

# Adaptation or paradigm shift? An interpretation of resilience through the lens of policy change

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Most literature on peacebuilding has been characterized by the intention to set resilience as an alternative to liberal peace or as a reproduction of it, thus conflating different types of policy development into a single dependent variable, whereby policy change happened or not. The central aim of the article is to clarify the type of change represented by the resilience approach. Evidence seems to show that resilience is an adaptation of the instruments and settings that leaves the overall goals of the policy unaltered. The second aim of the article is to suggest a move away from current monolithic interpretations, providing insights into how resilience can be saved from itself. The paper is not meant to provide exhaustive answers or indisputable empirical findings, but rather to shed light on the actual limitations of research in peacebuilding, and to provide some cues for future studies on how peace practice might change.

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## Introduction

Over the past decade, faith in (liberal) peacebuilding eroded significantly because many of the interventions undertaken in the previous period, particularly those in the Western Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa regions, were deemed ineffective [46]. In response, international actors undertook a comprehensive reform of the field. The new

peacebuilding strategy focuses on the concept of resilience, which recognizes the inherent complexity of post-conflict scenarios and the need to involve local actors, with an emphasis on adaptability and reflexivity.

Stemming from ecology and engineering and then spreading across all social sciences, resilience is understood in terms of multiplicity and in a multidimensional way. While this feature shapes resilience as a ubiquitous term, it also contributes to its vagueness and fostered different interpretations of the kind of change it (actually) entailed. The scholarly debate has therefore indulged in a rather problematic interpretation of the developments brought about by the resilience approach, conflating different levels of change into a single dependent variable, whether policy change happened or not [6].

The first part of the article aims to understand what type of change is outlined in the literature, as well as to deduce from available analyses what type of change can actually be observed in practice. The argument is twofold: on the one hand, I contend that the alternative is not so much between change or the total absence of it, but rather between change as an *adaptation* or change as a *paradigm shift*; on the other, I claim that the uncertainty regarding implementation modalities in different contexts and a lack of a radical rethinking of peacebuilding as a whole, results in resilience as an adaptation of the liberal model rather than a radical break with the past.

In light of this, in the second part of the article, I attempt to find an answer to the question of whether resilience is useless. I argue that the linkage to the liberal ideological legacy prevents offering a counterhegemonic alternative. However, a radical openness to alterity and plurality may serve as a way to save resilience from itself. In the final section, I draw my conclusions.

## The multiplicity of resilience in literature: ambivalences and paradoxes

The rise of resilience in the field of peacebuilding reflects a loss of faith in the ability of modernist-linear approaches to deal with conflict scenarios. The reference to a 'post' modern world made explicit in many definitions of the concept highlights the insufficiencies of the traditional liberal knowledge system and the need to provide a radical change in the way we think about peace practice [33]. Resilience has been defined as the ability of an individual, household,

community, country, or region to withstand, adapt, and quickly recover from stresses and shocks [21]. In this sense, current definitions of the concept do not fall far from its original connotation, as in ecology and engineering<sup>3</sup>, which focuses on ‘bouncing back’ and on the importance of restoring normalcy after facing a shock [35]<sup>4</sup>. The ecologist lens, in particular, remains prevalent in the conceptualization of the Anthropocene, depicted as an era of great uncertainty in which human action is constricted by unpredictable results [7,50,43]. Thus, the Anthropocene portrays a post-human scenario, in which the political subject has lost his transformative power and ‘resilience’ operates as a *lingua franca* of risk, preparedness, and survivability to drive him through a state of perpetual insecurity [20]. Accordingly, nonhuman factors acquired greater relevance in peace and conflict studies, as evidenced by the emergence of *environmental peacebuilding* as a new discipline<sup>5</sup>, which links ecological (in)security to the struggle of creating broader forms of peace [19]. Thus, environmental peacebuilding is one of the most relevant and controversial outcomes of the resilience approach, as it sees the environment as something of which humans are both shaping actors and weaponless spectators, and therefore, as both a threat multiplier and a source of empowerment that in either case must be ‘managed’ primarily through technical preparedness [5,27].

The concept of resilience was first applied at the United Nations (UN) level, in the *Hyogo Framework for Action* in 2005 [57], and at the European Union (EU) level, in the *European Report on Development* (2009 [58]). Stemming from the field of Disaster Risk Reduction, both documents sanctioned the connection between disaster, sustainability, and development policies in addressing the challenge of ‘fragility’ [42]. The concept has been fully institutionalized internationally in 2015/2016 with the adoption of the ‘sustaining peace’ concept<sup>6</sup> by the United Nations, and with the ratification of the *EU Global Strategy* (2016 [59]), turning resilience into the cornerstone of the new international strategy for conflict-prone countries [52], which acknowledges that peacebuilding is a political activity that must avoid templates, formulas, and one-size-fits-all solutions [14–16]. According to prevalent literature in the field, a resilience-based approach works along ‘processes and dynamics’ instead of privileging short-term stability; it gives increased emphasis to the local context, thus calling for a less active interference and for a more passive mode

of management; and it fosters greater centrality on the role of the society vis-à-vis the state [42]<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, resilience has also resulted in a new realm of bureaucratic practices, replacing direct engagement with a type of governance that operates from a distance through monitoring, benchmarking, and peer review [30]<sup>8</sup>.

Political actors explicitly refer to the concept of ‘policy change’ when presenting resilience as a cutting-edge concept and as a manifestation of a ‘pragmatic turn’ in peace practice [15]. However, while the fact that peacebuilding is at the center of a reform process is undeniable [36], it is nevertheless crucial to reflect on its actual scope [41], as not all changes are relevant. The main literature on the topic insists on the idea that policy change is a complex process, far from automatic, and shaped by both ideational and material factors [26,25,34,11]. Policy changes can be placed on a continuum indicating the magnitude of the shift from minor adjustment changes, through both program and goal changes, to fundamental changes in the overall policy orientation. Thus, not distinguishing between different orders of change [25] leads to improperly juxtaposing distinct types of policy development [6]. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that *adaptation* and *paradigm shift* are not the same [12]; whereas the former concept recalls *incrementalism* [37], and indicates normal policy-making processes oriented toward instrument recalibration or replacement, without questioning the general terms of a *policy paradigm*<sup>9</sup>; the latter concept refers to a radical change in policy discourse and policy goals [25].

According to Bargués and Schmidt [3], contemporary approaches seeking to foster resilience are characterized by the simultaneity of a paternalistic impetus and a fatalistic outlook. This friction outlines an ongoing tension between the drive for substantial change and the legacy of liberal peace [44,56]. Stemming from this intrinsic ambiguity, scholarly debate is split among the

<sup>3</sup> See Holling [28].

<sup>4</sup> Although still prevalent in the literature, the ‘bounce back’ notion has been criticized by certain literature because it “neither captures the changed reality nor encapsulates the new possibilities opened by the changes brought by a [shock]”, as it rather emphasizes a return to an initial position ([39], 418).

<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive literature review on *environmental peacebuilding* see Johnson et al. [29].

<sup>6</sup> UN, The challenge of sustaining peace (2015). A/69/968-S/2015/490.

<sup>7</sup> See also Biscop [4]; Balduino & Costantini [2]; Hajir et al. [24].

<sup>8</sup> A valuable attempt to translate the renewed attention on the locals, prompted by the resilience approach, into practice is notable in the adoption of the *everyday peace indicators* (EPI) by several IOs and NGOs working on peacebuilding (e.g. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Inter-American Foundation (IAF), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and United States Institute of Peace (USIP)). The EPI approach, designed by Pamina Firchow and Roger Mac Ginty, asks communities to build their own indicators to measure concepts such as peace, reconciliation, governance, and violent extremism. However, while EPI have been a step in the right direction, being an ex post evaluation of externally designed strategies, they run the risk of becoming a validation tool for international interventions, rather than a concrete means to promote local participation.

<sup>9</sup> According to Hall ([25], 279), a policy paradigm is “a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing”.

proponents of resilience as a move away from the liberal model [15] toward a new ‘adaptive’ and ‘reflexive peacebuilding’ [50]; and those who argue that although this normative shift is fresh, it did not lead to a re-definition of peacebuilding praxis [44]. Therefore, according to the literature, the alternative is not so much between change or the absence of it, but rather between change as *adaptation* or a *paradigm shift* [36].

The ‘multiplicity’ of the resilience concept [32,51] opened the door to a variety of interpretations, whereby authors who saw the emergence of the concept as a paradigm shift tended to agree in interpreting resilience as *self-determination*, while those who saw the concept as an adaptation of liberal peace, interpreted resilience as *self-responsibility* [9].

Understanding *resilience as self-determination* directs attention to the opportunities and new possibilities for transformation presented to (local) political actors in conditions of uncertainty and complexity [31]. For this strand of literature, the resilience approach reconfigures international intervention toward bottom-up and inclusive initiatives, resurfacing agency in terms of making (constant) changes in inner life through learning from exposure to contingencies [13,49].

Understanding *resilience as self-responsibility* gives centrality to the question of power, portraying the new approach as a continuation of neoliberal forms of governance [30]. According to Randazzo and Torrent [45], neoliberal reasoning starts from an evolutionary, complex ontology of social interactions and social emergence. According to these authors, this type of discourse fits well with the current resilience-based approach. Critics have also suggested that the approach reflects an enthusiasm for perpetuating the status quo [8,24,48], whereby inclusion has been led by the motivation to improve the efficiency and to avoid charges of neocolonialism, rather than by the willingness to provide instruments for (real) emancipation [10,54,24,47].

Beyond the attention given to the topic by both political actors and the literature, an examination of the sources revealed that they focused more on the ontological (or ideational) component of resilience, namely, its guiding principles, stated goals, and theories of change; rather than on the methodological (or practical) component, that is, policy instruments and implementation strategies<sup>10</sup>. Thus, “*although resilience concepts are increasingly accepted and applied by a multitude of actors and stakeholders,*

*uncertainty remains regarding implementation modalities in different contexts*” [6,22].

Owing to space constraints, an empirical assessment of the actual patterns of change fostered by the resilience approach is beyond the scope of this paper. However, recent literature has already provided some analysis, highlighting how international organizations and governmental agencies’ resilience strategies are hardly groundbreaking [30,2,3]<sup>11</sup>. So far, these strategies have been included in development cooperation and humanitarian assistance programs, ranging from emergency response to the improvement of public services, thus not differing from general postcrisis assistance measures. Being so, although further research is required to confirm this preliminary finding, the resilience approach would reflect a process of adaptation that does not alter the core values and goals of the main liberal paradigm [36].

### **Beyond resilience. Peace-facilitation through local worldviews**

*Europe is a garden. The rest of the world is a jungle, and the jungle could invade the garden*<sup>12</sup>.

On the one hand, scholarly debate seems to be at a dead-end, as resilience is either seen as a new paradigmatic solution to international interventions, conflicts, and crises, or as a meaningless and useless governmental buzzword [32]. On the other, international players are quite confused about how to transform this concept into practice failing to provide a concrete alternative to the old liberal script and prevent imperialistic claims. Thus, is resilience pointless? To answer this question, I again turn to the literature.

A recent line of research has argued that, while recognizing its limitations, it seems important not to dismiss resilience altogether [24], acknowledging its inventive force for the elaboration of a different future [13]. Besides the laudable effort to go beyond a ‘critique-without-alternative’ [55], these authors proceed from the arguable assumption that ‘resilience’ is a neutral concept that can bring about both positive and negative outcomes [23]. On this point, a group of researchers have (rightly) suggested that the concept is rooted in colonialist-thinking as it is categorically assumed to define a range of people (i.e. locals) despite the considerable differences among them. According to this view, locals are expected to adapt, be flexible, and adjust to any situation [38]. These scholars are disputing the

<sup>10</sup> According to Barguès and Schmidt ([3], 209), resilience “*it is better understood as a guiding philosophy and policy ideal rather than a tangible goal or outcome of international intervention*”.

<sup>11</sup> Some concrete examples of resilience-building are detailed in ECHO’s factsheets (2016). See: [https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/thematic/EU\\_building\\_resilience\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/thematic/EU_building_resilience_en.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security, at the inauguration of the new European Diplomatic Academy in Bruges, Belgium. 17 October 2022.

assumptions at play in hegemonic policy circles [8], calling for a valorization of ‘Epistemologies of the South’ [17,18]. In fact, non-Western thinking has produced similar accounts of resilience, regarding the relational condition of the human and its environment [53], found, for example, in the concept of *Ubuntu* for sub-Saharan peoples [40], and the concept of *Sumak Kawsay* for Andean peoples [1].

In conclusion, resilience is not a neutral concept, rather, it is largely Western-centric as it actively draws from Eurocentric philosophy [33,53]; however, its emancipatory potential, found in the shift toward contingency and the everyday, can still be actuated if the concept is read not through a Eurocentric lens but through local concepts and categories [8]. Thus, core emancipatory features of resilience could be saved by relying on Southern (subaltern) knowledge that is built on direct action and participation, and “*strengthens autonomy, decentralization, and horizontality as well as challenges all structural forms of domination*” [18,47].

## Conclusions

On the basis of a review of the literature in the field of peacebuilding and a preliminary analysis of primary sources, I showed that the ‘multiplicity’ of the resilience concept has led to different interpretations among authors, split between those who claim that we are witnessing a move toward a post-liberal peace, and those who assert that resilience is nothing more than an updated tool of neoliberal governance. However, while there seems to be a degree of consensus on which are the ontological features of resilience, less attention has been paid to explain what resilience-building means in practice. Currently available analyses reveal how international actors, when faced with uncertainty, prefer to update standard procedures and old liberal scripts.

While ‘resilience’ reveals emancipatory potential in its growing focus on local actors and dynamics, it is necessarily constrained by its linkage to Western outlook and liberal tenets, configuring a process of adaptation and not a paradigmatic shift, which instead represents a radical break with the established order. Future research should investigate more on the causes behind what seems to be a pathological path dependency of international actors toward liberal peace, and abandon the reluctance to theorize alternative visions, fostering greater openness toward subaltern thought and knowledge from the Global South.

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## Data Availability

No data were used for the research described in the article.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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## 6 Resilience and Peace

Through a reflection upon the limited results of the United Nations in securing lasting peace in war-torn scenarios, the article critically engages with three debates on contemporary peacebuilding literature: the inclusion of 'the locals', the achievement of an organisational system-wide coherence and the agential condition of peacebuilding actors.

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