



Is resilience socially constructed? Empirical evidence from Fiji, Ghana, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam



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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to better understand the various individual and household factors that influence resilience, that is, people's ability to respond adequately to shocks and stressors. One of our hypotheses is that resilience does not simply reflect the expected effects of quantifiable factors such as level of assets, or even less quantifiable social processes such as people's experience, but is also determined by more subjective dimensions related to people's perceptions of their ability to cope, adapt or transform in the face of adverse events. Data collected over two years in Fiji, Ghana, Sri Lanka and Vietnam confirms the importance of wealth in the recovery process of households affected by shocks and stressors. However our results challenge the idea that within communities, assets are a systematic differentiator in people's response to adverse events. The findings regarding social capital are mixed and call for more research: social capital had a strong positive influence on resilience at the community level, yet our analysis failed to demonstrate any tangible positive correlation at the household level. Finally, the data confirm that, like vulnerability, resilience is at least in part socially constructed, endogenous to individual and groups, and hence contingent on knowledge, attitudes to risk, culture and subjectivity.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, a growing body of evidence has pointed to the debilitating impacts that unexpected changes, shocks and extreme events can have on the lives and wellbeing of poor people in developing countries (Morduch, 1995; Baulch and Hoddinott, 2000; Sinha et al., 2002; Yamano et al., 2003; Dercon et al., 2005; IPCC, 2012). Small events such as a delay in rainfall, individual illness, or more severe idiosyncratic or covariate shocks such as the death of the household head, consecutive harvest failures, or the

devastating impact of seasonal tropical storms, can have irreversible consequences on people's lives, affecting their income, food security and health, and possibly driving them deeper into poverty.

In this context – because it holds particular appeal to the idea of people being able to endure shocks and stressors and bounce back – resilience has emerged as a concept that could help academics and practitioners better understand the links between shocks, responses and development outcomes (Constas et al., 2014a). “Resilience offers a lens with which to explore stressors and shocks and to understand livelihood dynamics” (Marschke and Berkes, 2006, p.2). As such resilience thinking is now becoming a central component in the planning and implementation of interventions in many sectors including humanitarian activities (DFID, 2011), disaster risk reduction (Klein et al., 2003), climate change adaptation (Boyd et al., 2008), social protection (World Bank, 2011), and food security and nutrition (von Grebmer et al., 2013; Constas et al., 2014b).

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Using this concept is not without challenges, however (Béné et al., 2012). Resilience has been recognized to be multi-scale, context and shock specific, and highly dynamic (Constas et al., 2014a) – characteristics that make it hard to measure through simple proxies (Berkes and Folke, 1998; Walker et al., 2002; Kallstrom and Ljung, 2005; Béné, 2013). Besides, improving our understanding of the factors that affect people's (or communities') resilience requires more than just the development and field-testing of robust and measurable indices of resilience. As with the rapidly growing literature on social barriers to adaptation (e.g. Østergaard and Reenberg, 2010; Jones and Boyd 2011), better insights are needed into the social, institutional and economic mechanisms that make people vulnerable and the contextual factors that influence individual and collective capacity to respond to shocks and stressors (Turner et al., 2003; Ayers and Forsyth, 2009). This in turn requires a better understanding of knowledge, perceptions and motivations of individuals and households in order to identify factors that influence behaviour and decisions (Coulthard, 2011; Schwarz et al., 2011). There is a need therefore to 'expand' resilience analysis beyond descriptive analysis of the frequency and severity of unexpected shocks or the types of responses adopted within particular socio-economic groups in specific contexts, into a more nuanced analysis of the individual and collective processes that mediate people's ability to respond and adapt to such shocks (Béné et al., 2011).

This research uses empirical data collected over two years from coastal fishing communities in Fiji, Ghana, Sri Lanka and Vietnam to better understand the various individual and household factors and processes that influence (positively or negatively) people's resilience. We focused on fishing communities as those are recognized to be exposed to a wide range of diverse shocks and stressors, a number of which appear to be common and comparable among the four focus countries, while others are more case-specific or idiosyncratic. Of particular relevance for this study is the current general context of the world's fisheries. Starting in the early 1990s, at about the time of the collapse of the Canadian cod stocks, many media headlines, scientific papers and environmental campaigns have been framed around the narrative that the world's fisheries resources are overexploited and on the edge of collapsing (see e.g. Pauly et al., 1998; Myers and Worm, 2003). This "World fisheries crisis", that is, the rapid decline in fish resources globally, is also often presented as a major potential source of poverty and vulnerability for fishing communities (e.g. Belhabib et al., 2015). Internally driven by over-investment in the fishery sector, and affecting the income and wellbeing of almost every fisheries-dependent communities in both developed and developing countries, overexploitation of fish resources may eventually reduce fishers' ability to face other shocks and stressors. This crisis context provides therefore an additional dimension to the analysis for fishing communities in terms of understanding how people adapt and respond to adversity.

2. Working hypotheses

Three central working hypotheses structured our work and the way the research was designed.

Wealth matters: It is often hypothesized (e.g. Zimmerman and Carter, 2003) that households may respond differently to shocks depending on their level of asset holdings. Hoddinott (2006) provided empirical support to this hypothesis when he observed that in the aftermath of the 1994/95 drought in Zimbabwe only wealthier households were able/willing to sell some of their livestock to cope with the drought—while the poorest with only one or two oxen were unwilling to draw down their livestock assets. Beyond this specific example, the empirical literature tends to agree that wealth (and in particular level of household assets) is

a particularly important factor to consider in relation to the ability of households to respond to adverse events (see e.g. Carter et al., 2007; Heltberg et al., 2009). However, only limited examination of the dynamic and differentiated nature of the mechanisms involved in these processes is available. In particular it is not clear whether the eventual difference in resilience outcome (if any) between the poorest and the wealthiest in a community comes effectively from the initial difference in assets or from some covariate factors such as ability to access formal credit, or even less tangible factors such as status, reputation, or social connections, which are often related to wealth levels. This last point leads to our next hypothesis.

Social capital is a critical element of resilience: Social capital in its various and diversified guises is often argued to be important for resilience (Adger, 2003; Bernier and Meinzen-Dick, 2014). Social cohesion, mechanisms of reciprocity, 'positive' social norms, strong social fabric, local 'good' governance, or capacity for collective actions are just some examples of these social elements that are usually postulated to contribute to resilience building. The literature reveals, however, that social capital can be less 'positive' and leads for instance to create or entrench exclusion and marginalization (Putzel, 1997; Wood, 2003; Cleaver, 2005). Beyond this "dark side" of social capital, empirical analyses also reveal that in some circumstances, even 'positive' dimensions of social capital can become constraining and may reduce household's or community's ability to adjust, adapt or transform. Coulthard (2011), for instance, shows how certain rural communities in India characterized by a very strong social identity built around traditional customary management system (called the Padu system), were less resilient than other groups with lower level of social cohesion: "The high social values attributed to the Padu system, alongside complex power structures, [had] hinder[ed] institutional adaptation' and prevented the community from transforming their livelihood, as was necessary to "survive" the drastic changes they were facing (Coulthard, 2011). In a more urban context, Pelling and Manuel-Navarrete (2011) demonstrated how power and existing institutional structures can also undermine the transformative capacities of communities: "By closing down imagination, discussion of alternative values, and organization, dominant structures, and social agency simultaneously support and undermine resilience" (Pelling and Manuel-Navarrete, 2011, p.19). Yet in other circumstances, analysis shows that leadership and good governance at the local level can be critical in unlocking the capacities of communities to adapt to change. Schwarz et al. (2011) for instance stress the critical role that participation, community self-support and local leadership play in the creation of the appropriate social environment for resilience building and adaptation.

Our third hypothesis is about perception: Although shocks, unforeseen adverse events, and changes affecting people's lives and livelihoods are part of a tangible reality, individual and collective responses and adaptation are also influenced by the perceptions people have about that reality (Camfield and McGregor, 2005; McLaughlin and Dietz, 2007; Weber, 2010). Perceptions of risk and vulnerability, as well as knowledge and experience are important factors in determining whether and how responses take place at the individual, community and societal levels. Research in Norway, for example, shows that well-developed disaster compensation funds have contributed to a perception that the government will cover the costs of extraordinary climate events. As a consequence, little if any action is undertaken by households (O'Brien et al., 2006). In a less developed country context, in Bangladesh, field data showed that, once households lost their house and assets following a severe river erosion or flood event, they chose either to stay and rebuild their lives (i.e. to resist) or to migrate to Dhaka (i.e. to give up), and that this decision partially depended on their level of self-

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