

# Chapter 11

## Resilience from the United Nations Standpoint: The Challenges of “Vagueness”



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**Abstract** A United Nations program, at the crossroad between the development and the humanitarian mandate (UNISDR) turned the concept of resilience into a central vehicle for its worldwide program on disaster risk reduction. It is through an ethnographic study of the negotiation process, topped by interviews and text analyses that I suggest various characteristics to describe resilience in an international organization. With the perspective of the sociology of translation, I discuss, on the one hand, the UN’s need to maintain a vague definition of the concept, which hinders operationalization and on the other, I show how the organization manages, with resilience, to legitimize its programs and sustainability.

**Keywords** United Nations · International organizations · Resilience Terminology · Translation · Disaster · Risk · Reduction

### 11.1 Context and Introduction

This chapter examines the use of *resilience* at the United Nations (UN), in particular a UN program—United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR)—which has the mandate to serve as “the focal point in the United Nations system for the coordination of disaster reduction and to ensure synergies among the disaster reduction activities of the United Nations system and regional organizations”.<sup>1</sup>

In a nutshell, when it comes to studying *resilience* in the context of international organizations, it is associated with disasters. Building and increasing *resilience* is in part a question of reducing a population toward risks. In fact, the link between risk and resilience goes back to the paradigm shift in the 1980s as a result of the massive

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.unisdr.org/who-we-are/mandate>, consulted on 12 December 2017.

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technological crises in the late 70s and early 80s. The notion of risk became integrated on the aftermath of these events across fields. Ulrich Beck [1] coined the term of the “risk society” era to account for this change. In that vein, many international actors got involved in managing the risks and the effects of natural hazards [2].

The growing incidences of death and destruction due to natural hazards have since played a major role for international organizations. The United Nations more specifically has managed to use the disaster narrative to legitimize programs and action plans, which promulgate norms and knowledge [2] and went as far as initiating the decade on international prevention for disaster reduction in the 1990s. The use of concepts such as vulnerability, disaster mitigation, disaster risk reduction and *resilience* within international organizations thus bear as witnesses for the paradigm change and the UN’s concern to integrate the notion of “living with risk” in its programs.

While *resilience* was used in the context of hazards, crises and disasters in the late 1990s, it also became the outcome of *vulnerability*. Prior to *resilience*, *vulnerability* was key to studying natural hazards and poverty until the late 1980s, but was usually portrayed in negative terms as the susceptibility to be harmed [3]. *Resilience* rose as the positive replacement for vulnerability, which could be worked on and improved. UNISDR became the first UN agency to take on the *resilience* term, making it a central concept in its programs.<sup>2</sup>

From an organizational point of view UNISDR seeks legitimization to sustain itself. Institutionally, it does so by fulfilling a mandate at the crossroad between development and humanitarian international programs. Historically, the fracture between humanitarian organizations, dealing with emergency response, and development organizations, dealing with prevention, divides practitioners both at headquarters and in the field. “Humanitarian and development organizations tend to compete with one another for money, turf and credit” [4]. Nevertheless UNISDR focuses on decreasing vulnerability in the face of disasters from a development point of view and from a humanitarian perspective by linking climate change with Early Warning Systems (EWS).<sup>3</sup>

If we assume *resilience* has great potential, we question on the one hand whether it is operationalizable, and on the other, what it contributes to more broadly in international organizations. To do so, we follow the central concept at the heart of international negotiations from the perspective of the sociology of translation. It allows to pay close attention to the actors [5], which entails observing as far as possible, what they do as much as what they say [6] and gives an account of their arguments, points of views and contradictions. In other words, we translate the scallops’ domestication and the fishermen of St Brieuc Bay— story explained in a groundbreaking article by

<sup>2</sup>Hyogo Framework for Action, 2005–2015 and Sendai Framework, 2015–2030.

<sup>3</sup>EWS: an integrated system of hazard monitoring, forecasting and prediction, disaster risk assessment, communication and preparedness activities systems and processes that enables individuals, communities, governments, businesses and others to take timely action to reduce disaster risks in advance of hazardous events to reduce losses. It also sets guidelines on how to best increase *resilience* from a preparedness standpoint (i.e. before a disaster strikes). It is thus viewed as an “a priori” outlook onto disaster.

[7]—to the one posed by the concept of resilience in the lead-up to UNISDR’s text by Callon ratification on disaster risk reduction. The St Brieuc Bay actors encompassed the three main scientists, the fishermen, the scientific peers and the scallops all at play to discuss the ways in which they can improve scallop productivity. In the case of UN negotiations we find “our” main actors to be Member state representatives, UNISDR’s staff member and members of Civil society. The “translation” thus needs to be viewed as a process in which a network of human and non-human actants (i.e. scallops being the *resilience* concept) construct common meanings and negotiate to reach individual or collective objectives [8]. We therefore look into UNISDR’s *inter-essement* [7] in its attempt to impose and stabilize the other actors (Civil society and Member states) around defining *resilience*. Applying the sociology of translation to international organizations goes in line with Law’s definition of organizations: precarious entities that require permanent stabilizing and ordering to maintain their actorness [9, 10].

## 11.2 Methodology

In order to analyze the purpose and operationalization limits of *resilience*, I rely on ethnographic data as well as content analysis [11]. *Embedded* [12–14] as member of the Women’s Civil society group in the run up to the Third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (WCDDR) held in Sendai, Japan in March 2015, I took notes and carried out 40 interviews during the negotiation process on the Sendai Framework text. Two ratified texts (Hyogo Framework for Action 2005, and Sendai Framework 2015) as well as interview and observation transcripts, as a result of a multi-sited ethnography [15] are at the heart of content analysis. I carried out a systematic search of the *resilience* concept to analyze what actors said about it and what the texts reveals. This in turn, allows me to look into the various uses of *resilience* throughout a UN agency, by providing a number of characteristics.

## 11.3 What Resilience Does at the United Nations

### 11.3.1 Creating “Vagueness”

In this section, I suggest to go over the various characteristics of *resilience* depicted at the UN to highlight the relevance of such a concept in international organizations. According to the analyses, five characteristics support the idea of *resilience* being a vague concept. I describe the forms *resilience* takes and illustrate the way the UN staff, Member states and Civil society members interpret and translate the concept.

First, I propose to associate *resilience* with the term *boundary object* [16]. In line with Brand and Jax’s argument [17], who suggest the use of *resilience* as a facilitator

within the field of science and technology, *resilience* facilitates communication across disciplinary borders. However, while easing communication, *boundary objects* also allow divergent meanings among the parties without it being necessarily openly recognized. Transposed to the UN context, *resilience* is a *boundary object*, which ties to tie two main disparities. On the one hand, it bridges the humanitarian and development divide among agencies enabling UNISDR to link both mandates [18] because both use it. On the other, the concept gives governments, UNISDR and Civil society the possibility to agree on common ground during negotiations.

[Resilience] is one of these empty concepts really. It's whatever you want it to make it. [...] It's just a word. You can define and apply it in different ways. [...] Same as sustainability. Those big words they are kind of empty vessels and you put in them what [you want]. (Katherine, Women's Group member, 8.2.2016).

Second *resilience* participates in the constructive ambiguity *game* that is often times played among governments. This concept is similar to the abovementioned *boundary object*, or that of *flexible language* [19], but draws its roots from a different literature, that of international relations. In other words, ambiguity leads to greater leeway in implementation, because states end up circumventing obligations under other agreements and improve their negotiating positions in other ongoing processes [20], in [21]. *Resilience* is thus made ambiguous.

We not all have the same recipe for resilience. Each country has its own capacity. There's not one formula. It's such a broad concept. (USA representative, 13.12.2016).

Third, *resilience* can be seen as a snake biting its tail. By analyzing the Hyogo Framework for Action text (HFA), *resilience* appears on many occasions and is understood as equivalent to “building a culture of safety” or even “a culture of disaster prevention”. According to UNISDR, addressing “disaster risks” allows in turn “to manage and to reduce” them. Governments are thus encouraged to instill a set of means to stimulate a “culture of disaster resilience” and attain these by “developing and strengthening institutions”, “enhancing governance for disaster risk reduction”. Member states also need to use “innovation”, “education and knowledge” more specifically knowledge pertaining to “hazards and the physical, social, economics and environmental vulnerabilities to disasters” by “promoting the engagement of media and food security” and ensuring that all “new hospitals are built with a level of resilience”. Implementing these means fills the promise of a resilient outcome. Yet *resilience* also seems to be a means in itself. It is stated “disasters can be substantially reduced if people are informed and motivated towards a culture of disaster prevention and resilience”. For UNISDR, the goal (reduce disasters) is reached providing there is *resilience*. While simultaneously acting as a mean, a goal and an outcome, *resilience* is hardly dissociable.

Fourth, *resilience* never appears as a stand-alone concept. It is associated with various words and tied to major concepts used at the UN in contexts of natural disasters. In the HFA, for example, we encounter “disaster resilience”, “build a culture of safety and resilience”, “culture of disaster prevention and resilience”, “building resilience”. In the Sendai Framework (SF), we come across “educational resilience of persons”,

“to promote a culture of disaster prevention, resilience and responsible citizenship”, “economic, social, health and environmental resilience”, “disaster risk resilience”, “ensure resilience to shocks” and many more. In a context where *resilience* can at any time be juxtaposed to other concepts, it threatens the very definition and thus endorses vagueness.

Fifth, *resilience* contains within itself an irrevocable paradox; on the one hand *resilience* can only be attained by being creative [22] and on the other, UNISDR provides a framework. By framing and giving guidelines, we lose the fundamental component inbuilt in the *resilience* definition, namely that of creativity. In this sense again, a paradoxical statement leads to misconception and vagueness.

While UNISDR works toward reducing life-loss and limiting destructive outcomes, *resilience* does not appear as an operationalizable concept. The lack of a clear definition, which makes the concept persistently vague, hinders disaster risk reduction operationalization at headquarters as well as in the field. This having been said, even though these characteristics may be perceived as taking a toll on the worldwide programs, its vagueness seems to have a purpose. Further outlooks give cues on how *resilience* favors the organization’s legitimacy.

### 11.3.2 *Resilience as a Legitimizing Tool*

While *resilience’s* vagueness appears when confronting views on meaning and definition, other characteristics come to light. Here, I analyze the characteristics that convey a concept as a vector for an organization’s sustainability.

Firstly, by acting as a non-controversial concept, *resilience* fosters international consensus within negotiation rooms as delegates express their desire to limit natural disaster impacts. The topic does not trigger salient political debate. On the contrary, in negotiation sessions with Member states, *resilience* is hardly discussed. Its definition<sup>4</sup> is a result of UNISDR’s suggestion and not further discussed.

[Resilience] is a word, I would say, yes, we all want to be resilient. It’s like we all want to be sustainable (Marie, UNISDR staff, 9.02.2016).

Secondly, over the years, *resilience* turned into the positive outlook of *vulnerability*. If vulnerability gives the impression of a defined and static state — difficult to grow out of — *resilience* hints communities can work toward becoming stronger and more robust. *Resilience* thus turns into a driving force and a goal to reach, by providing a window of opportunity for change.

[Resilience] is good in many ways because it allows us to focus less on vulnerability particularly in women and other gender groups and more on the positive and the capacities and capabilities etc. So it has value for me in that way because it should emphasize the positive

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<sup>4</sup>“The ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate to and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions” (SF, 2015).

and how do you reach that positive stage rather than always focusing on the negative and the poor women. (Ellen, Women's Group member, 8.02.2016).

Thirdly, *resilience* comes across as an up-to-date word. *Resilience*, as a relatively new concept, emanates from other trendy concepts used earlier in the UN context. Indeed by taking on *resilience* and making it a central concept in a worldwide program, UNISDR jumps on the bandwagon in order to stay tuned with current jargon.

Resilience is a good word just like sustainability is a good word. It's just like, in these international contexts, you need to change the terminology to keep it current, but really is reflecting many of the same things. So I still say disaster mitigation, but that's part of disaster risk reduction and that's part of... you know some people... I would write some documents where I would use some other terms, [such as disaster mitigation and I would be told] NO, [...] it is Disaster Risk Reduction. I was like "excuse me, I've been around!" (Cassandra, Women's Group member, 11.02.2016).

Finally, if we take a closer look into the late 2014, early 2015 negotiations in the run-up to the World Conference, *resilience* was hijacked by other international considerations. Even though Civil society strived to talk about disaster resilience and its practical considerations, Member states differed from the objective and raised politically charged issues. *Resilience* became of peripheral importance. It is the issues around "common but differentiated responsibility" (CBDR), "people living under the occupation", "technology transfer" that States inevitably raised causing lengthy negotiations. Nevertheless, it did not stop UNISDR from delivering a framework due to cover a time span of 15 years (2015–2030).

## 11.4 Conclusion

To conclude, integrating the *resilience* concept at the UN is not a naive undertaking. Rather it portrays an ideology, a vision of the world by using a certain language [23] namely that of making a world a better and safer place. While the initial motive seems to contribute to the reduction of disaster risk, it seems to overall serve a UN program. In particular, it helps in maintaining the organization's role and relevance regardless of the lack of operationalization. In this way, I explored the characteristics of *resilience* in international organizations, with a specific focus on the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction.

First, I presented five characteristics at the heart of the limits to operationalize *resilience*. Some of them stem from concepts in the literature (i.e. *boundary object*, *constructive ambiguity*, *flexible language*), others I developed for the purpose of this chapter (i.e. *a snake biting its tail*, *associated concept*, *non-controversial concept*). I showed how a vague definition creates challenges for future operationalization processes. Second, I put forward the characteristics, which play in favor of the organization's sustainability. Introducing a non-controversial concept allows to gather States, Civil society and various UN organizations to focus on how to positively impact consequences of disasters.

In this sense, studying the concept of *resilience*, in light of the actors at play, in a UN agency, accounts for the way issues are raised, the jargon updated and vagueness indispensable to keep the institution running. Even though *resilience* might come across as being a somewhat useless “empty vessel”, it not only federates various bodies around one topic, but remains fundamental in that it allows a “sense of direction” in international negotiations.

This is my view, but it’s important to have a concept in order to have a direction even if it’s blurry. Measuring it or at least trying to do so is a good sign. It shows that we are trying to go in that direction. I am a supporter of it. (George, UNISDR staff, 18.10.2016)

With this in mind, the chapter argues that such a concept participates not only in addressing the complexity of disasters and risk, but also plays a role in legitimizing the organization’s role even in light of a lack of operationalizable targets. *Resilience* thus participates in legitimizing UNISDR’s role as the main UN program for disaster coordination.

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