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## Operationalising Systemic Resilience

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### Abstract

This paper provides a critical analysis and synthesis of insights from the fields of Resilience Thinking, Critical Systems Thinking, Community Operational Research and Development Studies; and presents an operational framework for 'systemic resilience'. The framework is grounded in strength-based multi-stakeholder processes that explore the framing of 'resilience of what, to what, for whom, over what time frame'. Insights from Critical Systems Theory and Systemic Intervention demonstrate that rigorous framing of resilience necessarily involves participatory systemic boundary critique and both theoretical and methodological pluralism. This framework has implications for Community Operational Research activities aimed at building community resilience, and a suite of general principles is provided to this end. The Systemic Integrated Adaptation program in Nepal is provided to highlight applications in Community Operational Research, and also to highlight the flexible nature of the framework through the use of novel participatory techniques. Finally, the paper provides a discussion aimed to promote dialogue between the Resilience, Systems Thinking, Community Operational Research and Development communities.

**Keywords:** Community Operational Research; Resilience; Systems Thinking; Development; Climate Change Adaptation

### 1 Introduction

This paper provides an operational framework for understanding and managing system resilience, based on a novel synthesis of insights from the fields of Resilience Thinking, Critical Systems Thinking, Community Operational Research (COR) and Development Studies. The paper begins with an overview and synthesis of extant meanings of resilience, and provides an inclusive conceptualisation that situates any particular definition. It then demonstrates how applications of key insights from Critical Systems Thinking can be used to operationalise the prevalent but contentious concept of resilience in an open, inclusive, critical and rigorous manner. In particular, the literature on systems thinking highlights that any attempt to characterise system resilience inevitably relies on normative and partial system boundary judgements, so rigour in this pursuit requires the participation of diverse stakeholders and experts in critical processes, and is always an intervention. Development theory and practice has a long history of wrestling with issues of participation, representation, power and empowerment. Both Critical Systems Thinking (especially its application in Community OR), and Development Studies acknowledge issues of what constitutes improvement, who gets to decide this, for whom and how. Thus, this paper draws on development theory and COR in creating an operational framework for systemic resilience that is ethical and empowering for those involved.

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