POLICY BRIEFING

The Potential and Limits of the 'Resilience Agenda' in Peri-urban Contexts

Today, it is acknowledged that peri-urban space plays a critical and increasing role in relation to urban expansion. Yet this role is still poorly understood and peri-urban areas are rarely recognised in the different relevant decision-making spheres, leading to the political and economic marginalisation of peri-urban residents, who are often among the poor. Two policy-relevant questions emerge from this. What can the resilience narrative, which is increasingly used in the context of urbanisation, offer to address this disconnect? And what do policies that foster resilience in peri-urban spaces look like? A recent study led by IDS Fellows attempted to answer these questions. The study shows that promoting resilience in peri-urban contexts involves fostering adaptation, emphasising systems thinking that brings together urban and rural dynamics, and recognising that path dependence matters.

More than half the world's population now live in urban areas. In developing countries, these areas will become home to almost all of the projected population growth in the next three decades, swelling urban populations by a further 1.3 billion by 2030 and 2.5 billion by 2050. Increasing urban expansion – which creates peri-urban areas at the margins of cities – means that a simple distinction between urban and rural areas obscures a number of key issues. In the peri-urban interface, rural and urban dynamics overlap and land use changes tend to be particularly rapid, with wetlands and agricultural land often being converted to sites for industries, information technology (IT) hubs, infrastructure, and housing estates for affluent as well as poor residents, including migrants. Imprecise jurisdictional areas mean that both rural and urban authorities often fail to address the needs of peri-urban communities, who tend to be politically marginalised. As a consequence, land speculation is often widespread, with pockets of expensive new property developments surrounded by informal settlements.

Yet at the same time, peri-urban spaces continue to be of key importance because they influence both the nature and trajectory of urban development and can be decisive for the success of wider sustainable development strategies.

In this context we know relatively little about two important questions, which we deal with in turn below.

1 How might resilience in peri-urban spaces be understood?

Resilience is now widely regarded as something that individuals, communities and cities should strive for, particularly in relation to climate change and the challenges that it brings in the urban context. As such, the term increasingly diverges from its earlier usage (as a neutral, technical characteristic of a system, which did not have this normative dimension).

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However, a more careful analysis of how the term 'resilience' is used in the context of urbanisation shows that while it is now commonplace, it is often used in ill-defined, multiple and potentially incompatible ways. For example, resilience can be used to refer to a goal, as an analytical/operational framework, as a metaphor to link ecological and social systems, or as a (largely meaningless) buzzword.

At one level, the loose definition associated with the term can be useful as a form of integrating discourse between disciplines, whereby resilience plays the role of 'mobilising metaphor' to bring together practitioners, policymakers, local actors, and communities of practice with different (or divergent) agendas around the same table. When disconnected agendas are a major impediment for appropriate planning, then resilience may prove a powerful 'boundary concept' to break down these silos and ensure a more integrated planning process.

However, a systematic understanding of the various ways in which resilience is used is also critical for effective policymaking. The different interpretations and definitions of resilience that underpin the various narratives on urban resilience are themselves dynamic and 'malleable'. The concept of resilience has progressively evolved from a single ordinary term, when it referred simply to the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties, into a series of different and increasingly sophisticated scientific concepts characterised by different and specific definitions (Fig.1).

These various interpretations of resilience can be related to three areas of distinct research: (1) urban hazards and disaster risk reduction, underpinned by an engineering perspective; (2) urban ecological resilience, underpinned by ecology and ecosystem services; and (3) urban resilience through governance and institutions, underpinned by a social view of resilience. Given the extent to which the institutions and governance processes that shape peri-urban social and ecological systems are linked, it is

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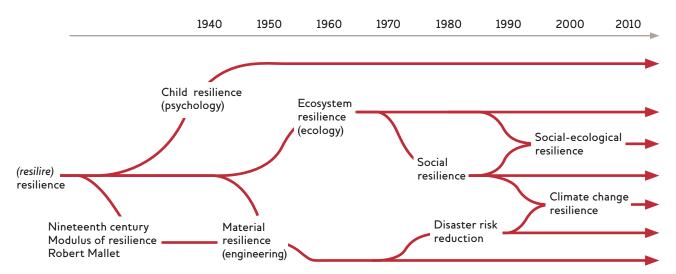

Figure 1 Evolutionary path of the concept of resilience and emergence of the different schools of thoughts and their lineages. Resilience in relation to urbanisation emerges at the intersection between disaster risk reduction, social resilience and ecosystem resilience.

necessary to combine all three perspectives to make the concept of resilience workable in the peri-urban context.

2 What does fostering resilience mean in relation to the peri-urban agenda?

There is a broad consensus on the importance of system characteristics such as flexibility, redundancy and modularity, and safe failure as critical principles for urban planning, especially in response to climate change-related extreme events. This interpretation of 'engineering resilience', which emerges essentially from the urban hazards and disaster risk reduction literature, appears to be scale neutral; it is equally important to ensure that these characteristics are present at the local as at the national level.

As such, urban resilience need not be state-centric. As peri-urban spaces expand, urban planners may alternatively look for ways to create ownership of the drivers of resilience among organisations of the urban poor and those who might be otherwise marginalised. These groups, who constitute a significant proportion of peri-urban populations, are often unrecognised and are excluded from formal titles to land as well as good-quality basic services, including those related to disaster risk management.

Yet experience shows that poor and marginalised communities are adaptive and able to develop flexible and resilient strategies and livelihoods, despite often being the most vulnerable to climatic shocks and stresses. This implies that the urban resilience agenda is not explicitly normative in relation to the needs and interests of the most marginalised and disenfranchised groups. In effect, these groups experience citizenship in very unsatisfactory terms in cities of the global South. There are, of course, limits to romanticising their 'resilience', which could also be seen as a form of coping strategy in the absence of any other alternatives. These groups also often pay the

price to ensure the resilience of others – i.e. they may be displaced from city centres or from so-called ecologically fragile areas, such as Mumbai's mangroves, in order to enhance the 'resilience' of the city, usually to the benefit of the middle and upper classes.

In this context, fostering resilience involves reconciling the various dimensions of the resilience agenda (infrastructural, ecological, and social) with the specificities of peri-urban spaces.

The analysis also reveals the following:
- Resilience, in an engineering sense, emphasises the importance of protecting infrastructure against extreme climate-related events, or the need to develop resistance and foster recovery in response to extreme events. In particular, this involves thinking, actions and interventions at the local level as well as the national level, and peri-urban spaces are critical components in this continuum.
- Ecological resilience emphasises issues related to conservation of biodiversity, and sustainable management of ecosystem services in an urbanised context. In particular, some of the practices closely associated with this narrative are directed towards the support of green commons (which are often located in peri-urban zones) and peri-urban agriculture.
- Social resilience focuses on decentralisation, participation and polycentric governance. The social governance narrative is, by nature, more inclined to address the general lack of visibility and political marginalisation that usually characterise peri-urban zones. In effect, those who are interested in addressing peri-urban issues often advocate decentralisation. As such, situations where government and institutions are expected to operate in ways that support and promote participation and development processes across scales and levels are more likely to favour the needs and aspirations of those living in peri-urban spaces.

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Policy recommendations

The most salient point that emerges from our analysis is that a large number of urban policies seem to link almost naturally with the resilience agenda. Put differently, it means that resilience –understood as one of the many different urban resilience interpretations – can easily be used to frame a large number of problems/issues related to urban development processes.

In light of our findings, we propose a series of guiding principles that appear particularly relevant in relation to peri-urban spaces, as follows.

1 Foster adaptation. Since resilience is, by nature, a concept that emphasises adaptation and the dynamic nature of systems, adopting a resilience narrative in relation to urbanisation planning could contribute to the adoption of policies that endorse and reflect these features.

2 Embrace systems thinking. Resilience emphasises the importance of system thinking and system properties. Policymakers (at national and local/municipal levels) need to adopt policies that acknowledge and endorse the importance of system characteristics such as cross-scale dynamics and component interactions, while also recognising flexibility, redundancy and modularity, or safe failure as generic principles that are critical in the face of extreme events. They also need to develop planning around the idea that peri-urban spaces which are integrated into the complex systems that serve cities (e.g. power, water, transportation, health, etc.) appear far less vulnerable to extreme events than urban areas that are wholly dependent on one single central system.

3 Acknowledge ecological dimensions. Policymakers and urban planners need to recognise and integrate in their decisions the fact that systems thinking goes beyond infrastructure to include ecological dimensions. This puts strong emphasis on issues related to conservation of biodiversity and sustainable management of ecosystem services. Many of the issues around conservation of biodiversity and the management of ecosystem services have strong links to different dynamics and processes that are taking place in peri-urban zones. Ecological resilience is therefore expected to be specifically sensitive to the peri-urban environment.

4 Path dependence matters. While there may be a tendency to view peri-urban areas as 'emergent', the processes that feed into the interplay between resilience and peri-urban expansion can occur over the long term, with deep-rooted interconnections between urban, peri-urban and rural spaces. This implies that when urban planners seek to identify factors contributing to urban resilience, or identify strategies to foster resilience, they need to cast their lens on the historical trajectories of wider sociopolitical and economic processes, which explicitly include both urban and rural dynamics, alongside an analysis of contemporary processes.

Further reading

Béné, C.; Cannon, T.; Gupte, J.; Mehta, L. and Tanner, T. (2014) *Exploring the Potential and Limits of the Resilience Agenda in Rapidly Urbanising Contexts*, Evidence Report 63, Brighton: IDS

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