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Policy Research Note #2

NORRAG
CONFLICT, VIOLENCE, EDUCATION &TRAINING

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# Education as a Stronghold? The Ambiguous Connections between Education, Resilience and Peacebuilding

In a NORRAG NEWSBite blog-post Roger Dale (2014) convincingly argued how "without theory, there are only opinions", in response to the seemingly unquestioned belief in 'big data' country comparisons and the political implications connected to PISA survey results. This argument, I believe, could also be loosely applied with a different focus, namely the recent massive adoption of the concept of resilience by actors working in the field of Education, Conflict (or Peacebuilding) and Emergencies. I argue there is a need for a solid theorisation and understanding of the roots and current conceptualisations of the term resilience, in order to unravel how, why and in what ways this swift adoption of this resilience discourse might impact on the experiences of those actually living educational realities in emergency or conflict situations.

## 1. The resilience-hype: the new kid on the education-in-emergencies block

Over the past few years, the word 'resilience' has made its appearance in a variety of international reports, newsletters, discussion fora and debates more generally, and specifically in the broader field of *education in conflict and emergencies*. Why did resilience become the new kid on the block? According to an OECD factsheett (2013), "there is a growing recognition that different types of risks – violence and conflict, climate change, disasters, global shocks, and other risk factors such as urbanisation and ageing populations – are inter-connected" and hence need to be addressed in a collaborative and coordinated manner. Is 'resilience' an answer?

*"The concept of resilience and how it relates to education in conflict and emergency situations is employed by a range of different actors, all with sligthly varying conceptualisations, rationales and approaches"*

In line with this reasoning, INEE's working group on Education and Fragility has formulated resilience as one of their key focus areas of work for the coming year in the notes of their meeting in Washinton DC (October 2013). INEE has developed into a key actor that brought and brings forward the Education in Emergencies discourse, which strives for the inclusion of education in humanitarian responses and a genuine concern to protect children in very difficult circumstances. However, the evidence suggests that, whilst the argument may receive growing recognition amongst those involved in education and emergencies networks, those working within other sectors still have to be convinced of education's role in emergencies and (post) conflict settings. The UNESCO Education for All Global Monitoring Report (2011:3) highlights how despite a decade of advocacy education still receives only 2% of humanitarian aid and receives the lowest response to funds requested when compared to food, health, shelter, water and sanitation. This picture is confirmed by field office reports that illustrate the difficulties for education (sector) support to compete with security, governance, economic and other social sectors during

and after conflict. In the best scenario, education is perceived as part of longer-term development strategy, but often still left out of more immediate humanitarian responses.

*Poster displayed at the entrance of UNICEF's building, UNICEF HQ, New York*

From this perspective, to search for common ground and a way to bridge the work (and thinking) of humanitarian, reconstruction and development actors in (post-)conflict and emergency situations, resilience has recently been adopted as a potential 'glue' between those sectors – also when looking at the role of education. Here, we come back to the OECD factsheet (2013) factsheet, proposing "resilience as a common goal [that] has the potential to bring together humanitarians, stabilisation and development actors; actors working on disaster risk reduction, conflict prevention and climate change; and others working on social, economic and institutional development" (yet leaving actors working on longer term peacebuilding effirst unmentioned). But *what do we really mean when we use the concept resilience?*

# 2. What is resilience?

## *Academic debates*

Resilience is rooted in several disciplines and approaches, including the natural sciences, (children's) psychology, social sciences, development studies, etc. One popular approach is that of 'ecological resilience' in relation to climate change (Adger, 2000). Resilience is most often referred to as a process rather than a trait. In contexts of conflict or adversity, it is synonimous to recovering from shocks, rebuilding infrastructure and systems, and at the individual level to protect from severe psychological problems (e.g. Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, PTSS). Nowadays, resilience can refer to several scales, including individual resilience, community resilience, institution resilience, state resilience and so forth.

In relation to political violence, Sousa et al (2013: 236, 244) conclude that there is still no clear nor common definition of 'resilience'. They distinguish between individual and collective dimensions of resilience, and perceive schooling (alongside work opportunities) as crucial factors that operate within the relationship between individuals and their communities to protect individual well-being in the face of political violence, as school becomes "a social resource that fosters a sense of normalcy and purpose in the midst of chaos".

In their overview work on child and youth resilience from a psychological perspective, Noltemeyer and Bush (2013) use the definition of Masten (1999: 283) who proposed resilience refers to "…patterns of desirable behavior in situations where adaptive functioning or development have been or currently are significantly threatened by adverse experiences or rearing conditions", while adding that resilience is not a singular personality trait but rather refers to a process or phenomenon that may be influenced by individual characteristics, social systems and environments.

Also contributing to these debates about resilience in child and youth developmental processes and well-being, Liebenberg and Ungar (2009) provide a useful genealogy of the field of psychological research on resilience. Where a first wave of research since the 1950's focused on resilience as an *outcome* (young people beating the odds), the second wave researchers studied mechanisms and resilience as a *process* of interaction between an individual and its environment. A third and more recent wave has shifted focus on young people's assets (internal and external resources), while the fourth and current wave (that includes the work of these authors) claims that resilience is discursively negotiated and influenced by the (cultural) context. In this view, studying children's resilience and self-efficacy (Kirby and Fraser, 1997 in Liebenberg and Ungar, 2009) requires assessing risks and the broader environment children and youth in

difficult circumstances are situated in: "Resilience is the positive end of the development continuum that occurs for children who experience both acute and chronic exposure to stressors like poverty, abuse, war, violence, neglect, drug addictions, mental illness, disability, marginalization, racism, and a myriad of other ways their well-being is threathened (2009: 3)." While recognizing that the myriad of definitions of resilience remains disparate and fuzzy, Ungar attempts to provide a comprehensive working definition of resilience for the field of education and youth psychology:

"In the context of exposure to significant adversity, whether psychological, environmental, or both, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual's family, community, and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in culturally meaningful ways" (2009: 6).

Mark Duffield, in an online recorded presentation in 2012, questioned the idea that in times of austerity "we all need to be resilient", weather this is to "bounce back" from natural disasters, massive economic crises or acts of terrorism. He convincingly argued why the current dominance of resilience-thinking in both popular media and political discourse is troublesome, as it follows a neo-liberal reasoning that urges every individual to take care and responsibility for their own security and ability to cope with risks. In a world where inequalities are deeply rooted in many societies, this can lead to an "exclusivity of a bunkered life" for only an elite few.

## *International organisations*

Moving from these more academic debates into the ongoing debates and usage of 'resilience' by a range of international actors now, we zoom in to the connections between education and resilience. For example, the World Banks' Education Resilience Approaches (ERA) programme (Reyes 2013) claims that resilience is important because it helps individuals and communities to deal with adversities, through promoting strong education systems and social cohesion in fragile contexts. In the World Bank's Education Notes of May 2013 Reyes (2013a) states that "Resilience matters because not only is learning and school success possible in spite of adversity, education can also be the vehicle to overcome adversity". Educational resilience is hence on the one hand perceived as students' individual ability to succeed in educational terms despite difficult circumstances, while at the institutional level education systems themselves can also be(come) resilient, as well as support resilience for students and the broader community and society. Thus, the World Bank (Reyes, 2013: 5) defines resilience as "the ability of human beings (and their communities and the institutions that serve them) to recover, succeed, and undergo positive transformations in the face of adversity."

*Picture of childrens' drawings, UNICEF HQ, New York*

In a 2013 OECD Factsheet on 'What does "Resilience" Mean for Donors?', it is mentioned how resilience is "the ability of individuals, communities and states and their institutions to absorb and recover from shocks, whilst positively adapting and transforming their structures and means for living in the face of long-term changes and uncertainty". In addition, "development programmes [should] ensure the resilience of health, education and social protection systems, even in times of major crisis", yet is not further elaborated *how* this should be accomplished. In an earlier OECD report (2008: 123), resilience is framed as the opposite end of fragility, as "resilience derives from a combination of capacity and resources, effective institutions and legitimacy, all of which are underpinned by political processes that mediate state-society relations and expectations". While acknowledging the sensitivities of using the term 'fragility' and 'fragile states' as a negative demeanor, UNESCO-IIEP in an editorial of a newsletter (2009) a also places

resilience at the other end of the fragility-continuum and portays education as a means to rebuild resilience.

USAID (2012: 5), in the context of food insecurity and (natural) disasters, defines "resilience to recurrent crisis as the ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth". In this view, building resilience will contribute to reduced humanitarian need over time. The UNDP (2013) similarly relates resilience more closely to natural disasters, and as a means to prevent crisis and enable recovery. Education (infrastructure) is included as an important part of the reconstruction process.

*"an emphasis on resilience might lead development actors to prioritize strategies that focus more on immediate coping with adversity, rather than the (often longer-term) addressing of inequalities and injustice in order to transform the structural conditions that generate conflict in the first place."*

The Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy (PBEA) Programme, a partnership among UNICEF, the Government of the Netherlands, the national governments of participating countries and other key partners, is a cross-sectoral programme that focuses on education and peacebuilding. "Its overall goal is to strengthen resilience, social cohesion, and human security in conflict-affected contexts, including countries at risk of, experiencing or recovering from conflict." UNICEF more broadly seems to adopt a primarily humanitarian approach to strengthen resilience that is focused on the agency of children and youth (UNICEF-RET 2013) , as well as the communities they belong to, as it illustrated in a Global Mapping of Communication for Development Interventions in Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation (2013).

In sum, the concept of resilience and how it relates to education in conflict and emergency situations is employed by a range of different actors, all with sligthly varying conceptualisations, rationales and approaches to establish resilience. While it is certainly not the purpose of this text to provide one clear-cut and overarching working definition for resilience, if this would even be a possibilty, what I do propose is to consider a range of questions and areas in need of further exploration if the route of resilience is taken (seriously).

## 3. Resilience for whom? And resilience for what?

Considering these many different interpretations of resilience, and its rather wide and recent adoptation, these are some of the questions that need to be asked:

- *What is the reason that the concept or idea of resilience gained so much popularity, not least in the field of education in situations of conflict and emergencies – and who/what are the main driving forces?*
- *Who is actually supposed to become 'resilient', is everyone or every group in society positioned to 'become equally resilient' or would some people perhaps be better situated or equipped to become 'more resilient than others'?*
- *And if people are stimulated or supported to become 'resilient', who is supporting this resilience, and what 'type of resilience' would be the desired result?*
- *What if in some cases resilience would mean to continue with a status quo that is not necessarily beneficial for all groups in society (in terms of social justice and equality)?*
- *And moving from the individual to the collective or institutional level, what if an education system that was partly a driver of structural inequalities that contributed to the causes of conflict in the first place, becomes resilient and hence continues to trigger such tensions?*
- *Can and should education systems become resilient, in what ways, under what circumstances and how?*
- *How would we be able to 'measure' whether resilience is achieved, and who establishes the indicators or targets for this?*

In short, what I want to highlight with raising these questions as a starting point for further discussion, is a concern that an emphasis on resilience might lead development actors to prioritize strategies that focus more on immediate *coping* with adversity, rather than the (often longer-term) *addressing* of inequalities and injustice in order to transform the structural conditions that generate conflict in the first place. A possible concern is that a burden of responsibility is placed on individuals and communities, rather than governments and institutions as duty bearers.

## 4. From "only opinions" to a theoretical unravelling of resilience

Resilience seems to be a broad enough term to include the approaches, however ideologically underpinned, by a wide range of actors. It might especially serve those actors that frame education as an a-political endeavour. In a sense, most of the resilience approaches adopted by international organisations mentioned above, seems to follow a (humanitarian, short term and problem solving) 'do no harm' approach, or in some cases a 'conflict sensitive' approach – resilience in this case could be seen as a way to navigate the status quo in the best possible way. Coming back to the work of Roger Dale (2006), such programming for resilience approaches that seek to (at least) restore a certain status quo, might fit with what he, based on the work of Cox, calls a problem-solving approach. My above-mentioned concerns and questions make the case for the need to move away from problem-solving approaches only, and into more transformative, social justice oriented approaches, that seek to question, challenge and address the underlying structural root causes of inequalities and conflict – while, at the same time, acknowledging the inherently political nature of any educational system or initiative. As challenge and transformation are not necessarily smooth processes in any situation, let alone in conflict-affected contexts, this might entail what Davies (2006:13) in her 'education-war interface' terms 'positive conflict' – an active struggle against violence through critical reflection, engagement and dialogue. Hence, as Novelli and Smith (2011:7) argue in a study conducted for UNICEF, education programming should be based on high quality political economy and conflict analysis that is sensitive to the conflict dynamics of local contexts, and support from external actors has to be informed, sensitive and patient: "The more intrusive and externally driven, the less self-organized and sustainable the outcome, and we need to recognize the potential for us to do harm, despite our best intentions."

*"There is a need to move away from problem-solving approaches only, and look into more transformative, social justice oriented approaches, that seek to question, challenge and address the underlying structural root causes of inequalities and conflict – while, at the same time, acknowledging the inherently political nature of any educational system or initiative."*

This need for high quality (cultural) political economy and conflict analysis to start to grasp the complexities of the challenges faced by those experiencing war, emergencies and conflict, is a field where efforts of local stakeholders, international actors and (local, and to some extent international) academic researchers can come together. As researchers, we can start to explore the ambigous connections between education, resilience and transformative forms of peacebuilding, as these form an area in need for in-depth study and consideration. Being reflexive of the debates on children's resilience from a psychological perspective, Liebenberg and Ungar (2009) claim that "studying well-being in relation to adversity demands research methods that are better tailored to the needs of resilience researchers". These authors present a range of useful methodological orientations for studying resilience among youth – including the need to deal with unequal power relations between researcher and young respondents; avoiding oppressive methods that fail to enhance trust; cultural sensitivity rather than voyeuristiccally studying indigenous societies; and genuine participation and inclusion of youth voices in (action) research.

Finally, together with Mario Novelli and Alan Smith (2014), we recently proposed an analytical framework that is grounded in critical theory and incorporates a multiscalar, and social justice oriented perspective to analyse the role of education in fostering sustainable and positive peace.

It is hoped that the ongoing development of such a theoretical and analytical framework helps to increase an understanding of the role of education in the conflict-affected contexts it is focused on, and at the same time to understand the impact of the various resilience discourses and actual implications for programmatic responses. Following Dale's words, with a more solid theoretical exploration, we can start to move away from "only opinions" on resilience.

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## About the programme of work:

The conceptualization of education and conflict has undergone a significant change over the past two decades. Although to a large extent still co-existing in separate academic and practitioner silos, the linkages between education and conflict have begun to emerge as a central concern for a variety of stakeholders working on sustainable development and peacebuilding in the global South. Critically examining this relationship is important, not just in the light of the post-2015 development agenda, but also in view of societal changes taking place globally. Many developing and emerging economies are not only characterized by an information and telecommunication technologies (ITCs) revolution, rising social inequalities, rampant urbanization, and youth bulges, but often also by extremely high rates of (often urban) violence. This level of violence is on a par with or higher than in countries affected by intra-state armed conflict or socio-political emergency.

## About NORRAG:

NORRAG is an independent network whose Secretariat is located at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID) in Geneva, Switzerland. Since its launch in 1985, NORRAG has established itself as a multi-stakeholder network of researchers, policymakers, members of NGOs, foundations and the private sector seeking to inform, challenge and influence international education and training policies and cooperation. Through networking and other forms of cooperation and institutional partnernships, it aims in particular to stimulate and disseminate timely, innnovative and critical analysis and to serve as a knowledge broker at the interface between research, policy and practice. As of February 2015, NORRAG has over 4,300 registered members in more than 170 countries, 45% from the global South.

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