The Politics Of Resilience: Transcending Reflections On Socio-Econonomic Vulnerability And Sustainable Development

Forzo Titang Franklin
Cultural Anthropology & Development Studies,
Faculty of Social Sciences. Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium

ABSTRACT
The integration of the resilience concept into contemporary international development agendas is increasingly gaining acclamation amongst policy makers and international development agencies. It has been conceived as an operational trajectory for shock and crisis management especially for socio-economically vulnerable and deprived communities in Africa and beyond, and has surpassed boundaries, becoming more visible in various domains of development intervention including health, financial and environmental discourses. This paper discusses succinctly the malleability of the resilience paradigm within the sustainable development discourse and seeks to underscore the propensity of resilience to navigate across sectors by identifying the various contextualization and pathways in which it intersects with development. It highlights some positive variables of resilience but also denotes some contextual shortcomings, precisely the assumption that the concept is a constructive approach to poverty alleviation. However, the paper concludes that the in depth application of resilience with regards to context is imperative for a more sustainable anticipation of impending threats and crisis for vulnerable communities and societies.

Keywords: resilience, vulnerability, sustainable development, poverty, communities

INTRODUCTION

"The resilience subject is a subject which most permanently struggles to accommodate itself to the world. Not a subject which can conceive of changing the world, its structure and conditions of possibility….but a subject which accepts the disastrousness of the world it lives in as a condition for partaking of that world" (Reid, 2010).

Processes of development are seemingly aligned not only to demands for sustainable and healthy societies, but to the discursive recent paradigm of resilience. The increasing sustainable development discourse is continuously propagated and advanced by western governments and international development aid agencies on the premise of seeking comprehensive and more holistic ways of designing development aid interventions and or programming. Changes in world system and recurrent socio-ecological crisis such as climate change, financial crisis, natural disasters and the rapid spread of health hazards, epidemics and pandemics, puts into full gear the recurrent arguments on resilience in public international discourses. Considering the case of climate change mitigation and adaptation, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in its discourse reiterated the appropriation of the resilience approach to disaster risk management and climate change adaptation and mitigation, as central to reducing social vulnerability (IPCC, 2012:2). It is not unfounded to concur implicitly that with the unpredictability of the future and the contemporary world economic system, the changing semantics in the conceptualization of development processes on the one hand, and resilience on the other is rapidly seeping through contemporary development debates. It is no strange concept that the appropriation of the resilience approach by multiple international stakeholders is pivotal to the latter's development agendas.

Resilience: Emergence of a "Contested" Concept in Theoretical Paradigms
The definitive links of resilience to the field of ecology was first drawn out by Holling as an indicative concept of physical risk within security discourses. Holling succinctly drew into focus within the resilience debate the ecological dimension of risks as aligned to the neoliberal viewpoint of multifaceted adaptive systems (Holling, 1973). Holling's work outlined the propensity of an ecosystem to remain stringent and cohesive, while experiencing grave crisis or perturbations. The basis of Holling's propositions underlined that systems become stable or experience equilibrium, even when faced with a disaster and or risks. The notion that there exists a "balance of nature" to which life will return to, eventually if left to self repair, represents itself as the axis of the ecosystem framework as elaborated by Holling. Hayek on the other hand orientated his own arguments towards the complexity of the market economy while defining the buildup of social systems as likened to ecological structures and or systems. His divergent views on resilience discourse were discernible from his stringent critique of the processes of economic planning (Hayek, 1945). Arguing that due to the complexity of economic processes in the market economy, it is practically an uphill task for governments and the state to believe that they could rationally control and determine the various individual relationships. This meant that society had the capability of self adaptability to impending risks and threats.

Hayek's critique of Keynesian policy and the interventionist attitude of the state to regulate economic activities spurred apparently during the 1970's oil shocks explained the weak and vulnerable institutions that attempted to redress the crisis situations. Through this apparent failure of state intervention to address the crisis, Hayek intoned that state interventionists programs and efforts at containing shocks were undoubtedly inefficient and doomed to fail. Coupled to this is the fact that the transcendence role of the state in regulating market affairs could provoke long term crisis situations that may worsen the vulnerability of the community and the already over emphasized state authority. Apparently, while we acknowledge that Hayek places on an ontological level the self regulatory process of the market system, the demonstration of their resilience ascertained implicitly that there is utmost possibility of social institutions and structures to dynamically remake themselves not only in anticipation of impending risks or hazards, but also in designing a more holistic and pragmatic approach that takes into account processes of sustainability and community resilience.

Decoupling the Resilience Paradigm in Sustainable Development
The popularity of the resilience paradigm across scholarly literature has attracted intense symbolic meaning and interpretations. As I previously highlighted, the emergence of resilience science in Holling's analysis of the ecosystem and biosphere, explained the imbued versatility and far reaching effect that the resilience paradigm exercised within ecology and political economy. Within the sustainable development discourse, the resilience paradigm embodies thriving communities and action oriented individuals, prone to adequately safeguarding the sustainable and long term well being of local communities within disaster and adversity situations. The growing influence of the resilience paradigm is in tandem with the concurrent recognition and need to establish sustainable societies as operationalized through the elaboration and adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The complexities surrounding human communities and societies poses serious challenges to achieving stable socio-ecological systems; and the fluctuating dynamics of development aid interventions inherently define a nuance between resilience and sustainable development. The appropriation of the resilience paradigm within community centered development processes is an indication of the fact that the resilience is a "derivative function" of not only socio-economic development and growth, but circumscribes itself to processes of socio-cultural relationships, robust development partnerships, cooperation models and the non-negligible collaboration between governments and international development aid agencies and stakeholders.

Aligning resilience thus to sustainable development appears to cause a shift in semantics towards a more holistic development approach, as the state of human capacity and ability to secure itself from world shocks and crisis, is no longer attributed to sustainable development processes. Conversely, one begins to question the propensity and predilection of communities and individuals to survive in a world without establishing appropriate safeguards that will guard and ensure their livelihoods and wellbeing from it. Arguably, this is appended on a growth and development premise in that resilience becomes not only a "positive" sustainable development process, but unabatedly poses a challenge for vulnerable and poverty stricken communities in most parts of Africa and other developing countries. Framing resilient communities becomes imperative once ecological rules and norms of societal change and transformation are appended to development, and once exposure to risks and situations of vulnerability becomes a condition sine qua non for development interventions. Intrinsically, this forms the basis and trajectory through which resilience discourse, policy, practice and implementation of sustainable development processes intertwine. The United Nations in its development policy discourses pushed forth the resilience/sustainable development nexus, recalling shocks and disaster prone situations in poor and vulnerable settings as rather an opportunity for the socio-economic and political transformation of communities and vulnerable societies.

To this effect, the United Nations ascertains that "*resilience fundamentally requires making societies aware of the importance of disaster reduction for their own well being.....because it is crucial for people to understand that they have a responsibility towards their own survival and not simply wait for governments to provide and find solutions*" (UN, 2004). It is thus no overstatement to underscore that from a linear perspective, sustainable development was hitherto a dominant framework in development discourses and succinctly posed a "*development dilemma*" for communities. Besides, it questioned the implications of economy centred policies on social support systems to which these poverty stricken and vulnerable communities relied upon for securing and maintaining sustainable livelihoods (Khagram et al, 2003). The link between resilience and sustainable development portrayed a conceptual shift in the sustainable development framework, specifically the neo-liberal construction of the development problematic (Duffield, 2008). This implied a *people oriented* perspective to community resilience systems, as Duffield argued that the process of sustainable development relates to people's ability to adopt "community based self reliance" through a process of promoting the sustainable use and management of resources, environments and ecosystems, as a reliable build up to ensuring their resilience. Nonetheless, the growth and spread of modernization and globalization throughout the world economy continues to create an increasing and more complex web of development interventions and dependence for developing countries and vulnerable communities, especially as these countries become intertwined in the resource trap of foreign aid and development.

The plethora of actors and key stakeholders (be they multilateral, bilateral, development aid agencies, national governments etc) championing the sustainable development platform, is evidence of concerted efforts across multiple layers of development intervention in the South, to attain common "global" development objectives. The resilience paradigm thus presents itself as a more "sustainable approach" for building the capacities of vulnerable communities, as a safeguard towards adapting to shocks and crisis situations. This intersection between development policy and resilience brings into the limelight development policy debates that highlight dominant assumptions on societal relationships that significantly affect resilience and the socio-ecological patterns and trajectories that circumvent development interventions (Brown, 2016). This could be for example local communities' capacity for adaptation, change and transformation as previously indicated, and policy prescriptions that guide resilient

efforts. At this juncture, the crucial task is to contextually determine how the resilience paradigm can integrate development aid interventions to guide and shape communities' capacities to anticipate and withstand future disasters and shocks.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on the review of various scholarly literatures on resilience and sustainable development discourse. The paper applies a qualitative analysis and arguments put forth are founded on the basis of empirical and conceptual studies on resilience and development in the Global South. More specifically, a desk research methodology was used to explore and analyze relevant literature available from the various journal articles, research projects, reviews, books and internet sources, to exegetically throw more light on the socio economic implications of resilience within development processes for developing and African countries in particular, on the basis of an integrative approach in development policy and local community interventions.

VULNERABILITY AND RESILIENCE: SHIFTING PARADIGMS?

The logic underlying vulnerability and resilience relates to communities' potential to adapt to shocks and impending hazards; as well as local institutions and governance structures' ability and capacity to ensure human security, wellbeing and livelihood. Strategically, sustainable development within the international development agenda functioned as a "naturalizing" ingredient for creating liberal societies and modes of governance through which the narrative of self help brought into focus the resilience of human populations, amidst persistent poverty and strings of growing social inequalities. Questionably enough how is it that the propagation of the resilience paradigm positioned itself as a "new opportunity" to concretely addressing vulnerability and supposedly ensuring sustainability? We could refer to the previously highlighted growth and domination of the resilience concept in the sustainable development discourse as a first step towards understanding the question posed. The origin of the resilience concept from the systemic domain of ecology is by no chance a strange phenomenon, highlighting inherently what Agder (2000: 349) underscores as "buffering the capacities of living systems; their ability to "take up" shocks or the "degree" of shocks and hazards that a living system can contain before changing its structure, variables and processes that control behaviour.

Ecologists, in discussing the vulnerability of societies concentrated more on peoples' capacities to adapt to external/internal threats, arguing implicitly that such determines the resilience of the ecosystem. The arguments of sustainable development on the economic development of communities emphasized resilience not only for community members but for the entire biosphere. This position ultimately shifts concern and focus from human life per se to incorporate all other entities vulnerable to the shocks wrecked upon society by market and or capitalist economies. The profound implications that this new line of thinking had on development policy, extensively shaped the manner in which the concurrent problem and nature of vulnerability was generated in development discourses. The United Nations Development Programme explained vulnerability to be a "*human condition or process resulting from physical, social, economic and environmental factors, which determine the likelihood and scale of damage from the impact of a given hazard*" (UNDP, 2004, quoted in Sapam R. et al, 2014). As established by the above definition, the referent object of vulnerability as a "human condition" pre supposes that the account of vulnerability as a human condition was bound to change and give precedence to the new concept of resilience; intrinsically emerging within the development policy discourse as a new process of posing a divergent kind of development policy problematic, and the contribution of multiple international development actors to development aid interventions and processes.

The speculative function of resilience thinking is imperative for poor and vulnerable communities to create enabling environments and possible devise structures and institutions that can contain future threats and crisis. Arguably, resilience provides conditions under which knowledge of vulnerabilities could be easily generated. In tandem, one can obviously perceive a double and correlated conceptual shift at this juncture in deconstructing resilience in vulnerability. The shift of resilience from an ecosystem orientation to a people centred discourse, has concomitantly declutched sustainable development from being an economic development pathway to being an ecosystem orientation. Thus, does tackling vulnerability the lens of resilience necessarily provide a way out for the poor and vulnerable, given the contested discourses between "*growing poverty of resources*" and the World Bank's narrative of the "*resources of the poor*"?

CIRCUMSCRIBING RESILIENCE THINKING IN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT ISSUES: A POSITIVE MEASURE OR ANOTHER SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT CATCHPHRASE?

Invariably, the application of a resilience framework within the context of development is a plus towards ensuring a holistic analysis of systems and their ability to withstand growing socio-economic risks and crisis situations. The primary responsibility for development and growth has seemingly been thrown into the cold vulnerable hands of developing countries, given that the solemn fate and destiny of developing countries' economies and governance systems are concomitantly dependent on global socio-political changes and transformations. The recent financial overturns overriding the Euro zone, especially within the context of the global financial crisis, is evidence enough of the "pervasive" international institutional arrangements that excruciatingly underscores adverse socio-political and ecological implications of systemic challenges to global development. How resilience circumscribes current thinking about social development issues in developing countries poses a succinct question to development aid interventions. In the context of poverty alleviation, the assumptions that poor and vulnerable communities are already resilient both by nature and as a matter of utmost necessity, arguably "justifies" the ability of communities to "independently" secure and maintain resilient livelihoods, while creating enabling environments via which they could effortlessly draw on available assets and resources to safeguard their health and wellbeing.

This is nuanced by the fact that there is still need for mutual cooperation between key actors and stakeholders to manage shocks as demonstrated by the World Bank's position and statement on the provision of increased development aid, support and collaboration to and with poor and vulnerable communities, as a collaborative step towards reducing poverty traps for these communities; and equipping them to cope with the changing global challenges and crisis situations such as climate change, debt crisis, health epidemics etc (World Bank, 2013). The various development discourses propagated by multilateral and bilateral aid agencies and international non governmental entities pushed forth resilience as a "post economic development solution" applicable to a wide sphere of diverse social entities, initiatives and processes (Brown, 2016). Recognizing resilience and the processes of managing it as a development objective, conveys inherently positive connotations of enhancing local capacities to withstand severe forces and ameliorates the depth of vulnerability that poor societies may find themselves in. Laying emphasis on building local capacities and strengthening local systems warrants one to ascertain "resilience thinking" as a practical development process, that reinforces normative processes about progressive and transformative socio-economic development. Consequently, the inability of local structures in developing settings to adapt to external impeding crisis puts into question the very perspective of the World Bank's assumption on the "natural resilience" of poor and vulnerable communities to external shocks.

Is it thus fair to ascertain (based on this backdrop) that the consideration of communities, people and households as self resilient is arguably a fallacy of social development? Can we rightly infer from development policy discourses championed by international development actors and agencies that the latter identifies and signals areas of socio-ecological concern and risk, but shifts responsibility of securing resilient livelihoods to communities and its people who are more or less vulnerable? Does resilience in itself offer opportunities and pathways through which communities can forge sustainable livelihoods and well being? Increasingly articulated within the context of sustainable development, it is invariably observable that the normative connotations of resilience thinking tends to profoundly obliterate the underlying power relations existing between international aid donors and recipient communities, and the relative vagueness with which it attempts to capture social dynamics, places the resilience discourse at somewhat a negative position (Béné et al, 2012). Nonetheless, bringing to the limelight the various power relations that underlie social development will enable stakeholders contextualize resilience in relation to available resources, skill sets and technical capacities that developing countries posses, and build upon these to apportion appropriate structures with the viability to withstand future shocks and crisis situations (Mackinnon & Derickson, 2012).

CONCLUSION

The growing prominence of the resilience paradigm within a variety of socio-ecological and development spheres warrants inherent research and analysis. The raison d'être of this paper first and foremost was to deconstruct succinctly the navigability of the resilience concept throughout the sustainable development discourse, highlighting the salient points that risks, vulnerability and poverty are critical to achieving sustainable societies. The application of the resilience framework in its holistic nature is particularly relevant at a juncture where poverty and vulnerability levels become intensified by the concurrent socio-economic dependence and interdependence of communities and individuals on current socio-political systems, which may be vulnerable in themselves. Maintaining sustainable livelihoods and well being is an inherent concern for poor rural communities and households and building the resilience of such communities, warrants an understanding of the interplay between resource use and management with the socio-cultural connotations that subsume community action and solidarity.

However, not only has resilience been shown to transcend political systems and reorient thinking towards sustainable and innovative directions, it has nonetheless proven to be problematic especially as regards poverty alleviation and continuous social inequalities in African countries and other less developed settings. Emphasizing that resilience is a "sustainable approach" to circumventing social development problems might be a fallacy because the end results of the process, ends with "losers" and "winners" with the poor and vulnerable likely to fall in the former context. Targeting resilience thinking through an incorporation of contemporary development aid interventions with context may go a long way to inform the sustainable development debate and divert international development agenda towards discussing the application of resilience interventions in more "real" contexts.

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