research
evidence for policy

Women members of a savings group during a meeting in Kilombero, Tanzania. Photo: Iddy Mayumana

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Social resilience: a new approach in mitigation research

Case studies featured here were conducted in: Ghana, Tanzania, and Pakistan

Policy message

- Social resilience is a valuable concept when designing interventions in development and social policy fields. It leads policymakers to focus on people's capacity to avoid problems and to overcome difficulties, rather than treating people as victims.

- Many policy areas can benefit from a social resilience approach, whether in disaster relief, climate change adaptation, or supporting human livelihoods in general. This policy brief examines social resilience in health, education, and migration.

- Efforts to build social resilience can strengthen people's economic ability to face threats, their social networks, and their knowledge and skills to deal with threats competently.

What do malaria in Tanzania, labour migrants in Pakistan, and pregnant teenagers in Ghana have in common?

Answer: they all involve people facing, and overcoming, threats or problems. All three are examples of how focusing on people's capacities to cope with problems can suggest new ways of dealing with policy issues in health and social development.

People's capacity to cope with problems is known as resilience. This issue of *evidence for policy* describes a model of social resilience and shows how it can be used to address subjects as diverse as preventive medicine, rural–urban migration, and reproductive health. Efforts to build social resilience can strengthen people's economic ability to face threats, their social networks, and their knowledge and skills to deal with threats competently.

Resilience vs. vulnerability

Over the last several decades, much research into social and development problems has centred on the idea of **vulnerability**: people's susceptibility to problems such as drought, disease, or unplanned pregnancy. This concept underlies many policies that aim to help vulnerable people deal with or avoid such problems.

But vulnerability focuses on people's weaknesses rather than on their strengths. It leads researchers and policymakers to view people as defenceless victims who need help.

An alternative view is to look at successes rather than failures – to focus on people's **social resilience**. Instead of analysing how people fail to deal with a problem, this approach studies how some people manage to cope well with a difficult situation, or how they manage to avoid coming up against a particular problem in the first place. Once we understand this, we can design ways to help other people avoid or deal with similar problems. This approach opens up new vistas for research, and points to new policy options that may not be obvious from the vulnerability viewpoint.

Key aspects of social resilience

We can think of social resilience in terms of four aspects: threats, capacities, enabling factors, and outcomes (Figure 1).

1 Threats

People's resilience depends on the type of threat they face. The risk may be environmental (e.g. landslides), individual (victim of violence), community-based (threat of eviction), related to a life event (serious illness or death of a relative), or a long-term threat (continuous shortage of food). Threats may be recurring or seasonal, have a slow onset (drought) or strike quickly (flood).

Someone who is resilient to one type of threat may not be resilient to a different threat. So we must be clear about what types of threats we are interested in, and whether we are concerned with just one type of threat or several.

Key questions: What is the threat we are examining? Do the affected individuals, groups, or organisations know that the threat exists?

Example: The danger of children dying of malaria.

2 Capacities

People have various types of capacity to deal with threats. These may be reactive (responding to a threat when it occurs) or proactive (anticipating the threat and planning how to avoid

A student uses a mobile phone to access information in Mtwara, Tanzania. Photo: Matthis Kleeb

it or reduce its impact). People may look for the information they need to deal with the problem, do things to mitigate the problem, or organise support to help them cope with it.

These capacities depend on three types of "capital":
- **Economic capital:** people's income and wealth
- **Cultural capital:** their education, skills, and attitudes
- **Social capital:** their ties to family and friends and other types of social support.

Individuals have capacities; so too do groups and organisations (and indeed governments). These capacities can be enhanced in various ways: through education, training, reorganisation, etc.

Key question: What can be done to improve the capacity of individuals, groups, and organisations to deal with threats more competently?

Example: Parents know that when their children have fever, they should go to a clinic for treatment (cultural capital). They also maintain a good social network that they can rely on in times of crisis (social capital). This network helps them to mobilise money (economic capital), transport, or other support needed for the medical treatment.

3 Enabling factors

Various interventions can build people's resilience by enabling them to draw on the various forms of economic, cultural, and social capital. The government is particularly important, since it shapes rules and regulations, makes facilities (such as clinics) available, and sponsors information and educational campaigns.

Key questions: What do the government or non-governmental organisations do to help build resilience? Do they support some individuals, groups, or organisations more, targeting certain people but excluding others?

Example: Social marketing campaigns build parents' cultural capital by informing them about the risk of malaria, its symptoms, and the treatment needed. By joining savings groups, parents can mobilise economic capital when they need it.

4 Outcomes

There may be more than one desired outcome. The people involved may do something to avoid the threat altogether. Or if they are affected, they may respond to the threat in a way that limits its impact. Since resilience is a process rather than a personal characteristic, it may be unstable and not durable. Before a threat occurs, it is necessary to help people build their resilience to it. And after the threat has happened, the focus should be on helping people draw on their resilience to respond in an appropriate way.

Key questions: What are the hoped-for outcomes? Who defines these outcomes, and what indicators can be defined to assess or measure them?

Example: Parents keep their houses free of mosquitoes and make sure their children sleep under bed nets. If their children do fall ill, they can recognise the symptoms and bring them to a clinic in time.

Multi-layered resilience

The concept of social resilience highlights the fact that individuals are part of social networks. Thus an individual is influenced by his or her household and community, as well as by regional, national, and even international organisations and institutions (Figure 1).

Following the same logic, it is possible to develop a person's, household's, or organisation's resilience through interventions at various levels: individual, household, community or organisation, district, national, and international. For example, it is possible to train individuals about malaria (an individual-level intervention), educate parents about the risk of the disease to their families (household level), or work with village leaders to eliminate mosquitoes' breeding places (community level). Governments can build more clinics, train staff, fund information campaigns, or subsidise bed nets.

In general, the more capacities people have, and the more layers that contribute, the more resilient they are.

The ideas of **empowerment**, **participation**, and **equity** – common in development and policy circles – contribute to building social resilience. If someone is empowered, he or she is more likely to be resilient. Similarly, participation in making decisions and equity are vital for individual and community resilience. Social resilience can thus be viewed as an overarching concept to which the others contribute. All four concepts are valid. They are not alternative choices for a given intervention: several of these ideas may be useful at any one time.

Figure 1: Multi-layered social resilience

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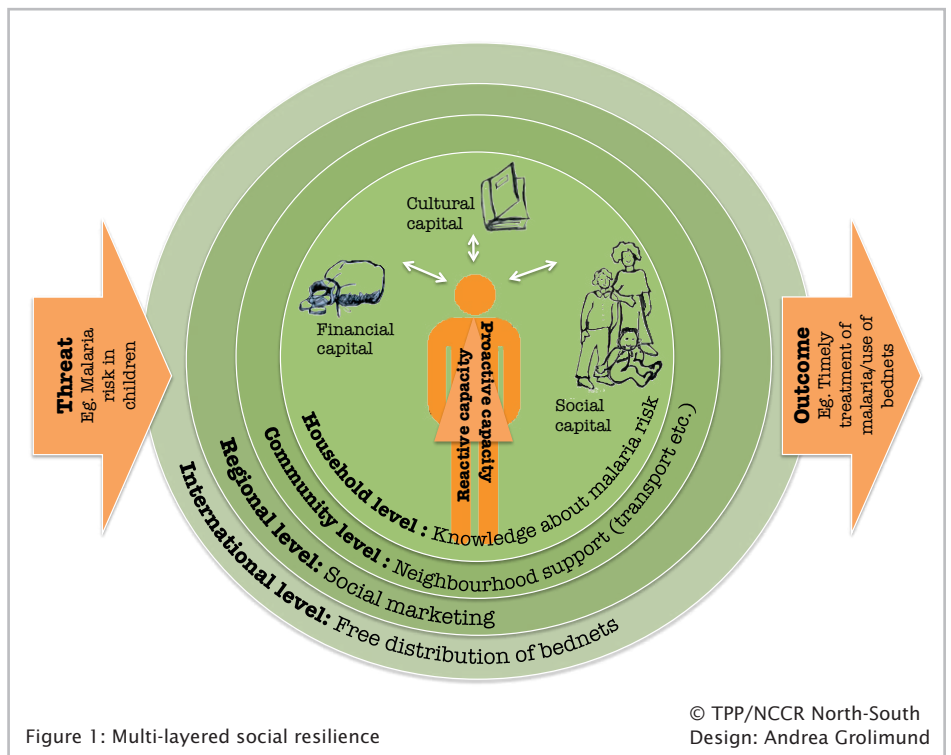
Women members of a savings group perform a drama on malaria in Kilombero, Tanzania.
Photo: Iddy Mayumana

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Policy implications of NCCR North-South research

▪ **Identify threats and people's ways of avoiding or overcoming them**
A social resilience approach starts with anticipating the types of threats that people may face. It works out how they can best deal with or avoid these threats, and then plans interventions to build people's abilities to do so. This approach is different from the more common vulnerability analysis, which looks at people's weaknesses rather than their strengths.

▪ **Support people's cultural, economic, and social capital**
People can draw on various resources: their "cultural capital" (broadly, their personal knowledge and skills), "economic capital" (their income and wealth), and "social capital" (their network of family and friends). Policies can help people build these types of capital to become more resilient in the face of a threat.

▪ **Enable resilience at every appropriate level**
Improving resilience may mean intervening at several levels: individual (e.g. through education), community (e.g. by working with village authorities), national (e.g. by adjusting policies to reduce the risk of a problem occurring), and at all levels in between.

Further reading

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More information:
www.socialresilience.ch

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