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Resilience and Environmental Security in Peacebuilding

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Resilience is a widely used concept among development, environmental, security and peacebuilding organisations. However, it has rarely been applied together with the concept of environmental security.

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Resilience is a widely used concept among development, environmental, security and peacebuilding organisations. However, it has rarely been applied together with the concept of environmental security, despite the obvious ways in which the concepts complement each other. These concepts can be jointly applied in the peacebuilding sector. Environmental security sharpens the scope of resilience, while resilience allows for taking issues into account that a traditional environmental security perspective might miss.

'Resilient communities', 'climate-resilient pathways', 'resilient future', 'resilient planet': there are hardly any key terms in the development, climate change, security, and peacebuilding sectors that have not been combined with 'resilience'. Due to the malleability of and enthusiasm for this concept, it has been depicted as the 'new superhero in town' replacing sustainability as the key guiding concept and buzzword in the international development community.

Less prominent but still widely used, at least implicitly, is the concept of environmental security. The term can relate to the absence of risks posed by environmental changes or events to individuals, groups or nations. But it can also focus on the environment itself and how human behaviour, including conflict, affects the security and integrity of the environment.

Several international organisations, including International Alert, adelphi, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) are working on combined approaches to environment, conflict and security issues. However, resilience has hardly ever been applied in conjunction with the concept of environmental security, despite their potential complementarity. Particularly in the peacebuilding sector, joint application of the concepts is promising because it could help to create an understanding of the extent to which people are at risk due to environmental factors (environmental security), and the extent to which people are able to adapt to environmental risks (resilience). Further, a joint application could help to understand the impacts of environmental factors on conflict dynamics and vice versa. Against this background, develop a framework which allows non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working to implement peacebuilding projects in developing countries to jointly apply resilience and environmental security.

Joint framework for environmental security and resilience in peacebuilding

Natural resources and the environment are the key elements linking environmental security and resilience to peacebuilding (see figure). Based on a six-step process, we combine the key strength of environmental security, its emphasis on the importance of the environment, and the key strength of resilience, namely the appreciation of complexity and local agency. The purpose of the process is to identify the states, changes, risks and disturbances, drivers

and mechanisms, impacts, and measures and responses from an environmental security and resilience perspective to gain a better understanding of conflict dynamics and identify entry points for peacebuilding.

Figure 1 – Framework for Environmental Security and Resilience in Peacebuilding.

In step one we use the environmental security perspective to determine the key elements of the environment and natural resources that are important to a specific community or group of people, while the resilience perspective identifies how and by whom natural resources and the environment are managed. Together the environmental security and resilience perspectives help to answer the question of whether tensions or conflicts over the identified resources exist.

In step two, we determine changes in natural resources and the environment before identifying the losers and winners of these changes. The resilience perspective allows us to take the overall complexity of the socio-economic and political context into account.

The objective of step three is to understand the interaction of different risks. The environmental security perspective pays particular attention to risks to the environment as well as risks caused by the environment. The resilience perspective adds socio-economic and political considerations, such as strong increases in food prices, regime changes and social instability.

Step four aims to identify the key drivers and mechanisms of the changes and risks, identified under step 2 and 3. For example, if a reduction of rainfall is

identified under step 2 and in step 3 an increased drought risk is noted, then step 4 explores whether the reduction of rainfall and drought risk can be attributed to global climate change or local factors such as deforestation.

Step five focuses on impacts. For example, one can ask whether the droughts and loss of harvest identified on the environmental security side and/or the increases in food prices identified on the resilience side, lead to hunger and how hunger in turn interacts with impacts of existing conflicts identified in the peacebuilding column.

Step six is particularly important because at that point we consider the actual measures and responses to environmental, socio-economic and political changes at different scales in order to determine the effects on conflict potential as well as to identify entry points for peacebuilding.

For example, if we identify hunger as a key impact under step five, the government could invest into irrigation schemes or (temporarily) subsidise staple food. This could reduce the conflict potential and strengthen the social contract between the government and the affected communities. However, for each measure taken, consideration must be given to who is affected, either positively or negatively (see dashed arrow connecting step six and two). On the resilience side, the capabilities (including knowledge, technology, networks and financial assets) and responses of the communities strongly depend on the social capital of the group concerned. For example, a loss of harvest might not result in hunger because the affected community might receive remittances from family members living outside the drought affected area. Our framework enables peacebuilding organisations and other stakeholders from development organisations and humanitarian assistance to identify core risks to

environmental security without losing sight of the wider political and cultural structures into which these insecurities are embedded.

In Practice: Palestine's Good Water Neighbor's Project

The Good Water Neighbors (GWN) project in Palestine shows the advantages of combining a resilience and an environmental security perspective in peacebuilding. Palestine suffers from a number of environmental insecurities, most of which are related to water scarcity and pollution. But these insecurities are embedded in and interact with wider political contexts, such as the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, tensions between various Palestinian groups, and dominance of technocratic, liberal peacebuilding approaches. In order to address this complex reality, GWN facilitates cooperation on environmental issues between Israeli and various Palestinian groups, thus increasing resilience to socio-political and environmental shocks simultaneously. Examples of such activities include transnational environmental education, establishing water infrastructure shared between both sides, and common protests against environmentally harmful infrastructure (such as the Israeli separation barrier).

Conclusion

Overall, the framework offers a possibility for environmental security to sharpen the scope of resilience, while resilience allows for taking issues such as governance into account that a traditional environmental security perspective might miss. The framework helps identifying the states, changes, risks and disturbances, drivers and mechanisms, impacts, and measures and responses from an environmental security and resilience perspective to gain a better understanding of conflict dynamics. However, when applying the framework continuous attention should be also paid to ambivalent effect of depoliticisation which is a risk both concepts entail.

On the one hand, steering away from contentious political debates, such as those related to the wider Israeli-Palestinian conflict, provides an entry point for peacebuilding projects. Social groups and even official actors can be involved without taking a stance on contentious political questions. On the other hand, avoiding discussions on structural inequalities means that some root causes of environmental insecurities, such as the unequal distribution of water resources between Israel and Palestine, are difficult to address. When applying the framework further attention needs to be paid to other pitfalls of resilience and environmental security, namely the redistribution of responsibility to the local level and potentially justifying external intervention. If these issues are kept in mind, the framework can be a useful tool, especially when analysing conflicts where natural resources and the environment play key roles.

Image credit: Traynor Tumwa.

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