

Re: silly-ence – or the Reinvention of Vulnerability

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“Resilience” is decidedly the development flavour of the month! Everybody’s doing it: it’s one of the three pillars in the World Bank’s “Social Protection and Labour Strategy 2012-2022”; the European Commission has put out a whole new Communication devoted to it; DFID has committed “to embed resilience-building in all DFID country programmes by 2015”; WFP (never one to miss a bandwagon) has a “Resilience Project” with the Swiss; and USAID celebrated a “Resilience Week” in April 2012. Academia is responding with delight: trenchantly erudite papers have appeared in the last few months with titles such as “The Relevance of ‘Resilience’?” (from the Humanitarian Policy Group), “Resilience: New Utopia or New Tyranny?” (from the Institute of Development Studies), “The Resilience Renaissance?” (also from IDS), “Resilience, a Risk Management Approach” (from the Overseas Development Institute), and “The Characteristics of Resilience Building” (from the Interagency Resilience Working Group, no less).

But what does it all signify? Does it mean anything? Does “resilience” advance the cause of development in any significant way? Probably not.

Resilience is no more and no less than the developmental antonym of “vulnerability”, a concept which has been around for a number of decades. Resilience, like vulnerability, has two dimensions: one internal and one external. You can increase resilience either by enhancing the inherent ability of an individual, a household, a community, a system or a country to withstand a shock, or you can act externally to reduce the potential for damage from that shock. Resilience can be increased, in just the same way as

vulnerability can be reduced, in either of these two dimensions: you can strengthen an entity’s capacity to resist or you can reduce the likelihood of exogenous damage.

Think of driving a car on a busy motorway. There is always the risk of an accident, which could result in death or serious injury. There are two ways to protect against the damage that this might cause. In one dimension you can strengthen the capacity of the car’s occupants to withstand an accident: you can surround all passengers with airbags; you can legislate that all of them wear seatbelts; you can install revolutionary technology such as anti-lock braking systems (ABS) and traction control systems (TCS); you can capacitate the driver to drive better; and you can enforce adherence to the highway code. In the other dimension you can set up systems to implement variable speed limits according to weather conditions or traffic flow; you can position police and emergency services at strategic positions along the motorway; you can train ambulance crews to deal better with accident victims; you can educate the general population how best to react if involved in a collision. Through addressing both dimensions, you are significantly reducing vulnerability... and increasing resilience... to serious harm through a traffic accident.

One of the recent arguments in favour of resilience as a guiding development paradigm proposes that it assembles a broader church of practitioners than vulnerability: from climate change, ecology, disaster management and social protection. But much the same was said of vulnerability a couple of decades back. In practice (sadly) it may be true that different communities

of practice still work in technical silos, but in theory both vulnerability and resilience are as broad or as narrow as you choose to make them: both are equally able to encompass climate-related factors, social dynamics, ecosystems, and so on...or not. Simply shifting the standpoint from vulnerability to resilience changes nothing.

Another paper sets up an assessment matrix to show how a commonly-used framework of social protection interventions to reduce vulnerability (with objectives of provision, prevention, promotion and transformation) maps to a suggested framework of resilience (with outcomes of coping/rehabilitating, adapting and transforming). The paper seems pleasantly surprised that the mapping works well. But if you accept that the two concepts are antonyms, then this is less surprising: it is like saying that a framework of increasing brightness maps well to a framework of decreasing darkness.

What is perhaps more useful, in linking social protection to the excitingly fashionable resilience model, is to consider how these four commonly accepted functions of social protection address different aspects of vulnerability to increase resilience. If we start from a definition of vulnerability as being represented by an equation: **vulnerability = poverty + risk – agency – voice**, then we can see how the four functions of social protection¹ act on each of the constants in the equation:

- Poverty is reduced through the **provision** function of social protection, represented by **social assistance** (such as social pensions, child grants or disability benefits) – this may be likened to the provision of airbags and seatbelts in the motorway example above.
- Risk is reduced through the **preventive** function of social protection, encompassing **social insurance** mechanisms (such as unemployment pay, burial societies and health insurance) – these are represented by the availability of ABS and TCS.
- Agency is increased through the **promotive** function of social protection, comprising the kind of **social empowerment** embodied in asset transfer programmes, cash-for-training and (well-designed) employment schemes – equipping the driver to drive better.

¹ Not everyone accepts this P-P-P-T framework of the functions of social protection, nor that the different types of social protection intervention can be mapped directly to a single individual function (eg a pension can be used for provision, prevention and promotion). But it is widely used, and serves as a useful structure for grouping these different interventions.

- Voice is increased through the **transformative** function of social protection, including interventions in the area of **social justice**, aimed at reducing discrimination, fulfilling rights, and so on – in our example, the standard application of the highway code, driving tests and driver education efforts.

At the same time, the motorway analogy also serves to underline that social protection is only one of many inter-dependent strategies that should be used to reduce vulnerability (and to increase resilience). Others might include interventions around:

- **Risk assessment**, to anticipate the dangers and have plans in place to react to them – such as the ability to communicate weather and traffic information in our motorway scenario.
- **Early warning**, such as tsunami sensors, earthquake detectors or drought monitoring systems – or the updating of weather/traffic warnings alongside the motorway in this scenario.
- **Pre-provisioning**, in the form of emergency stockpiles or strategic grain reserves – or the pre-positioning of police and ambulance crews in our example.
- **Health services**, so that they strengthen people's ability to withstand shocks – or, in our case, to correctly treat accident victims.
- **Education and training** to raise awareness and increase people's agency – or, in this instance, to persuade people to drive more responsibly and to respond effectively in case of an accident.

But the point is that to the same degree as these coordinated interventions reduce vulnerability, so they also increase resilience. Indeed they would suggest that a correspondingly accurate (and useful) equation for resilience would be: **resilience = assets – risk + agency + voice**.

The danger here is that resilience does not really advance the conceptual debate. It's as if development partners are searching for a new buzzword around which to rally, which the poverty academics are all too ready to supply. The literature of resilience is thus self-inflating, and much of it self-defeating as it revolves not around the legitimate application of the word itself but around the baggage that other writers have loaded onto it.

As a parting concession to the resilience lobby, however, there is a valid argument that framing objectives as positives instead of negatives may be psychologically preferable: on that basis alone, it may be better to rally the development community around "increasing resilience" rather than around "reducing vulnerability". To that extent, resilience may be a useful hanger; but to pretend it is anything more than that is, well, just plain silly!

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About The Author

Nicholas Freeland is an independent consultant in social security, who – especially as Christmas approaches – resents seeing old wine repackaged in new bottles.

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