

<http://www.urbanresilienceresearch.net/2016/04/20/how-resilient-is-resilience>  
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### **How resilient is resilience?** Ilan Kelman, University College London

So much has been written about 'resilience' that it could mean almost anything. How useful (or not) is resilience for people affected by development concerns such as disaster risk, including climate change challenges and opportunities?

Let's head out to an affected community. After all, they need resilience and I can provide that. Let's gather them together to listen to me.

First, I must define the word. In doing so, I alienate those who disagree with my definition. I disaffect even more who do not speak English or any language in which the word 'resilience', and the cultural construct of it, exists.

Having turned off a large proportion of those whom I am here to help, I proceed with popular interpretations of implementing resilience. Popular, at least, within certain, narrow, academic confines.

I launch into detailed expostulations of panarchy, consilience (is no one pro-silience?), adaptive capacity, integral theory, social-ecological systems, and transformation--followed by the many limitations and numerous criticisms of those terms. People wander off, back to their fishing, crops, and livestock. They post on facebook and twitter that they do not understand what 'resilience' means or achieves, nor what exactly I am doing in their community.

Confound it, now what? Did none of THESE people read my papers? Don't THEY realise how important I am, I mean, how important my work is? Now what?

Unfortunately, nothing to do except to fish with them and join them in the fields. I might even be forced to learn some of the local language and culture, to glean a sense of their needs and perspectives.

I learn that the school destroyed by the landslide was sited there because a rich person from the capital (with a doctorate in development studies) funded it, insisting that their own land be used as part of their generous gift. I see that the hazard map in the town hall was altered so that the land owned by the mayor's friends, now suffering from inundated houses, would not lose value or be zoned differently.

I would blame my observations on local culture, typical corruption, and different standards. I realise that the situation here mirrors political machinations back home.

Yet the people manage. They build back the school away from the slopes (is that build back better?). They re-house those who lost homes to floods (but why not the pre-disaster homeless?). They still earn income and put food on the table, albeit less than before.

They are poor and they lost a lot, but they bounced back to normal. They smile at me and seem happy. Perhaps I should transfer this resilience to my own community where a bunch of whiners always wants someone to do something for them.

I am soon told that continuing the daily routine, despite having lost half their family and half their income, is not so much resilience, but necessity. They are hungry each day and do not wish to lose more of their family. They know the value of education, so they need a school.

After fishing, farming, office work, and other jobs, they put in a few hours of reconstruction each evening, because no one turned up to assist. They buy building materials with loans, savings, and remittances because over half the relief supplies and donations were siphoned off before arriving.

They are exhausted, frustrated, and grieving. They deal with it because they have to. Is that resilience? They have little time to reply to my emails and online survey asking them.

Numerous good practice examples exist, far different from the scenario here. Yet in all our abstruse vocabulary, erudite debates, and reams of publications, what is concealed or bypassed by resilience? Our research agenda must investigate this question and more.

Resilience for what/whom, to what/whom, of what/whom? Who sets the agenda, who acts or is forced to act on the agenda, who reaps the rewards, and who pays the costs?

We must research these questions before communities suffer, asking the people what they seek, what roles resilience does and does not play, and how meaningful or meaningless the academic discourses are. It is not about dictating use or avoidance of 'resilience', but about discovering when it does and does not contribute alongside the helpful and damaging roles of academia--including for our own communities, not just for those 'others'.

'Resilience' has been moulded to be a powerful discourse. Writing in plain English and dealing with real people, this discourse does not seem to be particularly resilient when confronted by reality. Our research agenda should put first reality and people.

### **Biography**

Ilan Kelman <http://www.ilankelman.org> and Twitter [@IlanKelman](https://twitter.com/IlanKelman) is a Reader in Risk, Resilience and Global Health at University College London.

### **Relevant work**

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