Key challenges

Combining the systems emphasis of resilience thinking with an understanding of actors, **networks and relationships**, and the diverse **framings, narratives, and discourses** that different actors bring to bear.

Engaging resilience debates with **normative** concerns addressing the goals and values of different people and organisations, and trade-offs between people, systems, levels and scales - 'what trade-offs do we want or not want to see'?

Enriching resilience approaches through more disaggregated attention to **action and strategies**, considering transformations and transitions; endogeneity and exogeneity;

functions, flows and structures; shocks or stresses; control or response. How do actors decide strategies, and which enable adaptiveness, learning, flexibility and empowerment?

Strengthening attention to **power and politics** to address why particular resilience-enhancing narratives and pathways are/are not pursued, to challenge and transform unsustainable structures and framings in radical ways, to hold powerful actors and networks to account. Strategies might involve a spectrum from deliberative to antagonistic politics, moving away from managerialism towards a political conceptualisation.

More reading

Re-framing Resilience: Trans-disciplinarity, Reflexivity and Progressive Sustainability – a Symposium Report, Leach, M. (ed.) STEPS Working Paper 13 (2008)
ISBN - 978 1 85864 556 5

Dynamic Systems and the Challenge of Sustainability, STEPS Working Paper 1 by Ian Scoones, Melissa Leach, Adrian Smith, Sigrid Stagl, Andy Stirling and John Thompson (2007) ISBN – 13: 978 185864 650 2

For other titles in this series see:
www.steps-centre.org/publications

Credits

This briefing was written by Melissa Leach and edited by Julia Day.

About the STEPS Centre

The STEPS Centre (Social, Technological and Environmental Pathways to Sustainability) is an interdisciplinary global research and policy engagement hub uniting development studies with science and technology studies. We aim to develop a new approach to understanding, action and communication on sustainability and development in an era of unprecedented dynamic change. The STEPS Centre is based at the Institute of Development Studies and SPRU Science and Technology Policy Research at the University of Sussex with a network of partners in Asia, Africa and Latin America and is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Find out more: www.steps-centre.org

Contact us

STEPS Centre, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK
Tel: +44 (0)1273 915673
Email: steps-centre@ids.ac.uk
Web: www.steps-centre

Reframing Resilience

In a world where threats - linked to climate change, epidemic disease, or fluctuating financial markets - loom ever larger, resilience thinking highlights the complex dynamics of social-economic-environmental systems, across multiple scales.

Resilience thinking recognises uncertainty and surprise are inevitable. And it focuses on what is required to 'bounce back' from shocks - or 'the capacity of a social-ecological system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while undergoing change so as to retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and feedbacks'.

This contrasts starkly with conventional analytical and policy approaches focused on optimality, efficiency, stability, risk management and control – approaches which, in practice, often fail. Resilience approaches instead emphasise flexibility,

Skip O'Donnell / iStockphoto

diversity and adaptive learning as key responses to real-world dynamics. This offers prospects for more integrated and effective policy making towards sustainability.

Resilience insights and development perspectives

How does resilience intersect with development and debates about it? What insights does resilience thinking bring to understanding and action concerned with reducing poverty, vulnerability and marginalisation? With their origins in ecological science, resilience approaches confront both challenges and opportunities in engagement with perspectives and debates from other angles and disciplines — including development and science and technology studies. The 2008 STEPS Symposium explored these challenges, and considered their implications for policy and practice. Whereas resilience approaches observe that some systems are persistent while others are not, development perspectives introduce a more normative dimension, asking 'resilience of what for whom?' as well vulnerability concerns. Questions of values — what system functions or services are desirable — become crucial. These values depend on the person, group or place, so we must always ask whose resilience is at stake, and about its unequal distribution. Recognising greater resilience for one group affects the resilience of others in both positive and negative ways is key.

Conservative or radical resilience?

In mainstream usage resilience is inherently conservative, focusing on the persistence of a system. Yet in some cases, there may be good reasons for wanting to destroy or transform a system more fundamentally to meet desirable goals — as, for instance, with slavery, fascism, and fossil-fuel based energy systems. Here, it is useful to distinguish between the resilience of particular functions (e.g. the desirable persistence of electricity supply)

and of the structures to achieve them (e.g. in the context of climate change, it may be desirable to transform fossil-fuel-based structures to those based on new renewable technologies. See Case 1). Radical change may be required to steer away from undesired regimes towards new system states, or even new systems, that sustain and enhance ecosystem services, livelihoods and human wellbeing.

Studies of technology, society and economy focus usefully on transitions and transformations, identifying the interactions between external and internal processes needed to shift systems out of 'lock-in' to undesirable pathways, and onto more appropriate ones.

Knowledge and power

A focus on knowledge and power draws attention to how different people and groups understand and 'frame' systems and their dynamics, and prioritise particular goals. There are valuable opportunities to integrate social constructivist methodologies with resilience thinking, pointing towards policy approaches emphasising deliberation, reflexivity and the inclusion of diverse knowledges and perspectives.

Moreover, we need to ask searching questions about the pressures that lead to outcomes NOT supportive of resilience and robustness, and which continue to emphasise stability/risk framings. This involves considering the narratives, processes and pressures operating in policy; professions and disciplines; bureaucracies; and wider politics and political-economy. Unless these are addressed, talk of new governance designs is just wishful thinking.

"Resilience discourses replace narratives of fear, anxiety and powerlessness with alternatives centred on hope, renewal and adaptation"

Replacing narratives of fear

'Resilience' does not just reflect realities on the ground. It also operates as a discourse, enwrapped with power relations and enabling some effects while closing down others. For instance resilience can operate as a discourse of survival — as in the recovery of plants after drought, ecosystems after insult, or communities after disaster.

Resilience discourses, attractively, offer the potential to replace narratives of fear, anxiety and powerlessness with alternatives centred on hope, renewal and adaptation. Yet there are also links between resilience and more conservative politics and security discourses. There is therefore a need for critical attention to how 'resilience' as a mobile term, is moving and 'bedding down' in different contexts, and to what it means for particular groups of people and their dilemmas and conflicts, and for ethics, politics and notions of justice.

Case 1

Climate change, vulnerability and resilience

Resilience and vulnerability approaches are valuable in addressing climate change challenges — yet important distinctions and trade-offs exist between them. Unlike resilience, the term 'vulnerability' is explicitly normative, referring to susceptibility to harm. The Convention on Climate Change, based on the vulnerability approach, focuses on the fundamental rights of individuals. This underlies conventional adaptation with its focus on the most vulnerable, individual actors and narrow forms of stability and risk framing. In contrast, resilience-based planning addresses cross-scale interactions, uncertainty and surprise, looking for opportunities for experimentation and adaptive management. This may sometimes be antithetical to a vulnerability approach — yet important if the transformatory challenges of climate change are to be addressed.

Based on presentation by Neil Adger at the STEPS Symposium

Hannington Odame, Joachim Voss and Betty Kibaara at the STEPS Centre Resilience workshop / Alex Gregory