

# Field Notes

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## Frequently Asked Questions on “Resilience”

*“Resilience” is a word increasingly used in the field of humanitarian response and international development. But what exactly is resilience? What does it mean for education systems operating in contexts of violence, conflict or prone to natural disaster?*

*This FAQ seeks to clarify the conceptual underpinnings of resilience and provide some concrete illustrations of what it means to apply resilience to work on education in contexts of adversity.*

### 1 What is resilience?

Resilience has been studied extensively for over 40 years—including in relation to education. Broadly defined resilience is the ability to recover, perform and even grow or transform in contexts of adversity. This leads to three foundational premises of resilience: i) it necessarily starts from a point of adversity, ii) it seeks to explain an outcome of interest in spite of adversity ; and iii) it is especially interested in the process that fosters strengths, opportunities and the relations between individuals, communities and institutions. Initially, resilience research focused on people’s personal traits and innate capacities that allowed them to continue to perform and overcome difficulties in their lives. Today the definition of resilience has expanded to include an understanding of the relevant opportunities and services within institutions and systems to foster resilience.

In education systems, resilience relates not only to the assets and strengths of education communities but also to the relevant policies and programs that can support at-risk individuals to overcome adversity and have positive learning outcomes.

Specific definitions of resilience can differ between institutions, programs or researchers. Nonetheless, operationally, an understanding of resilience in each context considers a locally defined outcome of interest and the set of risks, strengths and opportunities associated with it.

### Fundamental principles of applying resilience theory and concepts to our work include:

- To believe and commit to the potential of every child to succeed despite (or even because of) the difficulties they face.
- To understand risks and assets from the perception of those who live them: this means contextualizing the understanding from the level of the Ministry to the level of the child in the classroom.
- To make explicit the strengths that exist across an education system in adversity (both long-standing strengths and strengths that have manifested as a result of the adversity in hand).
- To actively and explicitly engage these strengths in our long-term services and emergency response strategies.

Photo (left): Students study in the library of the World Bank-supported Female Experimental High School in Herat, Afghanistan; (right) a local researcher outside Bamako, Mali, conducts a focus group on risks and resilience with parents. © Graham Crouch, Jo

## 2 How does resilience support learning in contexts of adversity?

Outcomes of interest in a context of adversity can include learning, relevant skills acquisition and/or students' well-being in a context of adversity. Their achievement requires adopting a resilience approach and necessitates strategies to actively uncover the different perceptions of risks, strengths and relevant services among the key education actors (students, school staff, community members and policy makers). Especially, a resilience approach calls for the identification of the assets and protective processes (strengths, opportunities and services) that are already present in individuals, communities and systems facing high levels of risk. These assets may be tangible (such as human capital or community services) or intangible (such as high motivation to attend school or community solidarity).

Education systems can align their services to these assets to better address

the range of risks and to foster existing strengths in the long-term.

Essentially, education systems can provide both relevant emergency support and improve themselves beyond crisis response by incorporating innovative and flexible approaches to foster resilience into the system's formal institutions, strategic plans, programs, and resources for long-term, sustainable transformation.

Given the resilience approach's critical emphasis on local capacities and support processes, assessments and interventions must be locally-led, must utilize existing institutional and intellectual resources (at whatever level they may exist), and must purposefully capture the differing perceptions of risks and assets that exist among individuals, communities, and national actors within the education system itself.

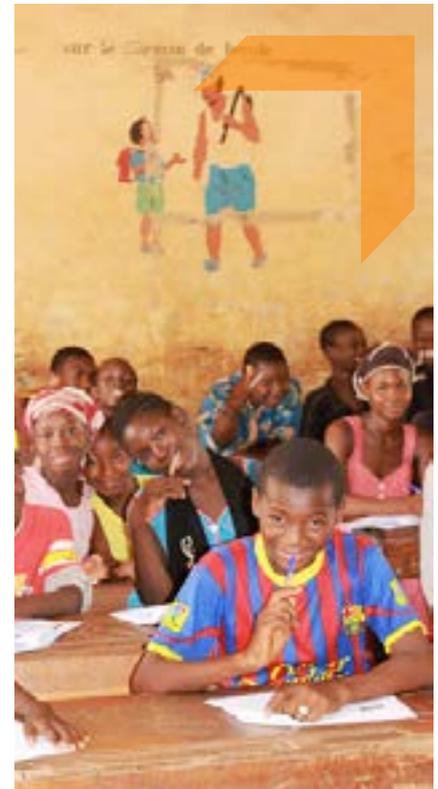
## 3 Isn't "resilience" just a new buzzword for what we have already been doing?

As outlined above, resilience is much more than semantics: applying resilience theory and evidence to education work explicitly connects the emergency response for the immediate needs of learners, with the longer-term development agenda of education systems.

In violence and/or conflict affected contexts, a resilience approach can complement existing conflict-focused approaches. When conflict assessments include a resilience perspective, they can identify examples of existing assets, opportunities or services to reduce conflict sensitivities within education services. A resilience approach can draw on relevant, indigenous and already

operational examples of positive coping and peacebuilding attempts in schools, communities and local stakeholders. Adopting a resilience approach does not preclude applying relevant conflict analysis activities and tools, but rather can support aligning conflict-sensitive guidance to contextually relevant assets within a given system.

Moreover, resilience is not simply the opposite of fragility. A resilience approach is not only concerned with reversing the impact of fragility, but with mobilizing assets, strengths and capacities towards the protection and engagement of at-risk individuals for longer-term personal, institutional and social transformative change.



Students at Boukassounbouyou public school in Mali fill out surveys for a Resilience Rapid Assessment.  
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### Education Resilience Approaches



The World Bank

The ERA Program is a World Bank program that offers a systematic process to collect evidence that can support local efforts to improve education services in violence and conflict affected contexts.

### Field Notes Series

The Field Notes series is produced to share lessons around this process in an effort to disseminate ERA's support for the collection of global evidence on resilience in contexts of adversity.

By embedding a focus on protective processes and assets in spite of adversity within education systems, resilience also provides an important bridge between immediate emergency responses to a crisis and the development of longer-term policies and plans to address such occurrences (see also question 6).

## 4 Isn't talking about assets just shifting responsibility to at-risk individuals?

Early resilience studies that focused solely on human aspects of resilience were criticized for this reason. Today, however, resilience research considers individual resilience in light of institutional supports—those systems, policies, programs and resources that can help at-risk individuals. It is also concerned with the supportive opportunities to address the risks and social injustices that individuals face, while fostering

strengths, opportunities and available services.

Moreover, the process-based nature of resilience means that we do not talk about “resilient students” but rather a “resilience process” that considers how the education system can build on local assets to help education communities overcome sources of adversity.

Finally, applying a resilience approach does not and should not negate the need to address the sources of adversity. It is one part of the puzzle that can help construct a more effective roadmap for education systems to identify priorities and entry points around the provision of immediate, medium and longer-term support for vulnerable children and youth.

## 5 Then, what should be the outcomes of a resilience process?

Because resilience is a complex and contextualized process, each resilience-focused institution, program, or research study develops its own operational definition of resilience and its outcomes of interest. For some contexts, the

outcome of interest may include improving net enrolment rates in the aftermath of an acute emergency; in others, it may refer to the ability of young people affected by high levels of gang violence in their communities to continue to attend and do well in

school; in yet others it could concern the ability of the education system to promote social cohesion and respect for diversity in the aftermath of a divisive and protracted conflict.

### A resilience approach IS...

- ✓ A way of addressing and improving education policy and institutions even in times of crisis.
- ✓ A valorizing way of engaging in difficult contexts and a positive counterweight to the often intractable perceptions of hopelessness that can dominate conflict and fragility discourses.
- ✓ Ways to uncover innovations, positive deviance, or critical cases which provide evidence that indigenous and context-based assets exist and illustrate how adversity is being managed and overcome.
- ✓ Ideas for how education systems can make their services more relevant and effective within contexts of adversity.  
  
A bridge to consciously improve the system's short and long-term response to crisis, among the objectives and support structures of humanitarian and development phases.
- ✓ To both mitigate future emergencies and improve core education functions (such as access, learning, completion, etc.).

### A resilience approach does NOT...

- ✗ Analyze in depth the drivers of conflict within a given country.
- ✗ Provide a structured focus on historical, institutional, social, environmental and economic issues related to adversity.
- ✗ Address the issues better addressed within broader conflict mitigation analysis.
- ✗ Offer a global set of independent interventions for promoting resilience (rather, it proposes that assets, opportunities and strengths of at-risks populations be incorporated into existing education or other social services).
- ✗ Analyze strengths, competencies and abilities outside of adversity (resilience approaches start from a context of adversity).
- ✗ Consider how risks or assets are perceived only by actors in contexts of privilege or power (but rather by vulnerable populations in difficult living contexts).

Photo (left): Students participate in a Resilience survey in Honduras; (below) A teacher explains a lesson to a Palestine refugee student in West Bank/Gaza; (opposite) Palestine refugee students in West Bank/Gaza line up for school. © Joel Reyes / World Bank and UNRWA.



## 6 How can a resilience approach support education authorities working in crisis contexts?

Through the identification of strengths, opportunities and individual, community and organizational assets within an education system, we can better:

- ➔ Pinpoint locally relevant policy options and associated entry points to mobilize for longer-term institutional change.
- ➔ Support and protect positive indigenous practices to better align emergency and development responses.



Foster institutional transformations that can occur precisely by incorporating the innovative and flexible ways education communities respond to emergencies, into the system's formal institutions, strategic plans, programs and resources.

Of note is the way this can help us better bridge the short-term humanitarian response and longer-term development. In the education sector, resilience focused assessments can be

used in the early stages of a crisis to: i) ensure that the varying perceptions of education community members are heard; ii) allow for the identification of assets that can be mobilized during the response; and iii) highlight important institutional linkages and connections to longer-term more sustainable interventions.

## 7 How is data about resilience collected?

At least three types of resilience data are needed to provide useful resilience evidence for education systems: i) data about the context of adversity and risks, ii) about the outcomes of interest in the face of such adversity, and iii) about the protective processes and assets that contribute to such outcomes.

Other fields of study have collected data about risks (e.g., risk assessments), coping (strengths or capabilities studies), or results (impact evaluations). However, a resilience approach requires all three assessment approaches together, with strong emphasis

on identifying existing assets and protective processes in contexts of adversity. Existing tools from risks, vulnerability, coping and adaptation can contribute to a resilience approach (see box on the next page).

Finally, a mixed-methods resilience assessment can contribute to the discovery of assets, exploration of protective processes and explicative evidence regarding their relations. These data and analysis must be useful for resilience-based education policies and programs.



## Existing tools to measure risk, vulnerability, coping and adaptation

While the application of resilience theory to international development work is relatively new, assessments of risk, vulnerability and assets are not and offer several well established quantitative and qualitative approaches and tools that can inform resilience work.

Examples of relevant assessment resources that can contribute to resilience research include:

- ➔ “Living through Crises” (Heltberg, Hossain and Reva 2012) which uses qualitative methods to understand how large-scale economic crises affect people’s lives and coping mechanisms.
- ➔ The Positive Deviance Approach which is an assets-based approach to uncover successful behaviors and strategies and extract key lessons for broader application.
- ➔ Quantitative surveys have been providing crucial evidence for policies for over two decades through household surveys on exposure to shocks (conflict or natural disaster), the associated vulnerability of individuals and households to these shocks and the strategies used by households to cope and adapt (see for example Kozel, Fallavier and Badiani 2008).

However, it is crucial that an assessment based on resilience theory address risks, outcomes of interest and protective processes/assets together, with strong emphasis on the latter.

### Resources:

Heltberg, R., N. Hossain, and A. Reva. 2012. *Living through Crises: How the Food, Fuel, and Financial Shocks Affect the Poor*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.

<http://www.positivedeviance.org/>

Kozel, V., P. Fallavier, and R. Badiani. 2008. “Risk and Vulnerability Analysis in World Bank Analytic Work: FY2000-FY2007”. *The World Bank Social Protection Discussion Paper No. 0812*.

## 8 What does resilience “look like” in practice?

Since its inception in 2010, the Education Resilience Approaches (ERA) Program at The World Bank has collected several examples of resilience from around the world, at the school and system level (also see [www.worldbank.org/education/resilience](http://www.worldbank.org/education/resilience)):

In **Rwanda**, ERA undertook a case study that looked back at how institutional resilience was built in the aftermath of the genocide through a firm focus on promoting a unified Rwandan identity. Rwandan policy makers made explicit in education policies and laws the role of the education system in promoting values of justice, human rights and social cohesion, and institutionalized existing indigenous mechanisms to manage schools and ensure accountability. In the emergency phase this was underscored by a strong focus on getting all students back into school as soon as possible.

This vision was then consolidated with more system level interventions over the longer term.

In **UNRWA refugee schools** in the West Bank, Gaza and Jordan, students have been known to score higher than their peers at public schools on international tests. ERA research shows that this is partly a result of support in the classroom by teachers who understand the adversities they face, maintain high expectations for all students, and explicitly relate education to the context within which the students live and study. Data collected from Palestine refugee students also highlights the importance of a well-structured school environment. Students appreciate rules, discipline and routine, which they say allows them to learn better and creates a sense of belonging to a school community and a greater educational project and purpose. Another crucial

source of support for these students is the use of peer-to-peer learning techniques, which help manage large class sizes with different attainment levels, makes lessons more accessible, and valorizes interpersonal support, solidarity between students and teamwork.

In **Honduras**, ERA’s critical case study of a school situated amidst high urban violence found that a major risk factor for students was the maladaptive ways of seeking a sense



of belonging in a protective group, through membership in violent youth gangs. Consequently, one of the greatest risks there is unsafe access routes to and from schools—times when students feel vulnerable for recruitment or being targeted by violence. Yet, they reported feeling supported by the mothers of students who came to the schools when violent incidents happened in the neighborhoods and organized safe journeys home. This is an example where system level policies, programs and strategies could build upon parental participation in schools to help foster resilience and relevant community interventions.

In *Mali* preliminary data from ERA's ongoing work highlights the solidarity between displaced persons and host communities in the south, such as specific support for ensuring displaced children continue to go to school. Teachers—both local and displaced—are also providing remedial courses and after-school activities in this time of need. These assets could be better institutionalized at the system level for greater access and regularity of schooling. Particular community needs that have been identified could be met through existing national policies such as school feeding and school based management committees, for which strong national

structures (albeit under-resourced ones) exist. Better coordination with NGOs and other agencies could help the Government and other support partners address the need for flexible education strategies and psychosocial support, and institutionalize these approaches in the longer-term.

In each case the resilience response stems from the specific context, which in turn is defined through national and local priorities. It entails better aligning national policies and programs to these priorities, and makes the system more relevant for its most vulnerable beneficiaries.

## 9 Where can I read more?

### *Academic research on resilience:*

The Resilience Research Centre based at Dalhousie University, Halifax Canada  
<http://resilienceresearch.org/>

The Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota  
<http://www.cehd.umn.edu/icd/people/faculty/cpsy/Masten.html>

The ResilienceNet virtual library hosted by The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
<http://resilnet.uiuc.edu/library.html>

### *Published papers by humanitarian and development agencies:*

World Bank Education Resilience Approaches Program  
Includes links to the education resilience framework paper, education case reports and education resilience assessment tools  
<http://www.worldbank.org/education/resilience>

USAID: Resilience Strategy (2012)  
<http://ethiopia.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/images/USAID%20Building%20Resilience%20to%20Recurrent%20Crisis.pdf>

UNICEF: Humanitarian Action for Children, Building Resilience (2011)  
[http://www.unicef.org/media/files/HAC2011\\_EN\\_PDA\\_web.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/media/files/HAC2011_EN_PDA_web.pdf)

Save the Children and World Vision: Ending the Everyday Emergency, Resilience and Children in the Sahel (2012)  
<http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/resources/online-library/ending-everyday-emergency-resilience-and-children-sahel>

UNESCO-IIEP newsletter: Rebuilding Resilience, the Education Challenge (2009)  
[http://www.iiep.unesco.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Info\\_Services\\_Newsletter/pdf/eng/2009/2009\\_1En.pdf](http://www.iiep.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Info_Services_Newsletter/pdf/eng/2009/2009_1En.pdf)

UNICEF: Building a Culture of Resilience (2012)  
[http://www.ineesite.org/uploads/files/resources/UNICEF\\_Final\\_Report\\_-\\_Building\\_a\\_Culture\\_of\\_Resilience.pdf](http://www.ineesite.org/uploads/files/resources/UNICEF_Final_Report_-_Building_a_Culture_of_Resilience.pdf)

INEE Minimum Standards for Education: Preparedness, Response, Recovery (2010)  
<http://www.ineesite.org/en/minimum-standards>

IRIN Humanitarian News and Analysis: Understanding resilience  
<http://www.irinnews.org/report/97584/>



A PTA meeting takes place in Um Deresaya, North Kordofan, Sudan. © Salahaldeen Nadir / World Bank