Panel Discussion: *From Disaster Risk Reduction to Comprehensive Resilience – Towards a Common Understanding,*
Thursday 23rd June 2011, London, UK

1. Foreword

With 373 disasters recorded globally in 2010 alone[1], it is imperative for humanitarian and development actors to focus attention and energy on building the comprehensive resilience of communities to the multiple shocks and hazards they face. Recent events in the sector, including the Global Platform for DRR 2011, and the release of key documents such as the *Humanitarian Emergency Response Review*[2], have echoed calls for a deeper discussion of

Photo: Chair, Marcus Oxley, addresses the audience

DRR and resilience, and this panel event responded to a growing appetite for this conversation. ActionAid has a long engagement in the VOICE Disaster Risk Reduction Working Group, which brings together NGOs from different EU countries to share information and engage in collective advocacy on DRR issues to EU institutions. This event was organised alongside the VOICE DRR Working Group meeting hosted by ActionAid in June, and brought together a wide range of actors to discuss DRR and resilience. As the crisis in East Africa unfolds and escalates, we are poignantly reminded of the vulnerability of those living in poverty, and their susceptibility to threats and hazards. Unfortunately I had to give my apologies and was unable to attend the event, but I hope you will join me in reflecting on this report and considering together as a sector how we can take this forward.

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2. Background

On 23rd June 2011, ActionAid and VOICE jointly held a panel discussion on Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and its relationship with building comprehensive resilience, with the aim of moving towards a common understanding of this increasingly prominent concept. The event was organised in light of growing recognition within the sector that, while reducing the risks of disasters makes sense on both economic[3] and humanitarian grounds, natural disasters are just one of many factors driving vulnerability – including social, political, economic and cultural shocks and hazards. Therefore, building resilience in a holistic way has become increasingly central in humanitarian discourse. However, questions remain as to what is meant by comprehensive resilience; its implications for practice across a variety of contexts; and to what extent it moves us beyond DRR. To read the full background note, please click here.

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[1] Both 'natural' and man-made: Centre for Research on Epidemiology of Disasters, http://www.cred.be/
[2] The *Humanitarian Emergency Response Review* (HERR) was an independent review, led by Lord Paddy Ashdown, of the way the UK Government responds to humanitarian emergencies. The full review can be read here: http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/publications1/HERR.pdf?epslanguage=en
[3] For every USD 1 invested in risk reduction, up to USD 7 is saved in disaster response: Asian Development Bank (ADB), Action Plan for implementing ADB's Disaster Emergency Action Plan, 2008: 7-8

The event was well attended by representatives from NGOs and academic institutions, as well as networks and donors. The panel of expert speakers comprised: **John Abuya** (International Thematic Programmes Manager, ActionAid International); **Mags Bird** (Programme Coordinator, VOICE); **Tim Waites** (Humanitarian and Disaster Reduction Policy Advisor, CHASE, DFID) and **Cynthia Gaigals** (Manager of the Peacebuilding Issues Programme, International Alert). The discussion was chaired by **Marcus Oxley** (Founding Chair of the Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction).

3. Introduction

Richard Miller, Executive Director of ActionAid UK and ActionAid's International Director for Human Security, kicked off the event by welcoming all attendees on behalf of ActionAid and VOICE, and setting the context of the discussion. Richard highlighted the very topical nature of the discussion in light of recent developments in the humanitarian sector, and the importance of understanding the concepts we use and how they work in practice in a sector where words go in and out of fashion.

The Chair of the discussion, Marcus Oxley, who has more than 20 years experience in the disaster risk management sector, then gave his insights and introduced the panellists (Marcus' PowerPoint presentation can be viewed here*):*

- There are some common themes in policy and practice around disasters, environmental degradation and poverty as we move from the international to the local level. In each case, the idea is that an international framework which is not legally binding, such as the Hyogo Framework for Action or the MDGs, is translated into national level policy and legislation, which in turn feeds into local community-based action plans. However, at the household level, people do not make the distinctions that experts do. Therefore, the institutional architecture is at odds with day to day experience at grassroots level.
- In DRR, then, there is a huge gap between international and national level policy on the one hand, and local level resources, capacity and action on the other – and therefore there is no change at local level. This gap needs to be closed. In fact, indicators show that disaster losses are increasing.   Rebranding activities (e.g. 'DRR' as 'CCA' (Climate Change Adaptation)) in response to changes in funding available does nothing to address this underlying systematic issue: the gap between policy and local level action.
- We find the same gap with poverty, and there is considerable overlap: 90% of people affected by disasters live in poor countries, and 90% of disasters are climate related.
- A community-based common resilience framework could facilitate convergence. The challenge is agreeing on what such a framework would look like at the local level, and how we can move towards one.

4. Panel presentations

a. John Abuya: The Case for Building Comprehensive Resilience

John set the tone of the discussion by sharing practical examples of ActionAid's DRR initiatives, which have informed discussions of resilience within ActionAid. These examples demonstrate the need for a comprehensive approach to resilience. For John's full presentation, click here.

- ActionAid's flagship Disaster Risk Reduction through Schools (DRRS) programme in 9 countries focused on both improving safety *in* schools, and working *through* schools, using education and curriculum to build a culture of safety, leading to social change within communities.
- Working with communities across 15 countries through both DRRS and DIPECHO programmes, a key approach was the use of comprehensive participatory vulnerability analysis, facilitating communities to identify the hazards they face, and mobilising them to address these risks.

- Through these activities, ActionAid realised that communities need to engage with local and national governments – to influence priorities, plans and strategies.
- ActionAid's programmes are also tackling the impacts of climate change, e.g. pastoralists adapting their livelihoods.
- ActionAid has also engaged in community-led conflict risk reduction work in 7 countries in Africa, empowering women, and mobilising them with federations of women lawyers, to demand justice and the fulfilment of their rights, thereby building their resilience to fragile and conflict-affected contexts.
- Finally, ActionAid has worked to build institutional capacity to reduce risks facing communities – for example, emergency fire services in Bangladesh.
- The key learning from all these examples is that communities are facing multiple risks and hazards – not only related to climate change, but also social, economic, political, etc. hazards. This calls for a comprehensive resilience approach.

b. Tim Waites: A perspective from DFID

Tim presented insights from DFID's current thinking around the emerging concept of resilience. With experience in livelihoods, the humanitarian sector and particularly food security, Tim addressed the potential and benefits of converging approaches.

- *The Humanitarian Emergency Response Review* (HERR) has put a spotlight on the concept of resilience, and presents an opportunity for deeper exploration of the concept.
- DFID has been active in DRR circles for nearly 10 years, for example:
  - o 2005 commitment to spending 10% of disaster relief funds on initiatives to reduce the impact of disasters
  - o 2006 'Reducing Disaster Risks' policy – much of which is still relevant today.
  - o Supporting multilaterals to mainstream/integrate DRR and Disaster Risk Management (DRM) into national plans
  - o Funded UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) at international level and Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR) at national level.
  - o Supported five NGOs to do work on community-level DRR (Click here for information).
  - o DFID has stressed the importance of: linking DRR, humanitarian and development work; mainstreaming and community-level action.
- In other areas of DFID, there is ongoing work on food security, social protection, cash transfers, climate change adaptation and early warning systems, which have all fed into the debate on resilience through the struggle for convergence.
- DFID has also funded consortiums: Strengthening Climate Resilience (SCR) looking at climate-smart DRM, and the Africa Climate Change Resilience Alliance (ACCRA) looking into issues of DRR, climate change, sustainable livelihoods and social protection. These initiatives are also feeding into the analysis.

The place of resilience in the HERR
- The HERR quickly became a discourse on future emergencies, and the idea of resilience was championed – being 1 of 7 key messages.
- While DRR got a knock in the HERR, because the 10% policy was regarded as backward looking and not well integrated into either development or humanitarian thinking, resilience was seen as a positive and forward looking concept – answering to risk and vulnerability and focused on positive impacts and outcomes.
- In DFID's response to the HERR, resilience has been welcomed by the minister, and DFID is now in the process of developing policies and strategies. There is a need to do so quickly, rather than dwelling on definitions; resilience to disasters needs to remain a broad concept. DFID will seek to work with existing conceptual frameworks.

- During a retreat with the humanitarian staff, key gaps were highlighted, including how links are made with conflict and security.
- DFID will invest in building resilience in 6 self-selected countries: Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nepal and Bangladesh, and will champion the development of regional resilience plans in the Caribbean and the Sahel.
- DFID is currently considering an uplift of funding on resilience, and is looking at how to mainstream resilience across DFID's work, including in economic growth.
- Resilience will be important alongside anticipation and innovation; DFID is moving ahead and needs fresh thinking and partnerships, which is a key place to start. However, within DFID it is felt that the work on resilience will come together at the country office level, where viewing initiatives, policies and programmes through a resilience lens is particularly useful.

c. Mags Bird: EU NGO network and Policy Perspective
Mags brought an EU NGO network and policy perspective to the debate, focusing on the challenges facing the NGO sector in developing resilience-based approaches, and the need for NGOs to address these challenges and be mindful of current donor considerations:

- VOICE represents European humanitarian NGOs to EU institutions and is a key interlocutor between them. DRR is one thematic aspect of VOICE activities, in keeping with the network's aim of facilitating collective NGO action to influence policy development. VOICE also advocates strongly for the implementation of independent humanitarian action
- Some positive themes in the European landscape can facilitate a focus on resilience: (1) ECHO's reputation as a need-based donor, focusing on forgotten as well as immediate crises; (2) European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid, with the mid-term review last year highlighting the link between DRR, rehabilitation and development as in need of more attention.

Challenges for NGOs in developing a resilience-based approach:
- European institutions and member states are more focused on humanitarian response than on building resilience. Disaster response includes many actors: the EC's recent communication *Towards a stronger European disaster response: the role of civil protection and humanitarian assistance* focused largely on civil protection and the use of military and other non-traditional humanitarian actors, and did not include much mention of NGOs
- Pressures of visibility and value for money mean that resilience is a difficult concept to generate interest around. These challenges are heightened by funding pressures, especially on the humanitarian budget as discussions of the next multi-year EU budget commence.
- Conversations about prevention and preparedness within and outside Europe involve different interlocutors and actors. This can make it difficult to find a common language.
- The EU has a complex institutional set-up which is currently in a process of institutional change – including EuropeAid and DG DevCo. Currently it is lacking a DRR focal point, which makes a conceptual conversation more challenging. This conversation continues to come from a humanitarian perspective, but needs to be expanded across the board. Furthermore, from the European perspective, value for money is an unavoidable conversation.

NGOs need to:
- Bear in mind that DRR is a complex concept and sector – and comprehensive resilience even more so – which should encompass themes currently covered in different 'silos'. It may therefore be difficult to make it attractive to donors and to find a common language.
- Be aware of the proliferation of actors in the humanitarian arena, including the private sector, and consider who may need to be involved in the conversation around a comprehensive resilience approach in light of this.
- Demonstrate effective and innovative partnerships to get things done, and to demonstrate how we are breaking out of our own silos.

- Demonstrate the added value of NGOs in building resilience, and learn from past difficulties (e.g. the challenge of operationalising LRRD).

d. Cynthia Gaigals: Citizen Resilience and Conflict Sensitivity
Cynthia explored community resilience in contexts of conflict and fragility. She stressed the need to be sensitive to and aware of the inevitable interaction between any agency and the context in which it is working, and highlighted the need to build community resilience by taking decisions close to affected communities. [Click here](#) for Cynthia's presentation.

- Cynthia began with a [powerful series of photographs](#) showing the ubiquity of the UN in Liberia, bringing to light issues of local police disempowerment, lack of country capacity, and the need to build the institutions and resilience of Liberian communities. This also demonstrated the two-way relation and interaction between any agency and the context in which it is working, even when steps are taken to mitigate risks.
- International Alert undertakes work to understand conflict and its causes. One tool is the 'Violence Triangle', which can be used to look below the surface to analyse and understand, for example, the issue of sexual violence in Burundi. The triangle analyses underlying causes, including attitudinal, institutional and structural values and causes of violence. It is difficult to know where to start – and especially hard to tackle attitudes – so in the field of international development we tend to start by examining and working on structures.
- When thinking about resilience, we can consider how it could be included in this triangle. For example, we can look at what resilience-related behaviours women exhibit. Resilience can be seen in the personal but also in the political and other spheres.
- There are also links to work on climate change. An International Alert publication: *A Climate of Conflict,* examines questions around whether climate change is causing conflict. In Nepal, International Alert found that poor local governance with incompatible laws were affecting people at local level, who were forced to develop new coping mechanisms.
- The amount of funding becoming available for Climate Change Adaptation (CCA) also brings with it risks and could have negative effects unless decisions around building resilience are taken close to affected communities. Therefore, a framework which ensures that resilience at the local level is not undermined is needed.

5. Discussion
The Chair then invited questions, comments and suggestions from the floor. A variety of points were raised and discussed, and provided food for thought for future discussion and action. Some of the questions, comments and responses included:

A. As a lead author for the IPCC report, looking at the relationship between DRR and CCA through a resilience lens, it is good to see that the experience of the panellists reflects findings from the academic literature. The report sees resilience as a broad concept, using a working definition which includes capacity to anticipate, respond, recover, cope, marshal existing resources and learn, with the latter playing a significant role. Whereas DRR is seen as delivering with regard to where we are now, CCA is viewed as anticipating the future. The concluding chapter addresses transformational pathways for resilience. (Mark Pelling, King's College London)

B. Resilience is a very useful and powerful concept for bringing people together who would not usually be round the same table, and there is a strategic value in not defining the concept too rigidly. However, when you start moving from analysis to action, the lack of a clear definition can be a problem, as different communities may have conflicting understandings of resilience, and we need to ask 'resilience to what'? There may be different outcomes and actions

according to different understandings of resilience. (Katie Harris, Institute of Development Studies)

- **Marcus:** *within the Global Network for Disaster Reduction, it is felt that good governance is a key factor for understanding resilience. In order to understand what resilience means, we also need to consider what we mean by development, and 2015 could be an opportunity to redefine this. Some suggestions for defining resilience include: flexibility, responsiveness, accountability and self-management. A resilient system would require close two-way communication with local experts who are involved in decision-making, and an enabling environment where autonomous adaptation can take place.*
- **Tim:** *during DFID's Humanitarian Retreat, we heard from a number of internal staff and external experts, and saw that there is huge diversity in the work already happening. Within DFID we are still developing learning and the meaning of resilience. One idea is that it is the acceptance of constant changes and shocks, with long-term change at different levels and coping mechanisms.*

C. It is important that any definition of resilience, however broad, encapsulates transformation out of poverty, rather than simply 'bouncing back'. How can we take this forward practically? (Debbie Hillier, Oxfam)
- **Tim:** *DFID is currently working on a paper to describe resilience. This could have definitions, but is more likely to include principles. Useful existing definitions/principles include: characteristics of resilient systems ([The Resilience Renaissance](#)); [UNISDR definition](#); DFID Ethiopia definition which talks of the capacity of households and communities to manage change, maintain or transform living standards in the face of shocks without compromising quality of life. Moving forward: the DFID HERR response commits to integrating resilience work into all 27 country offices by 2015. There is a need to place more responsibility at the country programme level and to build a culture of change.*

D. How does resilience differ from previous 'buzzwords' such as 'good governance' and 'sustainable livelihoods'? It could reflect funding changes from donors like DFID, but is this the only difference? (Joy Singhai, British Red Cross). We need to be clear about how much what we are doing is for our own benefit as a sector – in terms of understanding and communication – rather than benefitting communities on the ground. (Mark Butler, Tearfund)
- **Mark Pelling:** *a key difference seems to lie in the idea of responding to and adapting to uncertainty.*
- **Heloise Heyer** *(Care International UK): we should not underestimate the power of 'resilience' to bring different actors together, and the very shape-ability of the notion to trigger cross-sectoral thinking and dialogue.*

6. Conclusions and closing thoughts
The debate closed with some final thoughts from the panellists and the chair. The opportunity for future joint work around a common comprehensive resilience framework was left as an open proposition and food for thought:

John Abuya: The debate has raised many issues and shown that a variety of actors 'buy into' the concept of resilience – which has the power to bring together different actors to address drivers of risk and to look at building resilience in a comprehensive way. However, humanitarian space is crowded and donors are looking for convergence between funding streams. Perhaps we need a champion to bring perspectives together and move discussions forward.

Tim Waites: Resilience is a helpful tool, which brings together people from the livelihoods, DRR, conflict, food security communities, and focuses on the important output of resilience. There is an

appetite within DFID for continuing this discussion, and also there is a need to look for a global champion.

Mags Bird: We need to work on making resilience more 'attractive' to the wider public and donors, bearing in mind the power of civil society at home as well as abroad. Discussions around resilience and DRR are still largely a humanitarian driven conversation about development, and we must also consider the impact of these discussions on humanitarian principles, including independence.

Cynthia Gaigals: Conflict can often be a positive thing, and we need to think of resilience in terms of transformation. We need to think about how we can use opportunities to transition to a situation that is positive and more resilient.

Marcus Oxley: Often we find that many positive initiatives are essentially based simply on good development principles (e.g. work of Elinor Ostrom examining sustainable management of environmental commons by indigenous communities). We see this time and again across disciplines, which demonstrates the existence of core guiding principles based on common humanity, good governance and human rights.