings securely. Poor and disadvantaged people need protective policies and measures at the institutional level to enable them to build their resilience capacities and hope for a more promising future. Such policies and measures must address the root causes of poverty and the lack of opportunities for these resilience-related secure functionings.*

Amartya Sen's theory on individual capabilities and well-being also influenced the recommendations of the Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi (2009), created in 2008 by the French government, on 'the measurement of economic performance and social progress'. These recommendations inspired the drafting of many of the global policies mentioned above that promote the notion of resilience. A major observation of this Commission was that assessing economic progress based on variations of the gross domestic product (GDP) was largely insufficient, and that new indicators on the reality and the quality of people's lives, including qualitative ones, needed to be included. Nevertheless, ten years later Stiglitz, Fitoussi, and Durand (2018, 3) point out that the deficit of 'datasets and tools to examine the factors that determine outcomes for people and for the places where they live' persists, and that developing more of them is still a necessity. The same observation was made by the authors of a survey that in 2018 sought to ascertain the 'risks that matter' the most to inhabitants of 21 OECD countries (OECD 2019b). The purpose was to fill in the gaps left by results from standard household and labour force surveys and government administrative records. The main concerns indicated by the respondents were 'falling ill', 'struggling to make ends meet', and 'having enough money in old age' (*ibid*). The findings point to a clear sense of anxiety and dissatisfaction *vis-à-vis* existing social policy and protection mechanisms (*ibid.*). In the perception of the vast majority of people their government should do more in terms of social and economic security (*ibid.*; *cf.* also Wright 2016 and Bankoff 2019). The conclusion of this survey was also 'that listening to people matters' (*op. cit.*: 56).

Problems of outdated or insufficient/irrelevant statistics and knowledge on poverty, and of drawing too strongly on mathematical modelling exercises with questionable relevance, are worrying. That is the case especially for

populations of sub-Saharan Africa. As was mentioned above, this region accounts for most of the poor persons in the world, even more since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Beegle et al. (2016) from the WB have underlined important problems of data deprivation and data quality on poverty in Africa (a result of misreporting and deficiencies in data processing, among other reasons), with the consequence of being unable to track poverty over time and make proper decisions on tackling poverty. Even if the same authors have more recently reported some significant progress in this matter (Beegle and Christiaensen 2019), there is a striking contradiction between these findings and the otherwise near unanimous opinion that situations of fragility require redoubled attention because of their complexity.

Hence, in the specific case of poor people with weak national public services and protection mechanisms we need to undertake fieldwork with methodologies able to address this complexity if we want to bring new insight on what people need in order to be resilient. Individuals must be asked directly about what they do and aspire to, and local interdependencies and interactions need to be examined. It is necessary to develop qualitative and contextual approaches to people's risk perceptions and (lack of) solutions to overcome adversity and disruptions, whether under 'regular' or 'exceptional' circumstances (disasters). Doing so would help to better assess what drives the choices made by individuals and groups, and what needs to be done at the policy level to develop/increase social protection and societal resilience, and to help people find solutions and maintain/improve their livelihoods. This knowledge is also necessary to identify historical patterns of marginalisation, how people became precarious to begin with, and what needs to be done to make governments more accountable (Gladfelter 2018).

Jones (2019a) is a recent example of a how-to guide for eliciting people's self-evaluations of their resilience to hazards, using quantitative questions and with a focus on climate extremes and disasters. Our proposal, centred on the poorest people living in fragile contexts, similarly seeks to underscore the importance of the subjective perspective of individuals and households on their situation, and argues in favour of adopting a multi-level approach to understand how both daily and exceptional challenges are dealt with, and whether (and how) stress factors accumulate and interact.

The Need to Collect Qualitative Information

'Voices of the poor', the first large-scale international study on 'the views, experiences, and aspirations' of poor people, was conducted using 'participatory and qualitative research methods' (Narayan et al. 2000). While there were problems with the methodology (*e.g.,* the short duration of the study, the training of the surveyors, and other challenges more specific to the different countries of the project), an important conclusion was the possibility

given to poor people to present 'very directly […] the realities of their lives' (*ibid.*). That is also an important objective of our proposal – to open up new perspectives on the concept and operational understanding of the driving forces of resilience (see also Jones 2019a, 2019b). We see a need to collect information qualitatively through semi-structured interviews, and quantitatively through surveys at the various levels of society (individual, household, community). Many factors at the personal and societal levels play a central role in people's ability, or lack thereof, to not only manage daily problems, but also withstand disasters when they occur, and to the extent possible, recover from them. These include cultural frameworks, historical backgrounds, local experiences, values, beliefs, interests and perspectives, economic priorities and the social reality of economic production, power relations, and social connections.

As an example, investigating in the field the practice of DRR also illustrates the importance of taking the indigenous/local knowledge into account and of questioning the reasons why external stakeholders tend to dismiss it in their discourses and initiatives. Balay-As, Marlowe, and Gaillard (2018, 18–19) provide an overview of cases in which 'this differentiation disenfranchises indigenous knowledge, with scientific knowledge often preferred as the rational, objective and highly advanced response to disasters'. This disconnect is based on the assumption that only the combination of scientific knowledge and technological solutions, essentially of Western origin, has the capacity to tackle the complexity of disasters, framed as extraordinary events. The same authors give the example of typhoon early warning systems in Northern Philippines, whereby 'indigenous peoples' strategies for DRR are shaped by both indigenous and scientific knowledge and approaches' if potential issues of power that may arise from integrating these two forms of knowledge are recognised and responded to (*ibid.*). The rediscovery of the importance of mangroves in the daily livelihoods of local populations and as buffers against storm surges and tsunamis through attenuation of the strength of the waves (Romanach et al. 2018, 72) is also exemplary. Dahdouh-Guebasn et al. (2005) investigated the situation in Sri Lanka one month after the Indian Ocean tsunami that killed over a quarter million people and left millions homeless. The authors relate their findings to interviews of residents of the Indian subcontinent undertaken a few years earlier, showing that there was already a clear local understanding of the increased vulnerability to cyclones and floods due to the alteration/conversion of mangroves (*e.g.,* to shrimp farms). Their post-tsunami investigation confirmed that mangrove areas that were relatively unaltered provided effective mitigation of the damage inflicted on the coastal zone by the tsunami (*ibid.*: R444). Thus, as part of the policy-making process, engaging with people and integrating local and scientific knowledge is a promising path (Bankoff 2015; Balay-As, Marlowe, and Gaillard 2018; Casey Makondo and Thomas 2018; Parsons et al. 2019).

The Role of Local Drivers, Culture, and the Imperative of Survival in Risk Perception and Risk Propagation

The authors of the World Disasters Report 2014 remind us that 'culture is highly complex and encompasses beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviours' (IFRC&RCS 2014, 13). They explain very eloquently the importance of understanding 'how people put values on different aspects of their lives, assign priorities and find ways of living that enable them to live with hazards' (*op. cit.*: 17). This point applies across the world, including in the Western/Northern countries. For instance, the role of religion is far greater in the USA than in many European countries. At the same time, the USA are also characterised by a strong faith in technologies, which it is presumed will protect them and solve problems. More examples of cultural justifications for decisions that other peoples would find unacceptable or incomprehensible, based on other rationales, are presented in IFRC&RCS (2014, Chapter 2).

More generally, religious beliefs, cultural schemes, and the imperative of (economic) survival can be seen as powerful means of resistance to adversity, despite the lack of Wolff and De-Shalit's (2007) 'genuine opportunities for secure functionings'. These beliefs and schemes allow people to deal with problems of cognitive dissonance, for example, *i.e.,* clashes between contradictory ideas, risk perceptions and beliefs, or information that constitute(s) a source of mental discomfort. Take the case of people who decide to return to a dangerous area after a disaster in order to secure their livelihoods and remain connected with ancestral behaviours (*e.g.,* populations returning to the nearby environs of a volcano following an eruption). Benin's black market for petrol (Cessou 2016) is another case in point, whereby nearly 80 per cent of all fuel consumed in Benin is illegally refined oil from Nigeria –also an illustration of the corrosive character of poverty. Smuggling is performed on motorbikes by people carrying dozens of litres of gasoline in multiple drums, through major cities, clearly involving a high risk of explosion. The danger exists not only for the drivers but also for all of those in the vicinity (Corso 2017). Approximately 200 000 informal petrol vendors are willing to accept the risks associated with the roadside peddling of between 1 000 and 1 500 litres every week, earning nearly three times the income of a civil servant (Cessou 2016). People are aware of the risks they take, of course. However, they decide to cope mentally and live with these dangers, or to overlook them and avoid 'the stress of the dissonance' (IFRC&RCS 2014, 81).

In such cases, outsiders (such as 'experts' from international organisations) may conclude that people do not appear to learn from past disasters, whereas in reality, 'much more significance needs to be given to factors that are not [scientific] knowledge-related' (*op. cit.*: 24). Intra-group social relationships, power structures between individuals and groups, and/or the unequal allocation of risk between different groups are other possible explanations for seemingly

non-rational and counter-intuitive behaviour (*ibid.*). Johnson, Wahl, and Thomalla (2016) warn against international organisations adopting a technocratic approach to risk assessment and resilience related matters, informed solely by scientific knowledge. It is worth recalling that 'no one is 'immune' from culture', including international organisations and their staff, who run the risk of regarding themselves as unbiased and non-cultural, 'failing to recognize that their own culture has influenced their understanding of risk and framed their current *modus operandi*' (*op. cit.*: 3). Accounting for these fundamental dimensions in the shaping of a field survey will then help to limit the cultural bias that would otherwise most likely affect the results.

Conclusions

Throughout this paper we have looked at a number of features and patterns that are commonly found among international and governmental organisations and places of power regarding the concept/term of resilience when applied to human beings and their social settings. We have noted that resilience is often used to produce narratives underpinning policies linked to preventing/managing risks and recovering from disasters. While the emphasis is most often put on individual adaptability and the capacity to rebound, we have instead highlighted the importance of social structures and public mechanisms in supporting resilience capabilities, not only under exceptional circumstances but also in daily life. In this respect, the sophisticated universal social protection arrangements based on redistribution processes introduced in many advanced economies during the twentieth Century (Polanyi 1944), certainly remain as examples of some of the most powerful means of resilience.

The goal of fighting against poverty brings to the fore the meaning of resilience in the case of poor people living under fragile conditions. One of the main points of this paper is that resilience remains a valuable conceptual and operational framework on the condition that it is not understood and mobilised as an obligation but as capacities that people can build and turn into sustainable functionings, with the help of support mechanisms available at the institutional level.

We propose that resilience be seen as the ability to cope with both daily and exceptional challenges, insofar as genuine opportunities are available to achieve the necessary functionings securely. Poor and disadvantaged people need protective policies and measures at the institutional level to enable them to build their resilience capacities and hope for a more promising future. Such policies and measures must address the root causes of poverty and the lack of opportunities for these resilience-related secure functionings.

Setting up these mechanisms requires prior knowledge of what people actually think, do and hope for, in order to gain a better understanding of the various constitutive dimensions of the society in all its complexity. In other

words, we need a better understanding of what poor people in fragile contexts do (and lack) to cope with 'ordinary' difficulties as well as large crises, both individually and collectively. This implies the involvement of the concepts and tools of the social sciences, in particular fieldwork, with interviews and surveys, and incorporation of local knowledge. Undertaking further research at this level of granularity should also contribute to reducing the Western cultural bias that often affects policy-making, especially when it comes to assessing needs and to designing and implementing policies. Furthermore, this work should also help local governments and international organisations to identify and design actions and interventions that are closer to the populations concerned, thereby contributing to the local appropriation of development cooperation programmes, projects and initiatives.

Disclaimer

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest. The information and views set out in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the European Commission. Neither the European Commission nor any person acting on its behalf may be held responsible for the use that may be made of the information contained therein.

Acknowledgments

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

About the Authors

Christophe Quétel is a senior scientist in the Directorate 'Space, security and migration' of the Joint Research Centre (JRC, Belgium) of the European Commission. He obtained his PhD from the University Paris VI (France). He is leading a project on assessing risk perceptions and resilience patterns in fragile contexts.

Guy Bordin is a senior scientist in the Directorate 'Space, security and migration' of the Joint Research Centre (JRC, Belgium) of the European Commission. He holds a PhD in anthropology from the University of Paris Ouest-Nanterre (France). He works on issues dealing with risk assessment and resilience in fragile contexts.

Alexandre Abreu (PhD Economics, SOAS U. London) is a lecturer in Economics and Development Studies at ISEG—Lisbon School of Economics and Management and a researcher at

its Centre for African and Development Studies (Portugal). His research interests include various aspects of the political economy of development.

Ilektra Lemi holds an LLM in Law and Politics of International Security from Vrije University Amsterdam (Netherlands) and a Msc in Culture and Development Studies from KU Leuven (Belgium). She worked on a project on assessing risk perceptions and resilience patterns in fragile contexts at the Joint Research Centre (JRC, Belgium) of the European Commission.

Carlos Sangreman, economist PhD in African Studies, senior professor at the University of Aveiro, researcher in the Centre for African and Development Studies, University of Lisbon (Portugal) and international consultant since 1985 in Portuguese-speaking Africa and Timor. Research in the areas of statistics, well-being, poverty profiles, human rights indicators and development cooperation.

Notes

1. 'The EU and its Member States will implement humanitarian action and development cooperation in a more coherent and complementary way, actively contributing to building individual, community, societal and state resilience, addressing extreme poverty, preventing and tackling crises, reducing chronic vulnerability and building self-reliance. Sustainable solutions require multi-stakeholder approaches, interventions at different levels and a long-term vision. This means strengthening the link between relief, rehabilitation and development, including through an in-depth exchange of information, donor coordination and joint analysis of gaps, risks and vulnerabilities, and a shared vision of strategic priorities, as early as possible' (EU 2017b).
2. Prominent examples at UN level include the UN Development Programme report on 'Reducing Vulnerabilities and Building Resilience' (UNDP 2014), the Sendai Framework for DRR (2015), the strategy on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 2015), and the Paris Climate Agreement (UNFCC 2016). Alongside the emphasis on individual adaptability, EU documents also underscore, as illustrated in note 1, the importance of societal and state resilience, whereby the state has responsibility for protecting the population (for more on comparing UN and EU policy documents about resilience, see Joseph and Juncos 2019). Recent examples include 'A Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU's external action' (EU 2017a), 'The new European consensus on development' (EU 2017b), 'Towards a comprehensive Strategy with Africa' (EU 2020a), and the '2020 Strategic Foresight Report' (EU 2020b). In the 2019 Reference document Nº 26 of the European Commission (EC 2019), long-term social protection instruments are described as potential game changers for shock preparedness and supporting people through crises.

References

Alexander, D. E. 2013. "Resilience and Disaster Risk Reduction: an Etymological Journey." *Natural Hazards and Earth System Sciences* 13: 2707–2716.

AU. 2015. "Agenda 2063: The Africa we want." *ISBN: 978-92-95104-23-5.* https://au.int/en/agenda2063/overview.

Balay-As, M., J. Marlowe, and J. C. Gaillard. 2018. "Deconstructing the Binary Between Indigenous and Scientific Knowledge in Disaster Risk Reduction: Approaches to High Impact Weather Hazards." *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 30: 18–24.

Bankoff, G. 2015. "'Lahat Para sa Lahat' (Everything to Everybody): Consensual Leadership, Social Capital and Disaster Risk Reduction in A Filipino Community." *Disaster Prevention and Management: An International Journal* 24 (4): 430–447.

Bankoff, G. 2019. "Remaking the World in our own Image: Vulnerability, Resilience and Adaptation as Historical Discourses." *Disasters* 43 (2): 221–239.

Beegle, K., and L. Christiaensen. 2019. *Accelerating Poverty Reduction in Africa*. Washington, DC: World Bank. © World Bank. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/32354 License: CC BY 3.0 IGO.

Beegle, K., L. Christiaensen, A. Dabalen, and I. Gaddis. 2016. *Poverty in A Rising Africa*. Washington, DC: World Bank. © World Bank. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/22575 License: CC BY 3.0 IGO.

Béné, C., R. Godfrey Wood, A. Newsham, and M. Davies. 2012. "Resilience: New Utopia or New Tyranny? Reflection about the Potentials and Limits of the Concept of Resilience in Relation to Vulnerability Reduction Programmes." *IDS Working Paper* Volume 2012 No 405 – CSP Working Paper No 006, 2012. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.2040-0209.2012.00405.x.

Béné, C., A. Newsham, M. Davies, M. Ulrichs, and R. Godfrey-Wood. 2014. "Review Article: Resilience, Poverty, and Development." *Journal of International Development* 26: 598–623.

Bergsen, P., A. Billon-Galland, H. Kundnani, V. Ntousas, and T. Raines. 2020. "Europe After Coronavirus: The EU and a New Political Economy." *Research Paper*, *Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs*.

Carr, E. 2019. "Properties and Projects: Reconciling Resilience and Transformation for Adaptation and Development." *World Development* 122: 70–84.

Casey Makondo, C., and D. S. G. Thomas. 2018. "Climate Change Adaptation: Linking Indigenous Knowledge with Western Science for Effective Adaptation." *Environmental Science and Policy* 88: 83–91.

Cessou, S. 2016. "Benin's petrol black market and the struggle for survival"; originally published in French in Le Monde diplomatique. Copyright © 2016 *Le Monde diplomatique*. Republished by permission of Agence Global. https://www.equaltimes.org/benin-s-petrol-black-market-and#.XShC2IpS-Um.

Corso, J. 2017. "The Illegal trade supplying Benin's fuel needs." https://www.equaltimes.org/the-illegal-trade-supplying-benin?lang=en#.XShEIYpS-Ul.

Dahdouh-Guebasn, F., L. P. Jayatissa, D. Di Nitto, J. O. Bosire, D. Lo Seen, and N. Koedam. 2005. "How Effective Were Mangroves as A Defence Against the Recent Tsunami?" *Current Biology* 15 (12): R443–R447.

Doorn, N. 2017. "Resilience Indicators: Opportunities for Including Distributive Justice Concerns in Disaster Management." *Journal of Risk Research* 20 (N6): 711–731.

EC. 2019. "Social Protection across the Humanitarian-Development Nexus. A Game Changer in Supporting People through Crises." *Tools and Methods Series – Reference Document No 26* Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

EC. 2020. "State of the Union 2020 – The von der Leyen Commission: one year on." Publications Office of the European Union.

EU – COM(2020) 493 final. 2020b. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, "2020 Strategic Foresight Report – Charting the course towards a more resilient Europe".

EU – JOIN(2017) 21 final. 2017a. Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, "A Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU's external action".

EU – JOIN(2020) 4 final. 2020a. Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, "Towards a comprehensive Strategy with Africa".

EU – Official Journal 2017/C 210/01. 2017b. Joint Declarations European Parliament – Council – European Commission, "The new European consensus on development – 'our world, our dignity, our future'".

Fleming, J., and R. J. Ledogar. 2008. "Resilience, an Evolving Concept: A Review of Literature Relevant to Aboriginal Research." *Pimatisiwin: Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health* 6-2: 7–23. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2956753/.

g7 + . 2013. Note on the Fragility Spectrum. https://www.pbsbdialogue.org/media/filer_public/17/43/17434d29-eb70-425b-8367-7ccef13bfb0b/g7fragility_spectrum_2013.pdf.

Gladfelter, S. 2018. "The Politics of Participation in Community-Based Early Warning Systems: Building Resilience or Precarity Through Local Roles in Disseminating Disaster Information." *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 30: 120–131.

Hallegatte, S., A. Vogt-Schilb, M. Bangalore, and J. Rozenberg. 2017. *Unbreakable: Building the Resilience of the Poor in the Face of Natural Disasters*. Climate Change and Development. World Bank. © World Bank. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/25335 License: CC BY 3.0 IGO.

IFRC&RCS (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies). 2014. "Focus on culture and risk." *World Disasters Report*. http://www.ifrc.org/world-disasters-report-2014.

ISS. 2020. "Relations between Africa and Europe – Mapping Africa's priorities." *Africa Report 25 – August 2020*. https://issafrica.org/research/africa-report/relations-between-africa-and-europe-mapping-africas-priorities.

Johnson, K., D. Wahl, and F. Thomalla. 2016. "Addressing the cultural gap between humanitarian assistance and local responses to risk through a place-based approach." *Brief for the Global Sustainable Development Report* 2016. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/994846_Johnson%20et%20al._Addressing%20the%20cultural%20gap%20between%20humanitarian%20assistance%20and%20local%20responses%20to%20risk%20through%20a%20place-based%20approach.pdf.

Jones, L. 2019a. "A how-to guide for subjective evaluations of resilience." *BRACED Knowledge Manager report* September 2019, Issue n1 http://www.braced.org/contentAsset/raw-data/acced4f3-6bb6-4595-abc4-3b29dc438968/attachmentFile.

Jones, L. 2019b. "Resilience Isn't the Same for all: Comparing Subjective and Objective Approaches to Resilience Measurement." *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 10: e552. doi:10.1002/wcc.552.

Joseph, J. 2013. "Resilience as Embedded Neoliberalism: A Governmentality Approach." *Resilience* 1 (1): 38–52.

Joseph, J., and E. Juncos. 2019. "Resilience as an Emergent European Project? The EU's Place in the Resilience Turn." *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 57 (5): 995–1012.

Kindra, J. 2013. "Understanding resilience." *IRIN News (now The New Humanitarian)*. http://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2013/03/04/understanding-resilience.

Klein, N. 2007. *The Shock Doctrine*. 1st ed. Toronto: Knopf Canada.

Manyena, S. B. 2006. "The Concept of Resilience Revisited." *Disasters* 30 (4): 434–450.

McAslan, A. 2010. *The Concept of Resilience, Understanding its Origins, Meaning and Utility*. Adelaide, Australia: Torrens Resilience Institute.

Murphy, C., and P. Gardoni. 2012. "The Capability Approach in Risk Analysis." In *Handbook of Risk Theory*, edited by S. Roeser, R. Hillerbrand, P. Sandin, and M. Peterson, 978–997. Dordrecht: Springer.

Narayan, D., R. Chambers, M. K. Shah, and P. Petesch. 2000. *Voices of the Poor – Crying out for Change*. New York: World Bank. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/13848.

OECD. 2018. *States of Fragility 2018 - Highlights*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

OECD. 2019a. States of Fragility Website. http://www3.compareyourcountry.org/states-of-fragility/about/0/.

OECD. 2019b. *Risks That Matter: Main Findings From the 2018 OECD Risks That Matter Survey*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

Olsson, L., A. Jerneck, H. Thoren, J. Persso, and D. O'Byrne. 2015. "Why Resilience is Unappealing to Social Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations of the Scientific use of Resilience." *Science Advances* 1 (4): 1–11.

Parsons, M., J. Nalau, K. Fisher, and C. Brown. 2019. "Disrupting Path Dependency: Making Room for Indigenous Knowledge in River Management." *Global Environmental Change* 56: 95–113.

Polanyi, K. 1944. *The Great Transformation*. Boston: Farrar & Rinehart Publishers (USA).

Reghezza-Zitt, M., S. Rufat, G. Djament-Tran, A. Le Blanc, and S. Lhomme. 2012. "What Resilience is not: Uses and Abuses." *Cybergeo: European Journal of Geography*. [online], article 621 https://journals.openedition.org/cybergeo/25554.

Reid, J. 2012. "The Disastrous and Politically Debased Subject of Resilience." *Development Dialogue* 58: 67–82.

Romanach, S. S., D. L. DeAngelis, H. L. Koh, Y. Li, S. Y. Te, R. Sulaiman, R. Barizan, and L. Zhai. 2018. "Conservation and Restoration of Mangroves: Global Status, Perspectives, and Prognosis." *Ocean and Coastal Management* 154: 72–82.

Rufat, S. 2012. "Critique de la résilience pure." *Regards-CNRS*. https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00693162.

Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. 2015. https://www.undrr.org/implementing-sendai-framework/what-sendai-framework.

Stiglitz, E., J.-P. Fitoussi, and M. Durand. 2018. *For Good Measure: Advancing Research on Well-Being Metrics Beyond GDP*. Paris: OECD Publishing. http://www.oecd.org/publications/for-good-measure-9789264307278-en.htm.

Stiglitz, E., A. Sen, and J.-P. Fitoussi. 2009. "Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic and Social Progress." https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/118025/118123/Fitoussi+Commission+report.

UNDP. 2014. "Human Development Report 2014. Sustaining Human Progress: Reducing Vulnerabilities and Building Resilience" http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-report-2014.

UNDRR. 2016. "Report of the open-ended intergovernmental expert working group on indicators and terminology relating to disaster risk reduction" https://www.undrr.org/publication/report-open-ended-intergovernmental-expert-working-group-indicators-and-terminology.

UNFCC – Paris Climate Agreement. 2016. https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement.

UN SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals. 2015. https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/.

WB. 2020a. "Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020 – Reversals of Fortune" https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/poverty-and-shared-prosperity.

WB. 2020b. "Projecting Global Extreme Poverty up to 2030: How Close are We to World Bank's 3% Goal?" https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/projecting-global-extreme-poverty-2030-how-close-are-we-world-banks-3-goal.

WB. 2021. "Updated Estimates of the Impact of COVID-19 on Global Poverty: Looking Back at 2020 and the Outlook for 2021." https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/updated-estimates-impact-covid-19-global-poverty-lookingback-2020-and-outlook-2021.

Witter, S., and B. Hunter. 2017. "Resilience of health systems during and after crises – what does it mean and how can it be enhanced?" *ReBUILD Consortium, Health systems during*

and after crisis: evidence for better policy and practice | Brief 1; https://rebuildconsortium.com/media/1535/rebuild_briefing_1_june_17_resilience.pdf.

Wolff, J., and A. De-Shalit. 2007. *Disadvantage.* New-York: Oxford University Press Inc.

Wright, K. 2016. "Resilient Communities? Experiences of Risk and Resilience in A Time of Austerity." *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 18: 154–161.