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Building liberal resilience? A critical review from developing rural Asia

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ABSTRACT

'Resilience' is the catchword of the moment. For many of the mainstream institutions of international development, building resilience is embedded in a wider commitment to market liberalism. Taking three entry points, the sectoral, spatial and socio-governmental, this paper critically explores the connections, interdependencies and tensions between social resilience and the market imperative. The paper argues that 'liberal resilience' plays into a growth-development-resilience 'trap' wherein economic growth has become a de facto synonym for development and, often, development a synonym for resilience. Drawing on empirical cases from across rural Asia we highlight the incongruities and inconsistencies in this line of logic. The paper suggests that there is a need to critically judge the market mechanism and the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which the processes that have been set in train by market integration impinge on resilience.

1. Introduction: resilience and market integration

'Resilience' has become the mantra of the moment. From confronting the challenge of climate change to addressing financial crises, security threats and livelihood vulnerability in poor countries, it seems that building resilience will, somehow, do the trick. It has become a guiding vision and a new orthodoxy for donors. Just as governments used to have social exclusion units, now many have groups of policy makers thinking about how to create, sustain and manage resilience and, by implication, reduce vulnerability.

There is an enormous body of work on resilience, stemming largely from the field of ecology in the 1960s, but now applied to a variety of contexts and challenges. It has come to be used as a concept that enables scholars to work across disciplinary boundaries; as a framework for understanding complex issues; as an 'approach' that can inform and guide policy and practice; and as something to be built, sustained or encouraged in and of itself. In this way, and notwithstanding the fact that its multiple meanings remain disputed (Manyena, 2006; Manyena et al., 2011; Levine et al., 2012), resilience has taken on archetypal and exemplary status: "The term has assumed such political and financial clout, whether you're working in family planning or disaster management, it seems as if every funding proposal, every programme, every result has to be seen to be contributing to resilience" (Hussain, 2013). Resilience is seen as *the* 'policy gap', "with millions of dollars in public funding currently spent on resilience building" even while we are "without the means to adequately evaluate or monitor what resilience means in practice" (Sudmeier et al., 2013, p. 367; see also Hussain, 2013; Cretney, 2014).

This paper focuses on the sub-field of social resilience, defined by Adger (2000a, p. 347) as the "ability of groups or communities to cope with external stresses or disturbances as a result of social, political or environmental change". More particularly, the concern is on the connections between social resilience and market integration, drawing on the experience of developing rural Asia. The point of entry is international development policy and practice, particularly as these are justified and purveyed by bilateral and multilateral donors. As some others have done, the paper explores the intersection between neo-liberal approaches to development and resilience debates and practices. We take the discussion further, however, by 'grounding' these critiques in an effort to understand how resilience is deployed, through what mechanisms, and with what effects on people, places and livelihoods.

The building of social resilience has become a normative goal of the development sector, whereby resilience is often seen as a self-evident 'good' and vulnerability as necessarily 'bad' (Miller et al., 2010). The achievement of social resilience is, moreover, typically embedded in a broader – and longer standing – commitment to market integration and, more broadly still, to neo-liberalism. We

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refer to this here as the 'market imperative'. Just as it was assumed in the 1990s that sustainable development could be achieved through growth-oriented strategies of market integration, so in the new Millennium the building of social resilience is also predicated on the philosophy that the market is the best avenue for achieving the desirable twin ends of growth *with* social resilience, akin to the growth *with* equity argument of the 1990s. This paper critically explores the connections, interdependencies and tensions between social resilience, on the one hand, and the market imperative, on the other. This market-based approach to resilience purveyed by the key institutions of global development is termed here, 'liberal resilience'.

We focus on resilience at the community and household scales, while recognising the need to understand local resilience in wider national and global contexts. As Wilson (2012) writes, global processes (in this case market integration) are "ultimately mediated by the individual/household within a community and turned into action with tangible effects in a given locality" (p. 36). It is this "direct expression of [social] resilience" which is of particular interest.

There exists a rich and often critical academic debate concerning the relationship between resilience and marketisation, but this debate is rarely adequately reflected in policy and practice (see Welsh, 2014, p. 19; Brown, 2011). This paradigmatic short-sightedness encompasses both national governments and bilateral and multilateral agencies, and is linked to the agenda-setting power of the market orthodoxy (see below). The paper will argue that while there are evident ways in which market integration *can* assist in resilience-building (e.g. through access to capital and the opportunity for livelihood diversification), there is also a potent contradiction at the heart of the liberal resilience orthodoxy. There are many ways in which marketisation undermines resilience, exposing households, individuals and communities to new risks and vulnerabilities. Some of these have been overlooked because they lie outside the usual line of sight of policy-makers; others have been ignored or underplayed because they represent a challenge to the prevailing market-based paradigm.

To date, the burden of critical debate over the links between resilience and neoliberalism has focused on the ways in which governments and multilateral organisations have used resilience-thinking to promote and justify the building of adaptable (and resilient) neoliberal subjects embodying such qualities as self-reliance, self-help, self-sufficiency and personal responsibility (see Felli and Castree, 2012; Cretney, 2014, pp. 632–634; Cretney and Bond, 2014; Welsh, 2014). This is seen as a way in which states have off-loaded their responsibilities to the market on the one hand, and society, from community groups to families and individuals, on the other. The contribution we seek to make is rather different. Here, we highlight the way in which the evolving point of contact between marketisation and resilience creates a field of livelihood indeterminacy. We ask, in other words, two thoroughly empirical questions: What is the impact of the market imperative on livelihoods in the global South? And: what does this mean for resilience? The answers to these questions are then used to reflect on a third question: What are the implications for the promotion of liberal resilience, including the mechanisms deployed, by the key agencies of international development?

2. Resilience in practice and in theory

Since the turn of the Millennium, 'resilience' has come to occupy a critical and nodal position in both scholarship (see Berkes, 2007; Gaillard, 2010) and practice. It has been applied in the context of climate change (Bahadur et al., 2010; Cannon and Muller-Mahn, 2010; Gaillard, 2010), disasters (Cutter et al., 2008; Sudmeier et al., 2013), vulnerability reduction (Bene et al., 2012), risk management (Mitchell and Harris, 2012), terror threats (Coaffee, 2006; Coaffee and Rogers, 2008), economic/financial crises (Azevedo and Terra, 2009), and with regard to policy more generally (Levine et al., 2012; Levine and Mosel, 2014; Levine, 2014). Resilience has taken on a normative gloss in policy debates as both a necessary means of managing change and as a desirable end point. This extends, it should be added, across both the poor(er) and rich(er) worlds. Resilience has been embraced by the Asian Development Bank, AusAID (Australia), the Department for International Development (DFID, UK), the OECD, SIDA (Sweden), the UNDP, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Bank, and many other national and multilateral agencies as a key organising principle and integrative approach, not infrequently replacing, in the process, sustainable development (see Davidson, 2010).

This is not to suggest that these agencies lack expertise in the area or are unaware of the interdependencies and trade-offs between prevailing policies of market-led growth and social resilience. Indeed, at times the delicate balancing act that is necessary to make both the resilience and the market-led growth cases comes unstuck. The World Bank, in its report *Building resilience: integrating climate and disaster risk into development*, for example, states that "poor and marginalised households tend to be less resilient and face greater difficulties in absorbing and recovering from disaster impacts" (2013, p. 7), and then two pages later informs the reader that "the poor are already resilient, both by nature as well as by necessity" but "they need further funding, information and support to escape poverty traps and to better cope with weather-related disasters" (2013, p. 9).

For practitioners, resilience is seen as a linking concept that enables connections to be made between different areas of work and intervention. As the DFID explains:

> "Adopting resilience as our core approach to tackling disasters means identifying where different areas of our work can complement and enhance one another. This includes disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, social protection, working in fragile contexts and humanitarian preparedness and response" (DFID, 2011, p. 4).

In every instance, the reports produced by the key institutions of international development policy noted above take for granted that resilience is best achieved within a wider framework that emphasises the primacy of the market (see Table 1). To summarise, the mainstream view purveyed by these institutions is that market integration, pursued through the application of broadly neo-liberal policies, is the best means to achieve economic growth; and that economic growth is the best route to raising incomes and reducing poverty. As Brown says of climate change adaptation, which can be similarly applied to resilience debates, "much of the existing literature – and policy – is based on the assumption that alleviating poverty will enable people to adapt to climate change; in other words, that there is an almost complete overlap between those who are poor and those who are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change" (Brown, 2011, p. 26).

However, the directionality of the link to resilience is often less clearly specified. In some instances, it is assumed that development-as-growth will lead to greater resilience (OECD, 2013, p. 7) while in other cases, greater resilience, it seems will help to promote growth (ADB, 2013a, p. xii; AusAID, 2007, p. 2). But whatever the directionality of the relationship, rather than providing an opportunity to re-think the growth agenda, resilience is embedded within – or tacked on to – the prevailing market-based growth agenda. It is largely, it seems, business as usual for bilateral and multilateral agencies of development (see Grist, 2008; Brown, 2011, p. 28).