



# Squaring the Circle: Reconciling the Need for Rigor with the Reality on the Ground in Resilience Impact Assessment

CHRISTOPHE BÉNÉ<sup>a</sup>, FAHIM S. CHOWDHURY<sup>b</sup>, MAMUN RASHID<sup>b</sup>, SABBIR A. DHALI<sup>b</sup> and FERDOUS JAHAN<sup>c,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), Cali, Colombia*

<sup>b</sup> *Development Research Initiative (DRI), Dhaka, Bangladesh*

<sup>c</sup> *University of Dhaka, Bangladesh*

**Abstract.** — Currently shaping a large part of the development and humanitarian agenda the concept of resilience has been embraced by a large number of donors, development agencies, and international NGOs. As a consequence, an increasing number of development interventions that aim at strengthening the resilience of vulnerable households and communities are now being implemented across the globe. Along with these interventions, a growing and urgent call for rigorous monitoring and evaluation has emerged. Unfortunately, the very few resilience measurement frameworks that are available are often too “academics”, data-demanding, and therefore poorly adapted to the reality faced by practitioners on the ground. In this paper we develop a resilience impact assessment framework which addresses this challenge. Using an ex-post treatment *vs.* control approach, the framework satisfies the requirement for rigor that should be found in any proper impact assessment framework, but remains operational in the data- and resource-constrained situations which characterize most of the current interventions in the field. We illustrate the approach through the case of the *Enhancing Resilience* program that was implemented by the World Food Programme and its partners in Bangladesh during 2011–13.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is now a fact: resilience, as a concept, has extended its era of influence beyond the buzzword which it was risking of becoming just few years ago (see e.g. [URD, 2012](#); or [Devex, 2012](#)). Currently shaping a large part of the development and humanitarian agenda (e.g., [Béné, Godfrey-Wood, Newsham, & Davies, 2012](#); [Frankenberger & Nelson, 2013](#); [Osborne, 2007](#)) the concept of resilience has been embraced by a growing number of donors (USAID, DFID, CIDA, AUSAID, Swiss SDC, etc.), as well as UN and other development agencies (FAO, WFP, UNDP, EU-ECHO).<sup>1</sup> In parallel and as part of the same movement, more than 15 major international NGOs<sup>2</sup> have now made resilience one of their major programmatic priorities.

As a consequence of this new converging interest for resilience among donors and practitioners, a large and still increasing number of interventions that aim at strengthening the resilience of people (households, communities) in relation to food security in the context of climate change and other (societal) shocks and disasters, are now being implemented across the globe.<sup>3</sup>

Alongside, or underpinning, these interventions, a large number of resilience frameworks are now available. Those were developed mainly by NGOs (e.g. [Mercy Corps, 2015](#); [Oxfam, 2016](#); [Practical Action, 2011](#)) and international organizations (e.g. [DFID, 2011](#); [UNDP, 2013](#); [USAID, 2012](#)) as an attempt to “operationalize” a concept which has, so far, proven relatively difficult to apprehend and to apply on the ground ([Frankenberger & Nelson, 2013](#); [von Grebmer, Headey, Béné, & Haddad et al., 2013](#)). As summarized in the proceedings of one recent international conference on resilience: “questions of what to measure, whom to measure, how

often to measure, what methods to use, and at what scale are still being debated” ([IFPRI, 2014: 7](#)).

The problem however is now becoming even more complicated, as the challenge is no longer simply about measuring resilience; it is increasingly about developing robust, verifiable monitoring, evaluating, and learning (MEL) frameworks assessing and documenting the impact of resilience interventions. Put concretely, how can we be sure that these projects and interventions alleging that their activities lead to the strengthening of the beneficiaries’ resilience, do effectively achieve what they promise? What are the real impacts of these interventions, and is it appropriate to claim that those impacts are effectively resilience-related? For instance can a (statistically significant) increase in the number of income-generating activities of a community be considered as evidence that this community’s resilience has effectively been increased? Or, can a NGO that has successfully established and implemented a cash transfers program targeting a vulnerable socio-economic group claim that it has subsequently increased the resilience of the program’s beneficiaries?

Part of the problem is conceptual and part is empirical. Conceptually, there is a growing and urgent need for more

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rigor and replicability in the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks that are put in place by NGOs and other implementing agencies in relation to resilience interventions, at least for two reasons: (i) Although progress has been made in conceptualizing resilience measurement in relation to food security (see e.g. Béné, Headey, Haddad, & von Grebmer, 2016; Conostas *et al.*, 2014; FAO, 2013; Smith *et al.*, 2015), NGOs and international development agencies are still struggling to demonstrate that what they are measuring on the ground is effectively resilience, and not just, say, change in social capitals. This risk of reproducing “old wine in new bottles” calls for the development of new, rigorous, and robust Impact Assessment (IA) frameworks that are *specifically adapted* to resilience interventions (Béné, 2013; Griffin, 2013); (ii) this current lack of well-established IA frameworks adapted to resilience interventions leaves the implementing agencies in the dark. How can they effectively assess the impact of their interventions and distinguish what works from what does not without those rigorous IA frameworks? As pointed out by a group of practitioners and academics interested in resilience “While the last decade has seen the growth and adoption of resilience conceptual thinking in different sectors, robust, verifiable evidence of impact among programs seeking to build resilience remains scarce; key implementing partners lack the experience, knowledge and tools to use existing resilience measurement tools in ongoing monitoring and evaluation efforts of initiatives; and M&E practitioners often lack access to resilience knowledge being produced by academics and think-tanks, including new measurement approaches” (Rockefeller Foundation, 2016). In sum, the question has shifted from “how to measure resilience?” to “how to evaluate resilience intervention and learn from it?”

This growing need to strengthen the evidence-based of resilience intervention is however hampered by a series of pragmatic challenges. First the debate on what resilience is, how to define it, and how to measure it, has been so far mainly academic and theoretical (e.g. Barrett & Conostas, 2014). Although some very recent attempts have been made to bring these theoretical discussions down to a more empirical and operational level (see e.g. the Bond initiative on resilience,<sup>4</sup>) the disconnect between scholars/academics and practitioners/policy makers is still blatant and very little dialog has been possible so far between these two communities (Béné, Newsham, Davies, Ulrichs, & Godfrey-Wood, 2014; Rockefeller Foundation, 2016). Second, the current (academic) literature insists on the importance of high-frequency panel data in order to be able to catch the dynamic nature of resilience (Barrett & Conostas, 2012; Barrett & Headey, 2014; Béné, Headey *et al.*, 2016; Conostas *et al.*, 2014; Headey & Ecker, 2013). However, very few existing datasets appear to satisfy these stringent conditions of high-frequency panel data.<sup>5</sup> The (logistical and financial) costs of operating these types of surveys is simply too high for most NGOs and implementing agencies.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the mismatch between the short-term project cycle imposed by most donors (usually 3 years, sometimes 5 years) and the slow process of building households and communities’ resilience makes the task of practitioners almost impossible.

In those circumstances the key question becomes: can we still reconcile the need for a rigorous assessment framework—which is (legitimately) expected from a MEL perspective—with the empirical reality faced by practitioners on the ground where high-frequency panel data and 5+ year implementing period are luxury that cannot be afforded?

In this paper we develop a Resilience Impact Assessment (RIA) framework which addresses those questions. The frame-

work, which is based on an ex-post quasi-experimental design, fulfills the requirements for rigor (especially the internal validity and social interactions threats that need to be satisfied in any proper IA framework), but remains operational in the data- and information-constrained situations which characterize most of resilience interventions on the ground. We illustrate and test the framework through an empirical case study: the *Enhancing Resilience to Natural Disasters and the Effects of Climate Change* program that was implemented by the World Food Programme (WFP) and its partners during 2011–13.

## 2. THE ENHANCING RESILIENCE PROGRAM

### (a) Overview of the ER program activities

The *Enhancing Resilience to Natural Disasters and the Effects of Climate Change* (henceforth ER) program is a joint initiative implemented by the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) of the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives of the Government of Bangladesh and the World Food Programme. The ER program was initiated in 2011 as part of the WFP Bangladesh office’s disaster risk management and resilience portfolio (WFP, 2013). The central purpose of the ER program is to reduce the risks posed by natural disasters and the effects of climate change in the most vulnerable communities, while promoting food security and nutrition in ultra-poor households. It is implemented in two distinct parts of the country: the river erosion prone areas of the northwest and the cyclone and salinity affected coastal belt in the South.

The ER beneficiaries are selected by the program through a two-step process combining both geographic and local participatory targeting, as follows: first, areas considered to be the most exposed to extreme events (geographic targeting) were identified, and within those areas the most vulnerable households are then identified through participatory targeting at the community level.

The program follows a 3-year cycle. Ultra-poor households are first targeted and enrolled with a strong priority given to women. Subsequently a participatory process of local-level planning takes place through which households identify and map their specific vulnerabilities to climatic shocks and identify priorities for infrastructure work, in conjunction with local government. Then, three types of activities take place:

- (1) During the dry seasons (from January to June) of the first two years of the program cycle, protective and productive infrastructures are built or rehabilitated under the technical guidance of LGED, using unskilled labor, largely of the ultra-poor women.
- (2) During the wet seasons (from July to December), disaster preparedness, climate change awareness and life skills training are offered to participants. The life skills training focuses on women rights and empowerment aspects; as well as building awareness of the participants on nutritional issues. In exchange of their participation in work and training, participants are remunerated, initially through a combination of food and cash, and since 2015 exclusively in cash (equivalent value of Bangladesh Taka BDT 150/USD 1.95 per day in 2012).
- (3) At the beginning of the third year of the program one woman from each participating household is trained on establishing a micro-enterprise and receives a cash grant of BDT 12,000 ( $\approx$  USD 156) for investment as well as a monthly allowance for consumption support.

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