



Outcome Document¹

Fostering Resilience in Situation of Conflict and Fragility

An Expert Roundtable co-organized by UNDP, UNICEF, InterPeace, and the Rockefeller Foundation
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Summary

“The world as a whole needs to put integrated risk management at the center of development to ensure individuals and their societies are more resilient to the growing number of mega disasters including violent conflicts, epidemics, and natural hazards we face today... Regrettably we are still thinking in silos. I hope this meeting is not another attempt to reduce the resilience discourse to ‘climate’, ‘disaster’ and ‘conflict and fragility’ silos... I challenge you to look at a broader range of fragility and their multidimensionality and to explore how humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors can coherently operate at their intersection.” Jordan Ryan, then Assistant Administrator and Director of the former Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery of UNDP, posed this challenge to over 60 experts, academics, researchers, policy specialists, and practitioners who gathered at a roundtable meeting to advance understanding on resilience to conflict and fragility (as distinct from resilience to disaster and climate change).

Drawing on growing body of work being undertaken by UNICEF, UNDP, Interpeace, and a host of scholars, participants discussed the emerging perspectives on resilience in fragile and conflict-affected situations; the theories of change that inform their operationalization; the emerging tools and methodologies for assessing and understanding the drivers of resilience to conflict and fragility including how to measure progress on resilience-promoting efforts; and the financing and coordination mechanisms that advance these efforts. Particular attention was given to the question of what inherent or existing capacities exist in particular settings, and the implications this has for the approaches taken by external actors to foster resilience. The meeting further sought to mobilize an emergent community of practice to raise the level of discussion and profile of resilience in the context of conflict and fragility, and to lay the foundation for improved coordination and financing.

The Expert Roundtable was co-organized by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), InterPeace, and the Rockefeller Foundation. This report highlights key outcomes from the meeting.

¹ Views in this document are those expressed by participants at the workshop. They are not official positions of the organizing agencies—UNDP, UNICEF, InterPeace, and the Rockefeller Foundation.

1.0 Why the Growing prominence of resilience in international humanitarian and development discourse?

As part of setting the stage for the deliberations, participants acknowledged that resilience as a concept and policy instrument is becoming ubiquitous in humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding discourses. They cited among others the following reasons for the growing interest in resilience:

- 1.1. Conflict, natural hazards, insecurity, and other shocks and stresses are increasingly multidimensional, multilevel, and widespread. “For the first time since World War II we are at the same time responding to five Level 3 crises (the highest level of emergencies) in Syria, Iraq, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan...The situation is further worsened by the Ebola outbreak in West Africa”, Ted Chaiban—UNICEF’s Director of Programmes—reminded participants. The overwhelming scale and intractable nature of these crises is stretching available resources beyond limits, demanding attention to greater coherence and the minimization of duplication and waste. The resilience discourse is a wakeup call to both external and internal responders to crisis to reconsider their respective response designs and the way they organize and deploy resources in order to foster coordination, promote synergy, and minimize waste.
- 1.2. Long-term transformation of post-conflict societies can only happen when the affected population take ownership of their own change process. External support needs to focus more on identifying and strengthening the endogenous resources or drivers that make societies more resilient in the face of adversity.
- 1.3. Resilience helps the international system to better understand the overlapping impact of conflict and disasters due to natural hazards. It also provides a lens for understanding complex adaptive systems and the non-linear ways in which they function that deeply affect the delivery of aid.

Drawing on these observations, participants concluded that current national and international models for responding to conflict and fragility have shown significant weaknesses in their design and impact in responding to the growing crises. These new interconnected crises demand the reordering of the international crisis response and development systems. The resilience discourse, it was felt, offers a window for the reordering exercise, as it is redefining spaces and opportunities for co-developing new approaches that draw the strengths from different sectors and paradigms to address the complex settings participants are facing.

2.0 Perspectives on Resilience in Situations of Fragility and Conflict

Participants acknowledged the rich history of resilience across disciplines and practice areas. They affirmed the meeting’s starting assumption: that resilience discourse in the development and humanitarian sectors has generally focused on disasters and climate change, and while considerations of conflict and fragility have recently been accorded some attention, more is needed. Recognizing the rich ownership and application of resilience across disciplines and sectors, participants noted that the broad contours of the widely accepted understandings of resilience include ways in which individuals, communities, societies, states and their institutions, and systems respond to shocks and stresses whether caused by natural hazards, climate change or conflict. In reinterpreting the broad contours through the lens of conflict and peacebuilding theories, participants highlighted the following:

- 2.1 Resilience is about a) how much conflict-carrying (absorptive or conflict management) capacity a society has; b) how to identify and preserve the critical qualities of a society in time of conflict (e.g. dignity, cohesion, capacity, etc.) so that the society maintains its core function in spite of the crisis;

and c) how quickly a society recovers or undergoes a wholesale transformation after violent conflict to consolidate peace, accelerate development, and thereby better withstand future conflicts.

- 2.2 *Agency* (intentional actions taken by people in a society to address a problem) and *capacity* (the ability of society to act) are vital to understanding societal resilience. The role of international actors should be about supporting those factors that enable individuals, communities and societies to unleash their *agency* and *capacity* to respond to their own situations of conflict and fragility.
- 2.3 Transformation should be the ultimate aim of resilience-promoting efforts. Some participants however warned that internal and external actors should match ambition for wholesale transformation with what is feasible at a given time. This view proposed that resilience fostering efforts should begin by defining the ‘boundaries of change’—what needs to be changed with the available resources, level of commitment, and how much of the desired change is appropriate at a given time or may change over time.
- 2.4 Populations affected by conflict and fragility should take the lead in defining and engaging the ‘boundary of change’. This should be driven by strong commitment to local and national ownership, which moves beyond traditional NGOs to engage other societal groups (particularly women and youth). It was observed that policy discussions around resilience are dominated by Western scholars, policymakers, and practitioners, and as one participant noted, “If we are serious about fostering resilience, we need to increase dialogue with those affected by conflict and fragility and not among ourselves.”

3.0 Strategies for Promoting Resilience in Fragile and Conflict-affected Settings

By the general definition of resilience, participants discussed that fostering resilience should include developing institutional, organizational, and leadership *capacities* as well as mobilizing the *collective agency* of an individual, community or a society.

- 3.1 Capacity was defined as the ability of actors at all levels to respond to situations of violent conflict and other forms of shock and stress in increasingly transformative ways. Participants underlined **the role of basic service delivery in fostering societal resilience**. Inequality that is at the heart of the vulnerability of people and the fragility of institutions is manifested in unequal access to basic services including health, education, sanitation, etc., they argued. Better and more equal access to social services can enhance well-being, strengthen trust between people and their government, thereby build social cohesion and prevent violent conflicts.
 - 3.1.1 Citing cases from Sudan and Ethiopia, participants reflected on how better delivery of water brought together deeply divided groups in Darfur to dialogue and agree on the peaceful sharing of this common resource. Similarly, the decentralization of health systems at community level in Ethiopia is fostering collective actions in other areas of social life. The mobilization of community agency through the decentralized health system was a strong factor that contributed to Ethiopia escaping the devastating impact of the 2011 drought that hit the Horn of Africa region, a participant observed.
 - 3.1.2 While calling for further research to solidify claims made on the links between access to basic services and societal resilience, participants contended that better social service delivery that is conflict sensitive and equitable can strengthen the state-society relations. It can also serve as platform for dialogue as well as peace dividends in post conflict settings. This claim it was again emphasized is yet to be tested, but one deserving further investigation.

- 3.1.3 Participants warned that in situations of conflict and fragility the heavy technical leaning in capacity development must be matched by equal emphasis on the political and process dimensions of capacity development. They argued that the path a society takes out of crisis is not only determined by its ability—by the level of skills and technological knowhow. It is also a function of relationships and processes as well as about power and incentives. A society may have all the skills and technology to transform for the better after conflict but could be constrained by political interests. This is more obvious in the case of conflict and fragility where one section of the society, particularly those marginalized prior to the crisis, would want a wholesale transformation of society and its institutions, and those who wield power might promote a return to the *status quo ante*.

The meeting particularly noted the case of women who in times of crisis often acquire new roles, new powers and new skills, but when peace returns societies with strong male-dominated power structures, frequently force them back into pre-conflict roles. Some participants observed that the notion of “bouncing back” or “maintaining core functions” sometimes dominates the resilience discourse, inadvertently playing into the pressure to return to the *status quo ante* or to resist the potential of more transformative responses.

- 3.2 Participants observed that a **collective agency** of a society is rooted in its degree of social cohesion. That is why resilience scholars draw heavily on the social cohesion and social capital literature to understand how violent conflict breaks down or impedes society’s ability to cohere, to share, and to act together in situations of conflict and fragility. To foster social cohesion as resource for societal resilience, internal and external responders should consider the horizontal (between people) and vertical (between people and their governments) dimensions. Such efforts should include building infrastructures that facilitate interaction across communities; institutions that regulate behaviors and strengthens trust; education opportunities that empower individuals; healing and national reconciliation; and strengthening civil society organizations, among others.

4.0 Assessing Resilience: Research Strategies and Tools for Measurement

Resilience can be understood and measured both as an outcome and a process. It is generally considered that as an outcome it is about measuring the capacity and actions of society in responding to violent conflicts. As a process it is about how well a society organizes itself to coherently respond to the challenges of conflict and other shocks/stresses. Participants pointed out that current assessment and measuring tools and frameworks are fraught with methodological, technical, and political challenges. They are designed and understood in a reductionist paradigm that promotes the use of linear and simplistic cause and effect models that do not make assumptions explicit and often raise more questions than they answer. There is still lack of clarity on how assessment and measuring frameworks incorporate change and change dynamics in society. Participants also highlighted the following particular challenges:

- 4.1 On context assessment, participants underscored the need for resilience efforts to start with deep examination of the assets and capacities that individuals, households, communities, institutions and states have – those that exist within particular contexts and to determine the root causes of their fragility and vulnerability. Context assessment should also seek to understand what triggers collective actions at all levels of society and how they are sustained. It was also underscored that *capacities* and *agency* change throughout a conflict and such dynamics should be well understood to design pathways to resilience.

- 4.2 On measuring resilience fostering efforts, participants advised this should be about understanding system changes. Such an understanding requires a set of tools that engages the interdependent of paths and pathways to resilience. It calls for more attention to qualitative methods that capture the richness of particular contexts. Most importantly, in the resilience paradigm, we are expected to ensure that the peace we build today is strong enough to respond to tomorrow's conflicts. One participant reminded the meeting that the "Ebola crisis reminds us once again that when institutions and societies are not rebuilt to be resilient after civil wars, new shocks can quickly turn into crisis." But how do we account for success if it depends on whether today's outcomes pass the test of future conflicts? A key challenge in fostering societal resilience in situations of conflict and fragility is **to account for the unknown**. It also includes the dilemma we face in prevention—the ability to measure responsiveness to new risks, and what *doesn't* happen, rather than what *does*.
- 4.3 Another challenge is what to measure. Although measuring peacebuilding and development involves many of the same variables, in the case of resilience, the variables are interrogated in different ways. Resilience focuses measurement on transformation—on impact and not just output and outcome. It is also about composite rather than single variables. Here, more focus is needed to understand the different levels and types of resilience (both negative and positive) and their interactions and impacts; on non-determinant processes and commitment to ensure there are active feedback loops (on-going, real-time).

Embracing these challenges, participants concluded, requires innovation that goes beyond reductionist linear thinking—one that infuses the old monitoring and evaluation frameworks with new thinking and practices and also accounts for the relationship between assessment approaches and the politics of financing in donor capitals.

5.0 Coordination and Partnership in Fostering Resilience in Situations of Conflict and Fragility

Participants observed that decades of lack of coordination has not only led to the waste of much needed resources, it has severely undermined the building of resilience in conflict-affected societies. The resilience "agenda" offers an opportunity to forge enhanced coordination and coherence amongst actors both on the ground and working at regional and international levels. To achieve this aim participants made the following suggestions:

- 5.1 There is need for resilience coordination efforts to integrate the multi-dimensional programming underway by different partners in strategic and conflict sensitive ways. Fostering resilience is best achieved through coordination and partnership with different actors working side by side taking into account their comparative advantages, skills, mandates and programming cycles. There is also need for greater attention to multi-dimensional planning, which should be a truly inter-agency exercise.
- 5.2 On partnership in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, to foster resilience, the growing role of the military in peacebuilding and development and its potential impact on the resilience of post-conflict societies was discussed at the meeting. While recognizing that the military brings vast amounts of resources to conflict and post-conflict interventions, more work is needed to deepen understanding of the role of the military and how it impacts on work done by humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding practitioners. There was no resolution on this issue but participants emphasized the urgent need for a further dialogue with the military in areas where resilience and peacebuilding work of UN and other non-military actors are active.

6.0 Financing

- 6.1 Financing in the context of fostering resilience is critical because it makes the case for linking different types of financing in different phases – meeting immediate need and long-term needs. Participants contended that donors wield significant power and could force development and humanitarian actors to forge integration and coherence by the way donors structure their funding architectures. For instance, through funding, donors can steer development actors towards activities that go beyond achieving stability and managing risks to longer-term investment in transformation.
- 6.2 Participants discussed the pool funds modality as a good example. When it is informed by a common theory of change the pool fund mechanisms can force cooperation and coherence. Pool funds guarantee predictable and timely financing which are critical to fostering resilience. Participants called for the consolidation of the growing number of small sector specific pool fund mechanisms across recovery and development efforts under a resilience framework to break the silos and ensure synergy.
- 6.3 Participants recognized the need to examine the role that co-financing plays in helping to foster coordination and partnership. There also needs to be mechanisms/structures in place to equitably manage funds and ensure greater access to civil society and flexibility between instruments for the nimbleness of response. Most importantly, they warned, the resilience agenda must not be donor driven if it is to be actualized in a manner true to its intention.

7.0 Lessons Learnt from Practice

Despite much intuition about its relevance as a lens or an organizing principle there is still a relatively weak evidence base on how to foster resilience in situations of conflict and fragility. Participants dedicated time to discussing resilience-promoting efforts of selected cases including community, institutional, system resilience as well as disaster-conflict interface. The following were key messages drawn from the case analyses:

- 7.1 Failure to respond in time and relevantly is fuelling negative coping practices, which in places like South Sudan, are proving to be resilient. For example, the role and influence of elders, which have been the bedrock for stability in communities in South Sudan has weakened during the conflict without any positive alternative for regulating social behavior especially of youth. The gap in authority and social order is one source of instability and it is proving to be resistant to change. How do external support help to reduce these negative coping practices and provide better alternatives that enhance positive community and societal resilience. Others mentioned gang formation as a response to limited options to address challenges faced by especially young people. These examples re-echoed earlier discussion during the meeting for international actors to be sensitive to the ‘boundary of change’—how much change is appropriate in such contexts and at what time.
- 7.2 Drawing on the case of a community in Baghdad, Iraq, participants noted that in order to enhance community resilience one must first assess how individuals in the community define their community. Generally, community is defined as “living, multi-dimensional spaces, geographical areas where people actually do things together.” This process of “doing things together” requires well-defined and recognized community leadership and organization mechanisms, as well as a deeper understanding of the economic and geospatial infrastructure of the community (trade networks, road infrastructure, etc.).

- 7.3 Fear, it was suggested, is one of the primary causes for the polarization of communities in situations of conflict and fragility. The case of Iraq showed how extremist groups tend to exploit such fear to deplete the drivers of community resilience. One way to counter fear and its polarizing effect on community resilience is “narrative restructuring”. Narrative restructuring is a process of countering extremist narrative with more unifying narratives. This is possible in communities where there are still respected leaders, where the history of cohesion is strong, where there are still unifying symbols and myths. Collaborative, cross-cutting projects can also contribute to narrative restructuring by debunking narrative of exclusion and marginalization.
- 7.4 In rebuilding post-conflict societies, one mistake that is often made by international actors is the too much focus on rebuilding state institutions with limited attention to the civic agency that is triggered during times of conflict and instability. While recognizing some of the challenges in engaging with civil society organizations, participants contended that to set foundations for state-society relations, it is important to harness the power and capacity of civic groups. More aware and engaged civil society is the bedrock for resilient societies that is the basis for resilient states.
- 7.5 The Syrian conflict presented another case of resilience, on how humanitarian and development actors cooperate to foster resilience. In this case it is about how relatively capable systems in relatively stable societies adapt to respond to humanitarian crisis of the influx of large number of refugees. When a country suddenly experiences a 25% increase in its population, how does its health, education, and other basic service delivery sectors adjust to respond to the change? It is about how systems absorb or adapt to stress and change.

8.0 Cautions Moving Forward

Participants had concerns about the way in which the resilience agenda is moving forward, and identified a set of cautions, areas for more reflection, and a potential research agenda that include:

- 8.1 The resilience agenda must be careful to not simply “retrofit” existing frameworks and paradigms. At the same time, there is important knowledge and capacities that have been built over time in related policy agendas that must be captured and employed.
- 8.2 The over-reliance on limited measurement approaches and the need for more attention to qualitative, process and systems-oriented approaches to assessment.
- 8.3 The danger that the resilience discourse affirms and stops at the examination and recognition of adaptive strategies and responses, often local or informal, which adapt to and accommodate violence and conflict, rather than more transformative responses and strategies addressing underlying causes of conflict.

9.0 Next steps

Going forward, participants requested that a) discussions from the meeting be summarized in an outcome document that could inform ongoing global discussions aimed at shaping a new post-2015 development framework; and b) that a community of practice be initiated to exchange notes of practices, research findings, and programmes design on fostering resilience in situations of conflict and fragility.

The meeting ended on a high note—that resilience is not just another buzzword. Its growing presence is a testament that the international community must critically interrogate its current tools for response and quickly reinvent or re-modify them so that they are fit-for-purpose to respond to today’s challenges.