

# Resilience: From Metaphor to an Action Plan for Use in the Peacebuilding Field

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This report sets out the case for peacebuilders to adopt resilience concepts in their work and highlights action points for the peacebuilding community to develop resilience interventions. Resilience thinking is attractive to peacebuilders for the emphasis it gives to the systematic self-help mechanisms of local communities and institutions. The focus on sub-state actors and processes resonates with peacebuilding's experience of the importance of local conflict prevention and of bottom-up social and political change. Yet the case for work on resilience in the peacebuilding context is not without its problems. For example, most of what we take to be local resilience to conflict involves informal governance arrangements. These have no obvious 'plug-in' feature for those peacebuilding actors whose interventions are organized around supporting the formal institutions of central states. Because of such issues, action points are articulated herein as challenges the peacebuilding community must overcome in order to frame resilience for the peacebuilding environment and to operationalize it without doing harm.

The report is based on the presentations and discussions which made up the 2012 Annual Meeting of the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform. This gathering was fortunate to draw together actors sharing their best practices from different sectors, including ecology, disaster relief and development assistance, as well as to feature leaders who have 'walked the walk' for their communities in peacebuilding situations. Insights from their experiences are incorporated to illustrate and enrich the report's findings.

The Geneva Peacebuilding Platform is a leader in advancing institutional exchanges of this kind and in promoting learning based on experience on the ground. Its role since the Platform was created in 2008 is to facilitate the interaction on peacebuilding between different organizations and sectors and to draw together best practices analyses from an action-oriented standpoint. With more than 60 institutions and 2,300 peacebuilding professionals participating, the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform connects the critical mass of peacebuilding actors, resources, and expertise in Geneva and well beyond.

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**The Geneva Peacebuilding Platform is a joint project of four institutions:**

## Resilience in peacebuilding: The concept and a case for its use

While peacebuilding has long taken an interest in civil society, this work does not provide peacebuilders with an operant definition of resilience. Rather, resilience comes to peacebuilding as a concept popular in a number of other fields, including engineering, material science, ecology and psychology. Peacebuilders cannot find in these other disciplines a single 'right' definition because resilience has different meanings within each area as well as varying across them. Yet the range of insights and connotations found in other disciplines may itself be useful for the theory and practice of peacebuilding:

*Resilience is a new and untested metaphor for better understanding how post-conflict environments work*

Material science: the relationship of resilience to brittleness, which highlights that flexibility is often a key quality of resilience;

Engineering: system redundancy as a source of resilience: from which comes the idea that communities are most resilient when multiple actors are able to assume a critical function;

Ecology: first, the distinction between conservationism -- preserving conditions that facilitate ongoing processes of adaptation and change -- and preservationism -- maintaining conditions "as they are." Second, the concept of disequilibrium: that for in some systems, non-linearity and seemingly chaotic relationships are a complex form of equilibrium;

Psychology: which indicates that the sources of psychological resilience involve complex and variable combinations of factors, and so we should not expect nor seek a parsimonious inventory of sources of resilience.

*In peacebuilding, resilience concepts will always be inherently normative*

Looking across these different disciplines, many studies of resilience focus on systems as "complex adaptive systems" able to cope, adapt, and reorganize in response to a chronic challenge. Versus bouncing back, the emphasis is on adaptation -- when a system copes with a disturbance by withstanding it and maintaining its stability -- and transformation -- when the system changes in its sub-systems or the whole structure in order to continue functioning.

Flexibility, system redundancy, disequilibrium, adaptation, transformation: these are potent ideas indeed for a field like peacebuilding. Take the concept of disequilibrium. Peacebuilding contexts are marked by the stresses of post-conflict environments, high levels of armed violence, and multiple political processes that address imminent tensions or work towards long-term systemic transformations. Non-linearity and seeming chaos would appear to be the order of the day in such contexts. And following on this, resilience might be a good lense to better understand non-conflict outcomes: why some countries do not fall back into war, or (like Nigeria) escape general conflict despite appearing to be on the brink for many years.

Yet we must also recognize that ecosystems are not villages. In projecting disequilibrium from ecology to peacebuilding, we are proposing a new and untested metaphor for better understanding how post-conflict environments work. Metaphors always obscure some features of target phenomena even as they illuminate others. This makes it important to specify (vs. assume) the operant meanings of resilience for the peacebuilding context. The following table provides one example of peacebuilding categories and scenarios with a resilience

orientation. The scenarios include local communities' aims and ultimate goals in the face of pressures and challenges, plus the peacebuilding activities which might support those goals.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 1: Categories and scenarios for resilience in peacebuilding contexts**

RESILIENCE TYPE	LOCAL COMMUNITY AIMS	GOALS	PEACEBUILDING ACTIVITIES
coping	A quest to maintain a positive peace through a community successfully resisting conflict pressures from within or without	the status quo of a community at peace is seen as good and is the goal	local conflict prevention
adaptation	a quest to transform a negative peace into a positive peace	bring greater equity and justice to the peace via political reforms, e.g., extension of civil rights and liberties, new systems of representation or allocation of resources, protection of minority rights	support for local and national political reform processes within the context of local conflict prevention
adaptation, possibly heading into transformation	a quest for the <i>status quo ante bellum</i>	seek to return to the pre-war dispensation after being overwhelmed by an armed conflict – but the goal is often unattainable	assistance for the community to adapt to a new and typically less permissive environment, with an emphasis on trust-building and confidence-building measures
transformation	a quest to transform the systems of representation and structures of power at sub-national and national levels	build or revive new state-society relations, more often than not via political violence	a problem for peacebuilding given the role of political violence. The nearest practical approximation is stabilization strategies.

***Peacebuilders will need to be clear that their normative perspective may be separate from and in conflict with that of local actors***

The scenarios highlight that in peacebuilding resilience concepts will *always* be inherently normative in character. As the coping and adaptation scenarios 1 and 2 illustrate, resilience might be taken to be a positive characteristic to be harnessed in support of peacebuilding aims – and this is part of the great attraction of the concept, to render valid local actors and their efforts to help themselves to build sustainable societies.

**Often resilience may not be a meaningful concept for local actors**

Equally, however, resilience might be judged by outsider peacebuilders as negative – an obstacle to conflict resolution or state reconstruction plans. This is a possibility with the adaptation scenario 3 if a community refuses to accept that it cannot achieve the *status quo ante bellum*, or with the transformation scenario 4 if community transformation goals clash with stabilization plans.

Under the principle of 'do no harm,' peacebuilders will need to be clear about their normative perspective as separate from and potentially in conflict with the normative universe of local actors. Peacebuilders will be *choosing to act or not from their own perspective*, with peacebuilders' choices "situated within the inevitable tensions between individual freedom and social order, between formal and informal institutions and service provision, and ultimately between the institutional dynamics of the social system in question and the capacity-building agenda of the international community seeking to intervene in precisely those dynamics."<sup>2</sup>

Table 1 also serves to bring out another important point about perspective, namely that often resilience will not be a meaningful term for local actors for their aims and goals and capacities to achieve these. Rather, resilience might be a helpful metaphor in peacebuilders' vocabulary to make sense of what they observe.

### **Resilience in specific contexts**

The Annual Meeting provided a powerful illustration of the separation of local and external social vocabularies via three case studies of community action: community involvement in peacebuilding after the 2011 Tottenham Riots in London; the Sri Lankan Business for Peace Alliance and its efforts during the war in Sri Lanka and since to "invest in peace"; and the Guatemalan NGO Youth Alliance/*Alianza Joven* and its program to support talented but at-risk men and women between the ages of 18-25 to find work within the private sector. The community leaders from England, Sri Lanka, and Guatemala all had experiences and lessons learned that are highly relevant to peacebuilding theory and practice.

**Resilience risks becoming a new buzzword in the peacebuilding field**

- *Tottenham*: demonstrates that bringing communities back from conflict (riots, arson and theft in this case) takes effective communication: getting victims and potential perpetrator together to speak, and finding a neutral space for conflict resolution, that is, a place where different constituencies can express their discontent and make challenges and where the community can hear what the state is going to do differently.
- *Sri Lanka*: offers first of all a negative lesson, that centralization can hamper regional peacebuilding efforts. The Business for Peace Alliance had some success in building analytic, negotiation, and presentation skills for regional business chamber leaders, in facilitating some investment, and in launching a networking platform. It was not able to contribute much to keeping the ceasefire in the country, however, or to promoting regional economic and business reconstruction after the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam were crushed in 2009. A main reason is the centralized design given the regional

network: working as one body, in one language, and as administered through a secretariat based in the capital city.

- *Guatemala*: teaches that we should not feel sorry for at-risk youth, our pity will not help them. We should seek to help them, though, through rehabilitation programs, therapy to gain a sense of belonging and identity as a survivor, and individualized employment training and internships. The link between talented youth and the private sector is as crucial in this chain as psychological support, as without employment prospects youth become easy targets for recruitment by gangs and organized crime.

The community leaders at the Annual Meeting certainly mentioned resilience, but it was not an important category to describe what they had been doing or to identify the capabilities they had found essential to succeeding. The sole exception was the Guatemalan case, but in this instance reliance had a psychological meaning. The resilience stories were of individuals producing their own personal resilience as they took responsibility for critical reflection and found a way to dialogue with the adversity they had experienced. This is also a powerful idea, but it is not a peacebuilding concept. Indeed, it could be the personal experience of community actors in any of the scenarios in Table 1.

*It can also be a crucial reminder of the key importance of local communities, early warning systems, and capacity building at the local level*



*H.E. Elissa Golberg, Nims Obunge, Vivien Rueda, Azmi Thassim during the Annual Meeting 2012.*

Is resilience then nothing but a new buzzword in the peacebuilding field? There is an undoubted risk of this, given the metaphorical and perspectival dimensions of resilience's transfer. Yet for at least four reasons, it is worthwhile for the peacebuilding community to look further at resilience.

*Aid agencies may find it awkward to engage in resilience work*

## Why a focus on resilience could be useful

1. Brought into peacebuilding, resilience is a crucial reminder that successful conflict prevention, mitigation, or transformation, all depend on a syndrome of qualities and capabilities of local communities, not on externally engineered processes.
2. Resilience thinking directs us to value prevention and to work on advanced planning procedures and early warning systems – approaches that should receive more support, analytical and financial, than is often the case today.
3. Capacity-building at the local level has been shown time and time again to be valuable for peacebuilding, and resilience thinking acknowledges this and focuses peacebuilders on the informal and local sources of peace. It also draws our attention to the inherent strengths of local actors, rather than their weaknesses.
4. While resilience might not speak to the individuals involved, it could still be a useful concept for outsiders to assess risk and evaluate a community's responses to shocks, crises and/or chronic stresses coming from the post-conflict environment.

### Box 1

#### Resilience: The humanitarian viewpoint

For humanitarians, the promotion of resilience is identified as a long-term process. As such, it is a development goal that cannot easily be brought into humanitarian action with its short-term emergency and protection objectives. Yet resilience promotion should be on the joint humanitarian-development agenda. It is an important reminder of local government and societal concerns beyond surviving the emergency, and a potential means to achieve serve important prevention goals of risk reduction and early warning. The key will be finance – sustainable (multi-year) funding.

### Box 2

#### Resilience and slow onset risks in ecology

What kind of processes are bodies or groups supposed to be resilient to? The Annual Meeting indicates that we generally have in mind sudden onset shocks such as attacks, invasions, assassination programs, etc. Yet a lesson from ecology is that we must also consider degradation processes as peace spoilers. Environmental cooperation gives us a wealth of examples of resilience-building tools, including early warning, community resource (re)allocation, trust-building and cooperation between divided groups. But these tools do not cover environmental degradation and slow onset risks, or the interaction of stresses – and these are emerging as crucial in ecosystem management, just as they could be for peacebuilding efforts.

*Versus pouring in money, peacebuilders should focus on convening local actors and creating neutral spaces for them to meet*

In sum, resilience could lead to a healthy reflection in the peacebuilding field about assumptions, priorities and operational practices. Beyond this, resilience thinking could result in improved interventions on behalf of peace at the local level.

For peacebuilders to achieve this potential, however, they will need to further develop their own specific resilience vocabulary and tools: move from metaphor transfer to analytic categories, analysis to operationalization, operationalization to learning and evaluation. Each step in this chain presents challenges for peacebuilding that make up the first action points for advancing resilience in this field.

## **Operationalizing resilience in peacebuilding**

Instances of resilience appear to be all around peacebuilders, including in Somalia, Syria, Nigeria, Kenya, the United States and England. But a recognition that something important is occurring at the local level is not the same thing as having an analytic framework that enables us to better understand what's occurring. A first crucial challenge for peacebuilders is to create such a framework for resilience phenomena.

For this, resilience analysts will need to consider units and levels of analysis and also causal attributions. So, to return to Table 1, they will need to develop answers to questions like the following:

- what exactly do we mean by “local communities”?
- is it all of this unit, or some part (sub-system) which can carry an aim such as maintaining a positive peace?
- what would count as resilience self-help mechanisms used by this unit to achieve its aims and goals? (Table 1 actually says nothing about this point, although it is essential!)
- what would count as shocks and stresses, and what would represent different system or sub-system processes linking shocks and stresses and resilience mechanisms to different outcomes, e.g., success or failure in adaptation outcomes?

Along with the framework challenge will come some practical challenges for the peacebuilding community to undertake resilience reporting. A sub-state actor and sub-system framework necessitates more fine-grained and contextualized analysis than provided in many peacebuilding studies. Analysts will need to map interests, relationships and capabilities from a local perspective (which could mean village by village) and for economic and social and not only political dimensions. In the resilience metaphor, complex systems are also dynamic and prone to sudden shifts. This will make necessary the ongoing monitoring of local systems versus snapshots taken every couple of years.

***Outcomes from resilience work could mean that nothing happens, or that changes are long-term and undramatic***

**Sometimes resilience might be negative resilience from a sovereignty perspective, but positive resilience from a human security or human rights perspective**

The Annual Meeting discussed the significant investments in time and expertise that will be required in order to produce resilience analyses. It will be also be difficult in post-conflict countries to source staff with the necessary training and language skills. Worth exploring is whether technology – new crowdsourcing techniques, for example – could help to address some of these issues.

Also discussed was the question of dissemination. Already many good peacebuilding analyses are not circulated (or are never even written down) because of the sensitive nature of their contents and the prospect that the reports could be leaked. Resilience reports will undoubtedly also be deemed sensitive materials. The community should reflect on whether they can create a better system for the safe dissemination of these studies.

Peacebuilders' interest in resilience is ultimately practical; they are interested in how they might integrate resilience practices and mechanisms into peacebuilding operations, and/or adapt the peacebuilding services provided to a particular community in light of its perceived resilience. An important challenge for resilience interventions will come from the informality of the arrangements and activities of interest to peacebuilders. With their orientation on formal institutions, aid agencies will find it awkward to engage with local systems based on informal institutions and relations. Their tendency will be to seek to formalize (or co-opt) the informal networks and practices. In the process, they will risk 'smothering by love' what they are seeking to support. Alternatively they will risk failure because they create local resistance to changing what works well for local actors. An obvious example is informal street markets, which as Jütersonke and Kartas point, out "only function (and make economic sense for those involved) precisely because they are informal."<sup>3</sup>

Backstopping has worked in other informal contexts and could be a way forward for peacebuilders. Backstopping entails making a long-term commitment while undertaking only very surgical interventions. So, for example, instead of pouring in money, peacebuilders would focus on convening different local actors and on creating neutral spaces for local actors to meet and communicate.



*Marcus Oxley, Brian Ganson, Sandra Aviles, David Jensen, Rudolf Muller during the Annual Meeting 2012.*

### Box 3

#### Insights from the business and peacebuilding experience

Resilience program development might benefit from the example of conflict prevention in the context of large-scale business investment in conflict-affected and fragile environments. In these settings it is self-evident that large-scale investments are going to strain a country's physical infrastructure. Only now are we starting to recognize how such investment strains the political and social infrastructure of the places where the new operations are installed.

Work on supporting community resilience shows the value of anticipatory and analytical interventions. Outsiders can be useful backstoppers through preparing communities for what's arriving along with the trucks: disseminating information about typical effects, training community members to understand and observe, and convening them to discuss. The public forums which are created are important for the communities concerned to cope with the investment stresses. Sometimes they may also serve other public purposes, e.g., for locals to find solutions to public health issues or to manage problems of election violence.<sup>4</sup>

Learning is essential for peacebuilding to improve – and it will also create some issues for integrating resilience programming into peacebuilding. There are three dimensions of the learning problematic worth noting here:

- Resilience monitoring and evaluation tools (M & E) are going to be difficult to develop because system complexity makes it challenging for observers to attribute causality and intentionality. Indeed, substantial methodological innovations will be needed in the peacebuilding field to be able to create M & E measures for resilience programs.
- There's also sure to be the “boy and the elephant” issue for resilience M&E<sup>5</sup>: success in resilience work could often mean that nothing happens (the first scenario in Table 1) or that any outcome changes are long-term and not particularly dramatic (the first and possibly the second scenarios). Peacebuilding agencies are still learning how to draw programmatic lessons for areas of long-term commitment with a strong prevention dimension.
- Presuming the desirability of the local resilience in question, it should be asked early on how we can encourage effective local, national and regional learning of resilience mechanisms and informal and formal means of their promotion.

#### **Box 4**

##### **Why local learning matters: The example of disaster relief and recovery**

A vivid example of why local learning matters comes from the discussion of disaster relief and recovery (DRR) at the Annual Meeting. Most people assume that resilience in DRR is first and foremost about technological resilience, and that promoting resilience will therefore mean finding new technological solutions for local communities to withstand natural disasters. But in fact resilience in this field emphasizes the role of practical learning (reflection and experimentation) by local people. For example, the main conclusion of post-2011 tsunami resilience reviews undertaken in the eastern part of Japan was that community solidarity and self-help mattered most in local disaster responses to the tsunami. So rather than investing further in technology, investments are being made in this region in ways to promote social cohesion.

The last challenge, perhaps the most difficult, is foregrounded by the normative and external nature of the resilience metaphor. Peacebuilders cannot presume that they are 'as one' with the aims and goals of local communities. Rather peacebuilding agencies will have to make strategic judgments from their external perspective about when to support local resilience and when to view it as an impediment to their goals, whether goals of the state (re)building agenda or social change goals such as greater equity and social justice.

These will be politically and morally charged evaluations to make. Sometimes resilience might be negative resilience from a sovereignty perspective, but positive resilience from a human security or human rights perspective. Sometimes (perhaps often) resilience mechanisms will run counter to development and security goals such as equitable participation, gender equality or inclusive governance. Resilience could create increased intra-group solidarity in the short term, but later on produce inter-group rivalries. Peacebuilders are likely to choose in ways favoring their organizational agendas and moral compasses – it is to be hoped that this doesn't position peacebuilders too often against the hopes and aspirations of local actors.

Annual Meeting participants proposed development of a two-track statebuilding model: statebuilding as the long term goal while in the here and now community resilience is protected. They also emphasized the need for aid agencies to consider *how their measures will either promote or at least do no harm to community resilience.*

## Conclusion

Resilience is a powerful metaphor to remind peacebuilders that successful outcomes for peace depend on local actors, to encourage the peacebuilding community to value prevention more, and to focus them on the long term and on peacebuilding at the local and not just national level. The very richness of the resilience metaphor, however, also makes it a challenging concept for operationalization in peacebuilding contexts. Peacebuilders will need to develop their own analytic framework, vocabulary, and tools for the resilience construct. They will also need to grapple with the strategic (political and moral) questions inherent in the resilience concept.

*The principle of do no harm must also be applied to resilience work*

### Box 5

#### A summary of action points

The agenda for the peacebuilding community to develop appropriate resilience interventions includes the following action points:

1. Move from metaphor to an analytical framework for resilience in peacebuilding contexts, including specifying units and levels of analysis and causal attributions
2. Invest in fine-grained and contextualized mapping and ongoing monitoring
3. Consider within the peacebuilding community whether/how to create a better system for the safe dissemination of studies like these with sensitive contents
4. Identify interventions which will not 'smother by love' the very practices which aid agencies are seeking to support, nor create local resistance from local actors to changing what works well for them
5. Create monitoring and evaluation tools capable of addressing system complexity and tracking subtle long-term change as well as transformation as successful results
6. Encourage effective local, national and regional learning concerning resilience mechanisms and how they can be promoted

Throughout, peacebuilders will need to foreground the normative and external aspects of resilience brought into this field, and to judge appropriate actions based on whether they will either promote or at least do no harm to the communities in question.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Further elaboration is available in Ken Menkhaus (2013, forthcoming), "From 'Resilience' to 'Transformation'?: Towards New Multi-stakeholder Partnerships for Peacebuilding." Forthcoming paper, Geneva: Geneva Peacebuilding Platform.
- <sup>2</sup> Oliver Jütersonke and Moncef Kartas (2012), "Resilience: Conceptual Reflections." Brief No. 6, Geneva: Geneva Peacebuilding Platform, p. 5.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 6.
- <sup>4</sup> For a more in-depth treatment of the investment and peacebuilding agenda, see Brian Ganson and Achim Wennmann (2012), "Safe communities, resilient systems: Towards a new action framework on business and peacebuilding." Paper No. 3, Geneva: Geneva Peacebuilding Platform.
- <sup>5</sup> This Cold War allegory refers to the difficulties of demonstrating the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence. In the allegory, each morning a young boy goes out on his front step to yell, "Elephant, go away!" Finally, after a couple of years someone finally asks him what he is doing, and he answers, "Deterring the elephant. And see, it's worked!"

## **About the author and the paper**

This paper is a distillation of the main points raised during the 2012 Annual Meeting of the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform. The Annual Meeting took place at the Warwick Hotel in Geneva, 9 November 2012. All views expressed in this paper relate to the interventions made during the 2012 Annual Meeting. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the Rapporteur, or the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform. This paper is also available at <http://www.gpplatform.ch>.

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## **About the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform**

The Geneva Peacebuilding Platform is an inter-agency network that connects the critical mass of peacebuilding actors, resources, and expertise in Geneva and worldwide. Founded in 2008, the Platform has a mandate to facilitate interaction on peacebuilding between different institutions and sectors, and to advance new knowledge and understanding of peacebuilding issues and contexts. It also plays a creative role in building bridges between International Geneva, the United Nations peacebuilding architecture in New York, and peacebuilding activities in the field. The Platform's network comprises more than 2500 peacebuilding professionals and over 60 institutions working on peacebuilding directly or indirectly. As part of its 2012-2014 Programme, the Platform provides policy-relevant advice and services, ensures the continuous exchange of information through seminars, consultations, and conferences, and facilitates outcome-oriented peacebuilding dialogues in five focus areas. For more information see <http://www.gpplatform.ch>.

The Geneva Peacebuilding Platform is a joint project of four institutions: The Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies; the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP); Interpeace; and the Quaker United Nations Office, Geneva (QUNO).

## **Other Platform publications on resilience:**

Oliver Jütersonke and Moncef Kartas (2012) *Resilience: Conceptual Reflections* (Platform Brief 6).

Ken Menkhaus (2013) *Making Sense of Resilience in Peacebuilding Contexts: Approaches, Applications, Implications* (Platform Paper 6)

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