

# »» Resilience in development cooperation – what exactly does that mean?

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The frequency and intensity of political crises and natural disasters have increased significantly in recent decades around the world, and developing countries (especially the poorer sections of the population) are affected more often and more severely. Recurring shocks (droughts, floods, fragility traps, etc.) are often involved. The primary goal must be to identify these developments early on and, if possible, to prevent them right from the outset (prevention).

But what if a crisis or disaster happens after all? The usual response of the international community is to send aid organisations to alleviate immediate suffering. The aim of the reconstruction that follows is to eliminate dependency on the support of aid organisations. These are important measures, but they do not initially change the fact that the crisis could (and often does) repeat itself after a short time.

## Increasing resilience as a systemic measure to strengthen resistance to future crises

The concept of resilience goes one step further in this case. In the context of development cooperation, resilience is to be understood as the capacity of individuals and institutions, communities and states to withstand crises, risks or shocks like natural disasters, violent conflicts or poverty. This means absorbing them, adapting to them and, if necessary, making fundamental changes to ensure people's long-term prospects<sup>1</sup>.

## The three phases of resilience: absorption, adaptation, transformation

In the debate about resilience, a distinction is made between the following three successive phases of resilience:

- 1) Absorption capacity:** this refers to the ability to overcome the immediate crisis with the help of external support (willingness to accept external help), e.g. the ability to bridge a food shortage with cash transfers.
  - 2) Adaptive capacity:** this is the ability to adapt individual behaviours so that the effects of external shocks can be mitigated (adaptability), e.g. coping with drought using drought-resistant seeds.
  - 3) Transformative capacity:** this refers to the ability to prevent the occurrence of a risk event, e.g. circumventing the flood risk by relocating to flood-proof urban districts.
- insurance to compensate for economic losses (e.g. climate risk insurance),
  - support for (basic) education to increase people's problem-solving abilities,
  - strengthening the social and economic participation of women to lower their risk of poverty and improve their opportunities for taking action.

## Conclusion: a concept that is correct in principle but difficult to put into practice

The basic idea of the resilience concept is not completely new – the core idea is helping people help themselves. The special charm of the concept (and certainly a reason for its current popularity) is that it promises a way out of the misery of recurring crises. Its integral (SDG-spanning) character is also compelling. Nevertheless, it remains a rather abstract concept, which makes it difficult to derive concrete measures.■

## Literature

OECD (2014): Guidelines for resilience systems analysis, OECD Publishing.

## From theory to practice: how can resilience be increased?

The concept of increasing resilience can be applied to many different contexts (climate resilience, crisis resilience, poverty resilience, etc.). However, the central weakness of the concept also lies in this broad scope: it describes a state worth aspiring to, but does not per se contain any concrete indications of how resilience can be increased. This is also made more difficult by the complexity of the cause-and-effect relationships and the diversity of contexts. The examples above show that very different responses may be needed depending on the context.

Nevertheless, some measures can be identified that can increase resilience in a broader sense (i.e. to different shocks). These include, for example:

- expansion of social security systems to mitigate existence-threatening risks (unemployment, illness, poverty, etc.),

<sup>1</sup> based on EU, DFID and OECD