



Is resilience to climate change socially inclusive? Investigating theories of change processes in Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

Approaches to resilience to climate change can be socially exclusionary if they do not acknowledge diverse experiences of risks or socio-economic barriers to resilience. This paper contributes to analyses of resilience by studying how theories of change (ToC) processes used by development organizations might lead to social exclusions, and seeking ways to make these more inclusive. Adopting insights from participatory monitoring and evaluation, the paper first presents fieldwork from four villages in Myanmar to compare local experiences of risk and resilience with the ToCs underlying pathways to resilience based on building anticipatory, absorptive, and adaptive capacities. The paper then uses interviews with the development organizations using these pathways to identify how ToC processes might exclude local experiences and causes of risk, and to seek ways to make processes more inclusive. The research finds that development organizations can contribute to shared ToCs for resilience, but adopt tacitly different models of risk that reduce attention to more transformative socio-economic pathways to resilience. Consequently, there is a need to consider how resilience and ToCs can become insufficiently scrutinized boundary objects when they are shared by actors with different models of risk and intervention.

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1. Introduction

Resilience is now widely discussed within international development as the ability to withstand risks, including those arising from anthropogenic climate change (UNDP, 2014; USAID, 2013). Approaches to resilience, however, are controversial because they reflect, or even legitimize, wider social values and structures (Barrett & Conostas, 2014; Brown, 2016; Couzin-Frankel, 2018). Moreover, pathways to resilience might exclude local experiences or causes of risk if they are unaware of their own assumptions, or are not sensitive to diverse stakeholders (Bahadur & Tanner, 2014; Béné, Chowdhury, Rashid, Dhali, & Jahan, 2017).

This paper contributes to the analysis of resilience within environment and development policy by studying the processes used by development organizations to develop, apply, and adapt theories of change (ToCs) for resilience. By so doing, the paper adopts insights from participatory monitoring and evaluation (M&E) to investigate the processes by which development organizations adopt and revise approaches to resilience. Moreover, it contributes to the analysis of ToCs as sites of contestable assumed cause-and-effect and as insufficiently scrutinized boundary objects

(Roe, 1991; Star & Griesemer, 1989). Indeed, Brown (2016, p. 71) has argued that the role of resilience as a boundary object within environmental policy needs further research.

The paper presents a combination of fieldwork and interviews relating to development interventions to build resilience in four villages in Myanmar. In particular, it focuses on the frameworks used by the development initiative known as BRACED (Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters),¹ funded by the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DfID). BRACED is a useful example because it actively seeks to build social capacities to address climate resilience, rather than other initiatives that focus on strengthening infrastructure or managing ecosystems alone. Moreover, BRACED offers the opportunity to analyze diverse ToC processes, based upon program-wide objectives, different pathways to resilience, and the distinctive specialisms of its constituent members.

The research had three objectives. First, to analyze the social inclusiveness of different pathways to resilience by comparing local experiences of risk and resilience in villages with the ToCs underlying each pathway (in particular the research focused on building anticipatory, absorptive, and adaptive capacities as the

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¹ <http://www.braced.org/>.

pathways to resilience). Second, to identify the ToC processes, including tacit models of risk and socio-economic transformation, used by development organizations to understand how different pathways were adopted, applied, revised, or left unchallenged. And third, to draw constructive lessons from these studies for making ToC processes and pathways to resilience more socially inclusive.

2. Making resilience inclusive

2.1. Resilience as a contested outcome and boundary object

Resilience is commonly defined as the ability to withstand shocks and risks (Adger, 2000; Brown, 2016). Early definitions of resilience referred largely to physical properties of infrastructure or ecosystems, and especially the stability of physical systems during shocks (Holling, 1973, p. 14; Ludwig, Walker, & Holling, 1997).² An increasing number of analysts, however, argue that resilience does not only refer to physical properties of infrastructure or ecosystems, but also to socio-economic factors such as people's ability to access diverse livelihoods, or avoid long-term drivers of social vulnerability (Agrawala & Van Aalst, 2005; Burton, Bizikova, Dickinson, & Howard, 2007; Folke et al., 2010; Folke, 2006; Nelson, Adger, & Brown, 2007). Accordingly, some observers have argued that resilience, and associated concepts such as adaptive capacity, have to be seen in terms of wider social processes of transformational change, which locate concepts of resilience within broader socio-economic change and social values concerning development objectives and appropriate levels of risk (Arora-Jonsson, 2016; Brown, 2016; O'Brien, 2009, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2012; Pelling, 2011; Pelling, O'Brien, & Matyas, 2015).

This social basis of resilience raises a number of conceptual concerns. First, as a socially valued outcome, there is no single pathway to resilience, and approaches depend on local, or deliberately identified values and circumstances (Levine, 2014; O'Brien & Wolf, 2010; Smith & Stirling, 2010). Indeed, Béné, Frankenberger, and Nelson (2015, p. 7) have drawn from capabilities approaches to development to argue that resilience is effectively a theory of change for achieving wellbeing. It is also possible to adapt previous questions used to define so-called adaptation science (after Smit, Burton, Klein, & Street, 1999): "what" is the objective of resilience? (i.e. which risks); "who" is it for? (or what are the socio-economic barriers); and "how" (how do different options achieve resilience).³

Second, frameworks of resilience also imply a tacit model of agency and responsibility for addressing risks. Some critics have used this concern to argue that "resilience," by definition, can fail to interrogate, and even tacitly uphold existing social and economic orders, including neo-liberal world orders (Adger, 2008; Brown, 2016, p. 63; Chandler & Reid, 2016; Rigg & Oven, 2015; Watts, 2015). These worries have also been voiced for other fields of climate policy. Concerning vulnerability assessments, Tschakert, van Oort, St. Clair, and LaMadrid (2013, p. 343) wrote "attention to structural and relational drivers of vulnerability has all but disappeared." Meanwhile, other critics have argued that attempts to build resilience through local initiatives such as community-based adaptation to climate

change overstate the homogeneity and agency of communities, and downplay the role and responsibilities of the state and market actors (Dodman & Mitlin, 2013; Forsyth, 2013; Reid & Huq, 2014). These concerns do not dismiss the potential for community involvement in transformational change, but instead imply a need to consider a range of potential pathways to resilience (Ensor, Park, Attwood, Kaminski, & Johnson, 2016; Quandt, 2018).

And thirdly, there are concerns that approaches to resilience can be socially exclusionary if they avoid diverse experiences of risk, or barriers to resilience arising from social and economic structures (Agrawala & Van Aalst, 2005; Burton et al., 2007; Folke et al., 2010; Folke, 2006; Nelson et al., 2007). In particular, approaches to resilience can be exclusionary if they assume that specific pathways are universally beneficial, or if they assume that climatic risks are experienced universally by all stakeholders. Consequently, a more socially inclusive approach to resilience will not equate pathways to resilience with the universal achievement of resilience. But it is also conceptually and methodologically challenging to represent resilience in socially sensitive terms. Indeed, "it is much easier to measure 'objective' events such as rainfall than it is to 'measure' the circumstances which deprive some people of access to irrigation" (Levine, 2014, p. 15; see also: Boyd et al., 2008; Burton, 2009; Lemos & Boyd, 2010; Nightingale, 2017; Ribot, 2010).

Some of these concerns might also be expressed through the debate about resilience as a boundary object. Boundary objects are commonly defined as ideas, tools, or frameworks that are shared by different communities, but which might also be interpreted differently by these groups (Star & Griesemer, 1989). Various scholars in environmental science have argued that resilience is a boundary object because it seeks to integrate social and natural dimensions of sustainability; or because it acts as a communication tool between science and policy (Brand & Jax, 2007; Brown, 2016, p. 3; Olsson, Jerneck, Thoren, Persson, & O'Byrne, 2015). These interpretations of boundary objects emphasize how they offer particular challenges for analysis when they involve different communities of scientists and policymakers, and where scientific analysis of risk and vulnerabilities can be mixed with value-driven policy work (see also Clark et al., 2016).

The concept of boundary objects, however, can also explain social exclusions and blindspots within approaches to resilience. Scholars working in more sociological disciplines have argued that boundary objects should not be defined by what is cognitively agreed about their content, but by what is left unquestioned and undiscussed about them (Baggio, Brown, & Hellebrandt, 2015; Huvila et al., 2014). For example, Brand and Jax (2007) argued the "vagueness and malleability" of different interpretations of resilience allow different actors to work together on this theme "without a consensus about their aims and interests." Accordingly, they also state that boundary objects are a "hindrance to scientific progress" because they serve a purpose in reducing critical scrutiny. In this sense, boundary objects might be similar to so-called development narratives and storylines, which refer to commonly-heard assumptions about cause-and-effect in development practice, but which oversimplify complex relationships, and persist despite the existence of contradictory evidence (Aldunce, Beilin, Handmer, & Howden, 2016; Hajer, 1995, p. 65; Roe, 1991).

Making approaches to resilience more socially inclusive, therefore, depends partly on acknowledging diverse drivers and experiences of risks, and how different stakeholders experience barriers in responding to risks. But it also depends on understanding how analytical approaches to resilience might receive, or be insulated from, critical scrutiny when they act as shared frameworks between different actors.

² Holling (1973, p. 14) defined resilience as "the persistence of relationships within a system; a measure of the ability of systems to absorb changes of state variables, driving variables, and parameters, and still persist."

³ Smit et al (1999)'s original questions for adaptation were: 'what' is being adapted to (i.e. the experience of risk); 'who' adapts (what are the socio-economic barriers to adaptation); and 'how' (how do these actions, adopted by certain groups, reduce vulnerability to environmental change).

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