

What is equitable resilience?

Four key elements for putting resilience into practice.



SEI discussion brief
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The concept of resilience has gained prominence in recent years as a key goal of efforts to adapt to climate change and to reduce disaster risks. This view holds that while some stresses and shocks may be unavoidable, resilient societies will be better prepared to cope, recover and adapt – or even to make fundamental changes for transformation. Yet for all the interest in resilience, it has been criticized for failing to account for power relations and how the complexity of social dynamics determines outcomes of environmental change and governance.

This discussion brief examines equity. Equity places focus on the needs of those who are disadvantaged by relations of power and inequalities of opportunity, and on how these barriers to human flourishing can be identified, understood and addressed. From this perspective, the apparent failure of resilience to attend to the distributive and power dimensions of environmental and development challenges limits the concept for analysis and practice. Based on a systematic analysis of the peer-reviewed literature on social-ecological resilience, including a wide range of critiques, this brief considers what the concept of resilience means in practice for development, adaptation and disaster risk reduction. The goal is to achieve equitable resilience.

For the most part, attempts to integrate resilience in development and disaster risk management have focused on identifying critical components upon which to act. One study, for example, offers ten resilience indicators from the literature focused on resilience in social, ecological and socio-ecological systems that are applied to climate, disaster and development contexts (Bahadur et al. 2013). These resilience indicators include ensuring multiple forms of diversity, securing effective governance and institutions, and addressing uncertainty and change. Our aim is to develop a definition of equitable resilience that can be used alongside such resilience indicators in a given context to drive ground-level interventions towards equitable outcomes. We refer to this as equitable resilience in practice.

To do this, we reviewed a total of 171 articles published in the period 2005-2015 that cover resilience and one or more of seven concepts: equity, equality, power, agency, justice, ethics and human rights. Through our review, we draw out insights that may enable their systematic treatment. Our analysis (Matin et al. 2018: 198) leads us to conclude that equitable resilience can be defined as:

...a form of human-environmental resilience that takes into account issues of social vulnerability and differentiated access to power, knowledge and resources. It starts from people's own perception of their position within their human-environmental system and accounts for their realities and their need for a change of circumstance to avoid imbalances of power into the future.

Photo (above):
Disaster aftermath, Nepal
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As such, we identify four key elements of equitable resilience-building.

- Recognizing subjectivities: How social contexts, power relations and categorization of people determine social and economic entitlements
- Working toward inclusion and representation and avoiding processes that disenfranchise some groups
- Attending to multiple levels of governance as well as geographical and temporal aspects of scale
- Promoting system(s) transformation when existing arrangements degrade well-being or increase risks for certain sections of society
- In the following sections, we examine each of these themes. We then offer some reflections on how they interact and suggest ways forward for researchers and practitioners.

Recognizing subjectivities

Some stresses and shocks may be unavoidable but resilient societies will be better prepared to cope, recover and adapt.

Subjectivity relates to one's essential individuality. It is the lived experiences of individuals, patterned and felt over many years, in their historical context and mediated by institutional processes and cultural forms. Subjectivities are often grounded in individuals' cultural, racial, ethnic, gender and other attributes. Differences in resilience result from the differing abilities of individuals to mobilize these attributes in their favour. In other cases, where these attributes are socially constructed to discriminate against individuals and groups, they can subject people to further disenfranchisement, undermine their resilience and create conditions for additional risks.

Subjectivities shape how people interpret what is happening around them. New information and experiences are processed through an individual's pre-existing mental models, based on their subjectivities, but they are also influencing and shaping subjectivities (Paton et al. 2010).

Subjectivities can shape political identities in cases where authorities divide people, explicitly or implicitly, defining some as more powerful than others and perpetuating or fostering inequality based on their social categorization. Development processes may shift subjectivities and generate new social identities. For example, a study in Mexico observed that the dominant discourse in development and disaster risk policy promoted the individualization of well-being and risks, elevating personal goals and undermining collective action. It found that local people saw development in personal terms, as improvements in individual or family quality of life, potentially setting "...a constraint for any transformational agenda and pos[ing] a challenge for adaptation and mitigation which might be seen as public goods" (Pelling and Manuel-Navarette 2011).

Inclusion and representation

Overwhelming evidence points to the benefits of inclusion in decision-making. The reviewed articles detail many kinds of inclusion: of differently situated groups with divergent capacities; of different resilience discourses and approaches, norms and knowledge; and of informal and formal governing arrangements at different levels. Others focus on ensuring equity among geographical regions and different levels of governance. Time is also relevant, covering not only people affected today, but future generations whose resilience might be compromised by our choices.

Including diverse social groups requires consideration of gender relations, age, ethnicity, disability, sexuality and other formal and informal social groupings that influence resource allocation and people's relationships with the environment. Exclusion of a group from decision-making that is related to risk reduction and adaptation generally creates barriers to resilient transformation, while inclusion can help illuminate how different factors affect people's ability to respond to risks, leading to more effective interventions.

The inclusion of different discourses and knowledges allows us to recognize the different values and interests embedded in resilience decisions, as well as potential conflicts. In situations where

the choices of one group may affect the vulnerability of others, or where strong vested interests may act as a barrier to sustainable adaptation, normative principles based on a human rights approach can be a first step toward social justice and environmental integrity (Ensor et al. 2015). For instance, a case study in Lagos, Nigeria, found that “...limited access to housing and weak housing rights are two crucial factors that have pushed the urban poor not only to encroach on hazardous landscapes but also to adopt environmentally intolerable coping and livelihood strategies, [eroding] resilience against flooding” (Ajibade and McBean 2014). Addressing power asymmetries among state institutions and in formal and informal governance arrangements at different levels is another major area of attention and concern. A key mechanism for achieving this is to combine elements from formal and informal institutions (Wakjira et al. 2013). Though state agencies’ responsibilities for ensuring inclusion and equitable power-sharing are generally accepted as a good governance norm, ensuring inclusive governance remains a challenge, even in advanced democracies.

Working across scales

An appreciation of scale – geographical and temporal – is central to both resilience and systems thinking. Yet there are relatively few inclusive methods for working across scales. As one study noted, “...environmental governance initiatives at a range of scales are emerging, but these are rarely joined-up and are often undermined by other unsustainable initiatives put in place by the very same decision makers” (Berardi et al 2015).

Scale plays a role in marginalization, such as when decisions that affect the resilience of a rural community are made in the provincial or national capital, limiting or precluding local people’s participation in the process. Several articles we reviewed highlight the importance of understanding cross-scale interactions, as well as the scales on which different actors operate. Some actions may increase resilience on one scale but exacerbate vulnerability on another.

Governance – both of the social system and of people’s relationships with the environment – is a critical scale-related issue that has not been adequately addressed. Effective leadership at the grassroots level is crucial, but cross-scale collaboration is often complex (Bankoff 2015). As noted, actors at different scales may also have different degrees of power and influence. The poorest of the poor may need to depend on actors and resources outside of their communities if they are to become more resilient.

The multiple dimensions of scale create potential for conflicts between scales, as well as for unwanted cross-scale effects. For instance, international actors often push aside local actors, causing resentment (Scharffscher 2011). Adaptation measures at one scale may increase vulnerability at another scale, such as a coastal barrier for a city that causes problems along the larger coastline. This can intensify inequities: in this example, if the outlying coastal communities are poorer and less able to adapt, those additional problems increase their vulnerability. Conflicts can also occur across timescales: a near-term solution may decrease the system’s overall resilience, making it more vulnerable to future shocks (Walker and Westley 2011).

Transformative change

In many cases, adaptation may not be enough to achieve resilience – a more fundamental change, a transformation, is needed. As one analysis notes, if “...changes in resource use patterns, accountability and distribution of authority become sufficiently pronounced and lasting, it could be considered a transformation in the social-ecological system at this local scale” (Ratner et al. 2013: 59).

Many argue that transformation is inherently political, as it requires recognizing and addressing systemic issues. Equitable resilience requires correcting failures in development and disaster risk

management, not perpetuating or sustaining them, and opening up possibilities for wholesale transformation. That, in turn, requires understanding how power is held and used and which actors or processes lead to some winning and others losing (Pelling and Manuel-Navarette 2011).

Learning systems can have a central role in enabling transformations. Social learning platforms, in which multiple stakeholders look to understand their different perspectives and forge new knowledge through joint learning and action, have the potential to foster and underpin more democratic governance, as stakeholders define problems and identify solutions together (Robards et al. 2011). Such approaches are, however, attempts to contain politics. Success is not guaranteed, trade-offs are likely, and change at one scale will not necessarily travel uncontested to others.

Making connections: resilience, sustainability and equity

Recent literature underlines the need for a resilience theory that enables decision makers to engage with questions of equity. Resilience cannot be assumed to be the appropriate goal for policy in the same manner as sustainability (Elmqvist 2017), and the search for sustainability may be better framed as a search for transformation, in particular in how governance frames problems and potential solutions. The contribution of equitable resilience is to make clear the need to engage with such questions at the moment when resilience is invoked in practice, enabling it to support the development of systems that are responsive to change and socially just and thus relevant to global sustainability challenges (Chelleri et al. 2015).

A key insight from our analysis is that the four elements – subjectivities, inclusion, scale and transformation – are closely interconnected. Subjectivities reveal how place, identity and social contexts shape the ways people see themselves and are treated. Meaningful inclusion can be the mechanism through which subjectivities are addressed. Equitable resilience must also cross scale-boundaries and allow for fundamental changes in the system, particularly in contexts where transformation is deemed desirable by the communities concerned.

Notably, few of the papers we reviewed explicitly address all four elements. While each issue is critical, the recognition of all four, and their interactions, is needed to successfully promote equity in resilience practice. A simplistic view that focuses exclusively on any one element, or ignores intersectionality, is insufficient. Striving for equitable resilience requires us to identify social processes that address all four elements.

In all of this, transformation is central to equitable resilience. Systemic failures require systemic solutions, and that will often mean transformation. Achieving transformation, in turn, requires good, inclusive governance that embraces different types of communities and takes into account different levels of authority.

Equitable resilience in practice

This analysis has implications not only for conceptual and practical studies of resilience, but also for wider attempts at human-environmental sustainability. The reviewed literature supports our definition of equitable resilience as one that takes into account issues of power, subjection and resistance; identifies socially constructed limitations faced by groups and communities at all levels; and coalesces these issues to avoid unsustainable interventions made in the name of either disaster response or development.

Equitable resilience in practice requires consideration of all four elements through methods revealing how actors and institutions support narratives, customs or forms of regulation that subjugate or empower those who are intended to benefit. Resilience indicators alone are not enough to support this form of practice. It “...remains for practitioners to engage with critiques

of resilience and acknowledge the potential for sustaining and reinforcing existing relations of power and resource access” (Ensor et al. 2016: 147). Our literature analysis suggests that engaging with critiques of resilience will require systematic exploration of subjectivities, of the equity implications of inclusion and scale, and of the potential for transformation. The aim here is not to replace resilience interventions, but to complement them with ways of analysing for, and engaging in, resilience practice that, the literature suggests, increases the likelihood of equitable outcomes.

As resilience becomes more prevalent in policy and practice, attention to the demands of equitable resilience becomes ever more significant. Without expansion of resilience beyond policy discourse that focuses on services, security and infrastructure, resilience practice will risk entrenching vulnerability and generating new risks for groups distributed across temporal and spatial scales. Put simply, this means allowing for a form of resilience that confronts systemic change, beyond adaptation. Fostering equitable resilience will require policy and practitioner stakeholders to engage with the politics of social, cultural and political change (Ensor et al. 2018). Though this challenge may be felt as new and significant, it is necessary and pressing.

Equitable resilience needs to be embedded in a systems approach and go beyond mere consideration of equity in the workings and distribution of development outcomes, taking us much deeper into the complexity of social processes. Sharply delineated definitions of objectively identifiable scientific resilience become more blurred in these middle-level social processes, and it is here that attention must be paid if we are to achieve equitable resilience.

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The work presented in this discussion brief is an output of SEI’s initiative *Transforming Development and Disaster Risk* (TDDR). TDDR seeks to integrate disaster risk reduction with equitable, resilient and sustainable development by transforming the complex relationship between development and disaster risk. Its goal is to improve understanding of how risks are created and how they accumulate, recognizing that disaster risk and development are closely interlinked. For more information on TDDR, please visit www.sei.org/projects-and-tools/projects/sei-initiative-on-transforming-development-and-disaster-risk.

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