Fragility and Resilience

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INTRODUCTION

Resilience is the ability of a state and society to absorb, adapt, and transform in response to a shock or long-term stressor. A central feature of resilience is a strong social compact between the state and society on their respective and mutual roles and responsibilities. There are several constituent parts of a social compact. On the side of the state, it is the capacity to manage societal expectations, the ability to ensure basic provisions, and the management of state resources in ways that meet societal needs.[2] Transactions between society and the state – the essence of the compact – take place through formal and informal institutional mechanisms that instill mutual trust and benefit, if executed equitably and fairly, and ensure a reservoir of confidence and source of stability during crises. The compact can also shape the norms and set the conditions for societal relations; government inclusivity inspires horizontal cohesion across society, helping to establish trusted frameworks and forums for group collaboration. Thus, a social compact is not only an agreement or a relationship, but a complex set of interactions and associations that act as an immune system, or resilience, to internal and external stress and shock.[3]

Experience shows that shocks and stressors have different impacts across geographies and groups. Certain states and societies are better able to withstand them, while others tip into spirals of fragility and violence. Part of this is due to the targeted nature of the threat; for example, violent extremism often spreads through localized conflicts, with extremist groups manipulating local grievances to gain position and traction. The other part, however, is about resilience capacities. Social cohesion is a factor in determining how states and societies respond to shocks. Studies have shown that communities in Kenya, India, and Iraq that were able to resist violence, while their neighbors succumbed, had high levels of working trust built up through community associations (businesses, clubs, neighborhoods) that encouraged ethnic and religious groups to work together for the benefit of the collective whole.[4] These associative

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relationships stopped retributive cycles of violence and provided avenues for crisis communication and negotiation. Adaptive leadership – characterized by leaders who clearly assess risk, engage constituents inclusively, and organize collectively in response to shocks – is also key, as are citizens who believe in their own collective efficacy, that is, their ability to act and change outcomes.[5] Resilience, in many ways, is about tapping into these existing capacities to address the forces of fragility and doing this through innovation, adaptation, and learning.

WHY RESILIENCE MATTERS

The international community and national governments face difficulties working in such diverse fragility contexts due to rapidly changing dynamics, cultural factors, and issues of scale and sustainability. The prevention and mitigation of fragility and violence demand new approaches, such as resilience practice, which emphasize local innovation and collective action. Systematically understanding how states and societies adapt and learn when faced with crises will improve assessment of local risk and vulnerability for better and more targeted support. In addition, if core capacities and strategies are identified across geographies and crises, a foundation can be established for successful resilience policy and practice.

Responses to fragility and violence – adaptation, absorption, and transformation – can differ in scale and approach. Absorption and adaptation involve the ability of actors to resist and adapt to various threats; transformation involves the capacity of actors to bring about a systems shift from, for example, authoritarianism to democracy or civil war to civil peace. The international community often adopts ambitious "transformational" interventions in fragile and conflict-affected states without the resources, political will, or know-how for sustained, comprehensive systems change. Absorption and adaptation might be more relevant resilience approaches,

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recognizing that investments in these resilience capacities could lead to potential transformation through their accumulation – a transformation driven from within the system rather than external to it. This means, however, becoming more comfortable with and knowledgeable about hybrid forms of peace and governance, systems that are neither liberal nor traditional, and neither formal nor informal. And it means the acceptance of trade-offs such as not extending the institutions and influence of the state to allow tribal groups to govern to maintain peace. Still, a critical aspect of resilience practice is recognizing when these compromises become stressors, tipping points, or nodes of vulnerability to shock that require addressing.

It is important to recognize that resilience is an attribute of a socio-political system and is not intrinsically negative or positive. Oppressive systems can be resilient, as can systems of violence. A perverse

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resilience in Guatemala is a reminder of the non-linearity of post-conflict transitions where, despite the emergence of communities and institutions that promote peace, violent actors and systems also adapt. A decades-long-civil war in Guatemala that killed 200,000 people finally came to an end in 1996 with the Guatemalan Peace Accords. However, the adaptive resilience of key sections of society (e.g., the military, militias, gangs), external shocks (deportation by the United States of gang members), and long-running social stressors (e.g., social exclusion, crime, corruption, high poverty and inequality, weak state) have created a situation in which violence levels today are higher than they were during the war.[6]

Resilience is also not the same as invulnerability. Resilience capacity is highly relational to the size of

the violent shock and the tenacity of the long-term stressors; even highly resilient social systems can be propelled into violence as a result of a severe stress or overwhelming shock. Analysis of resilience therefore needs to focus on both sides of the correlation – that is, at what magnitude of violence or stress does a system stop being resilient? The United States' invasion of Iraq provides a vivid example of a shock that not only removed a political regime, but also sent repercussions throughout a society and overwhelmed capacities to maintain local peace. While Saddam Hussein maintained a brutal regime that favored the privileged Sunni elements of the country's sectarian divide, Baghdad nevertheless had the capacity to function as a multiethnic center for commerce and culture for centuries. Many communities in Baghdad were resilient to the pressures of sectarian polarization and conflict escalation by using certain capacities and by adapting to the changes brought on by the conflict. Notwithstanding the adaptive capacity of some of these communities, Baghdad as a whole shows how failure to absorb a shock can often lead to a negative transformation. In 2006, Baghdad changed from an integrated whole, marked by sectarian coexistence, to a patchwork of ethnic enclaves. The city remained intact as a center of people and commerce, but its inability to completely absorb the intensity and duration of violent shock fundamentally changed its identity as a multiethnic polity.[7]

RESILIENCE: OPPORTUNITIES

The concept of resilience is increasingly resonating in foreign policy circles because of its explanatory power for why and how interventions in fragile states must evolve, such as the realization that interventions often undercut the capacity and legitimacy of local governments and civil society or intercede without a clear or deep understanding of local conflict dynamics.

Shifting the focus. The experience of the last decade of war has exposed the chronic weaknesses of international intervention models that used institutional capacities, rather than the realities of countries and communities affected by conflict, to drive programming, largely overlooking the complex interplay of risk and capacity. Resilience thinking

provides an important heuristic shift by refocusing attention on the positive attributes of states and societies, potentially making outside intervenors more demand-driven than supply-driven.

Engaging local capacity. Resilience also refocuses attention on agency, recognizing that conflict-affected societies are in a constant state of flux and embrace various adaptive strategies in preventing and managing violence. This approach not only opens up space for engaging with local partners, it makes them the focal point. Traditional conflict prevention efforts are rooted in bringing something external to bear on the conflict, and these efforts often discount the existing capacities people are already using to prevent violence and achieve peace.

Prevention. A more systematic analysis of resilience capacities and actions could lead to evidence-based prevention strategies and programming and more fine-tuned approaches. For example, how specifically are societies resilient to different contexts of violence? That is, why is a society resilient to violent extremism, but not to electoral violence? And can common resilience capacities and actions be identified across geographies and conflicts?

Level of intervention. A critique of international interventions is that they never add up to "peace writ large," or from a resilience perspective, a systemic transformation from conflict and violence to peace and nonviolence.[8] Systems thinking brings the larger system into focus, allowing practitioners to explore the interactive dynamics of different parts of the system and how those parts are elements of a larger whole. In this sense, sustainability, the holy grail of intervention and practice, is the cumulative effect of multiple resiliencies in a socio-political system. Resilience brings the entire political-societal system into focus and moves interventions away from discrete conflict problems and project-based responses. The key question becomes what intervention or accumulation of interventions will tip the conflict system to a nonviolent system that is improving over time, which requires a systems-level, not a project-level, theory of change.

Bridging communities of practice. Increasingly related fields are incorporating resilience thinking and

approaches into their work. Humanitarian, development, conflict management, and security programs are closely examining which capacities and strategies protect societies and communities from natural and man-made disasters and what helps them rebound. Interestingly, consensus is growing in these fields that social cohesion, collective action, and conflict management are critical to disaster and development resilience, suggesting that resilience offers avenues for collaboration and integration.

Empowering. Resilience approaches in violence-affected societies show that focusing on gain versus loss engages and empowers communities weary of a focus on conflict dynamics and vulnerability and risk. Like redesigning and reframing a house, the new framing opens new vistas. Communities see that their individual but comparable everyday "resistances" to violent actors offer a powerful foundation for collective action and harnessing positive relationships and community capacity.

RESILIENCE: CHALLENGES

Several challenges exist in applying the resilience concept to the policy and practice of engaging fragile states.

Business as usual. At issue is whether resilience thinking and approaches are simply the latest new packaging for international assistance programs and practices**.** However, without making structural reforms to the field or engaging local personnel and structures, resilience is subject to the same constraints as interventions in general and therefore to the same implementation challenges. Similarly, without careful delineations, such as a clearly articulated theory of change, a distinct practice for resilience, and evaluative evidence of impact, any programmatic intervention (development and humanitarian assistance; dialogue, mediation and negotiation practice, etc.) could be called a resilience approach.

An excuse for disengagement. Part of the appeal of resilience is that the concept appears intuitively obvious and easy to implement: Instead of heavy-handed, protracted, and costly interventions,

conflict prevention and recovery become a matter of activating latent or supporting functioning capacity in conflict-affected countries. The emphasis, however,
on government and societal response and responsibility could provide a convenient justification for international disengagement from the long-term investments of political capital and capacity building that these societies require.

Trade-offs. Some sources of resilience in a system – such as community coping mechanisms involving illicit economies and relationships with armed actors – may contradict national and international rule of law and prove challenging for international peace-building actors to tolerate or ignore. Furthermore, within any political-social system, there are equilibrium trade-offs regarding acceptable violence. In certain systems, women are forced into interclan marriages to ensure broader social peace, but these marriages have high percentages of domestic violence. There are also equilibrium trade-offs between microsystems, such as peace and governance. For example, in Kenya, in Wajir Country, the state decided not to extend its influence and institutions and allowed tribal groups to govern to maintain peace. These equilibrium trade-offs often reflect the state of a system's transition. Some trade-offs may be uncomfortable to outsiders but acceptable to a society looking at the prospects of violence or greater levels of violence. These compromises, however, if not addressed over the long term, become stressors or tipping points (where the system changes from one of peace to one of violence) or nodes of vulnerability to shock.

OPERATIONALIZING RESILIENCE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Does the current international system that funds, implements, and evaluates policies and programs to reduce state and social fragility encourage flexible, timely, and creative multilevel crisis prevention and response? The system remains highly structured around rigid, project-level deliverables set by top-down actors and delivered by downstream implementing organizations. This is a largely unidirectional process that is a far cry from the systemic approach

needed in fragile states. There are promising new approaches that recognize the need to build systemic resilience to violence from within country systems. One such approach, used by the United Nations Development Program's Infrastructures for Peace initiative and the U.S. Institute of Peace's Facilitator Networks, has created and supported mediator networks in fragile states. Both programs recognize that a set of structures, processes and relationships work together to manage conflict. Vulnerable societies are often characterized by rolling turbulence and multiple, overlapping crises. In fast-moving, dynamic situations, the response must be embedded within the system, and there must be capacity to activate "insider mediators" at critical moments to promote positive social cohesion and help manage shocks and stressors that threaten peace.[9]

New thinking is also emerging within the international aid system around how to support complex social change processes in fragile and conflict-affected states. Social movements exhibit many of the characteristics sought in adaptive systems. Collective action is the central objective. The movements adopt a systemic lens on the problems they seek to address. Their goals are change-oriented and directed at power systems. They involve multilevel webs of actors and individuals that take on novel organizational forms that are fit to purpose. Experimentation and learning are not just ideals; they are central to survival.[10] These types of approaches bring the larger system into focus, allowing policymakers and practitioners to explore the interactive dynamism of different parts of the system, and how those parts are elements of a larger whole. Systems approaches are a way to move beyond project-based international interventions, which have never added up to transition "writ large" from fragility and conflict to thriving and nonviolence.

To that end, the following recommendations can help institutionalize resilience as a core tenet of a new approach to fragile states.

Develop more accurate conflict and fragility assessments. Fragility and conflict assessments currently focus primarily on risk and vulnerability and not on strength and capacity (or resilience), and focus on the risk of violent shock while slow processes remain hidden and less understood. Resilience thinking

requires an understanding of slow variables that, over time, can create critical thresholds:

- Support more systematic analysis of resilience capacities, such as how countries, communities, and groups have demonstrated strength and capacity in the face of violence and fragility.
- Use evidence on resilience capacities to build robust fragility assessment frameworks as the foundation for better, targeted interventions.
- Build on conflict research on slow processes that identify which variables drive stressors and the magnitude of their role in increasing fragility and the risk of violence.
- Increasingly use regular public opinion polling to help signal rising stressors or the erosion of social cohesion and the social compact, which can help actors at multiple levels shape effective responses.

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- Establish specialized monitoring networks to regularly collect and disseminate qualitative and quantitative data on social conditions and slow changing variables.

Weigh intervention trade-offs. Changing the norms, behaviors, and structures of systems of violence and fragility – which is the aim of most international interventions – may have noble intentions, but it does have negative effects:

- Pay equal attention to eroding the resilience of violent regimes, which can be highly resilient to positive change, and not just to creating systemic peace (e.g., target and manipulate armed factions, create awareness of drivers of organized violence,

reject fear through humor as a form of civil resistance).

- Systematically assess how transformations are completed and how to manage partial system transformations to prevent backsliding given that a common outcome of transformation strategies and programs, as seen in Kosovo and Bosnia, is a system in partial transition or caught between emergent and latent systems (hybridization).
- Shore up the capacity of a system to absorb or adapt to shocks or stressors, which may be a more realistic goal, recognizing that each approach has consequences (e.g., equilibrium trade-offs such as accepting violence against women in Afghanistan in exchange for stability between tribes or accepting a status quo that preserves a system's conflict dynamics) and there may be disagreement among different groups experiencing or striving for different resilience responses.

Take systemic approaches. There should be greater emphasis on interventions that mediate the space between society and state and establish or strengthen a social compact. This can be done by ensuring that institutional reforms incorporate approaches that change perceptions and attitudes of the state in positive ways, and that socially-oriented programs (dialogue, mediation, negotiation) incorporate approaches to engage with and change institutions in ways that conform with societal expectations:

- Facilitate convergence and strengthen trusted frameworks for group collaboration through assistance programs to counterbalance long-term stressors and shocks and the effects of state and societal fragility. Convergence across society and between the society and government occurs when groups see the collective utility in working together, rather than competing, and when agreed-on norms for their interaction exist. Convergence is key to a country's overall development and the overcoming of fragility.[11]
- Adopt systems thinking and approaches that incorporate system-level theories of change to drive more holistic programming, allow international and national policymakers and practitioners to see how separate institutional efforts fit together

to achieve "greater than the sum" impacts, and facilitate better coordination.

- Engage rigorous research approaches to systematically identify resilience capacities across geographies and across different conflict contexts (electoral violence, violent extremism), providing evidence for prevention practice, such as prioritizing prevention approaches that create and sustain critical resilience capacities, especially within communities approaching fragility and violence thresholds.
- Experiment with, test, and evaluate new types of programmatic interventions that build and support "within system" resilience, such as

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strategic accompaniment, where local actors drive response and outside intervenors provide support or leverage at critical moments or with critical actors; *network and movement* creation to organize collective action against violent and corrupt actors and systems; and *adaptive governance* models that use informal and formal institutions to manage scarce resources – increasingly important for fragile states facing climate change.

These suggestions for operationalizing resilience move resilience from a lofty concept to a model for fragility policy and practice.

NOTES

1. Portions of this paper are excerpted from Lauren Van Metre and Jason Calder, "Resilience and Peacebuilding: How Societies Respond to Violence," Peaceworks 119 (U.S. Institute of Peace, 2016).

2. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Concepts and Dilemmas of State Building in Fragile Situations: From Fragility to Resilience," *Journal on Development*, 9 no. 3 (2008) 15-20.

3. "**World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development**" (World Bank, 2011), 7.

4. Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002); Ami Carpenter, *Community Resilience to Sectarian Violence in Baghdad* (New York: Springer, 2014); and Lauren Van Metre, "Community Resilience to Violent Extremism in Kenya" (U.S. Institute of Peace, 2016).

5. Mary Anderson and Marshall Wallace, *Opting Out of War: Strategies to Prevent Violent Conflict* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013); and Carpenter, *Community Resilience to Sectarian Violence in Baghdad*, 121.

6. Tani Marilena Adams, "Chronic Violence and Non-conventional Armed Actors: A Systemic Approach" (Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, 2014).

7. Carpenter, *Community Resilience to Sectarian Violence in Baghdad*, 47.

8. Rob Ricigliano, *Making Peace Last: A Toolbox for Sustainable Peacebuilding* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2011).

9. Chetan Kumar, "Supporting Insider Mediation: Strengthening Resilience to Conflict and Turbulence" (United Nations Development Program, 2014)

10. Maria J. Stephan, Sadaf Lakhani, and Nadia Naviwala, "Aid to Civil Society: A Movement Mindset," Special Report no. 361 (U.S. Institute of Peace, 2015).

11. Alexandre Marc et al., "Societal Dynamics and Fragility: Engaging Societies in Responding to Fragile Situations" (The World Bank, 2013), 40–41.