

Resilience: from the general concept to the specific context of the Sahel

Key messages from the Dakar conference

20 years ago, in the context of the end of the Cold War, Groupe URD was created to work on LRRD (linking relief, rehabilitation and development). Over the two decades, we have also worked on other themes, such as supporting coping strategies, the quality of humanitarian action, the analysis of vulnerabilities and disaster prevention and preparedness. The idea of an action research project on resilience first emerged in 2008. In 2010, thanks to funding from the European Commission, work began with CARE Netherlands and the University of Wageningen's Disaster Studies Group on the interaction between Poverty Reduction (PR), Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Climate Change Adaptation (CCA). This led to the creation of the RESILIENCE project. But in addition to the intuition that it was important to study this interaction was also the idea that to work on these issues, it was also necessary to stimulate interaction between stakeholders, and notably between host nations and their civil societies, including the private sector, and also key European actors. Field visits were carried out in southern Ethiopia, in Kalimantan in Indonesia and on the strip between the Amazon and the Andes in Bolivia. Numerous events aimed at facilitating exchange were organised, both in the countries concerned and in Europe, educational films were produced and pedagogical tools were developed and made available to the humanitarian and development aid community, both in the North and the South.

The project culminated in the experience exchange workshop entitled "Resilience: from the general concept to the specific context of the Sahel". The objective was to finish the project in a region concerned by the subject, and where there was a constructive dynamic to carry the issue forward. The societies of the Sahel are amongst the most resilient societies that exist. But this resilience has been seriously weakened by a number of factors: demographic growth and the resulting pressure on resources and services, environmental degradation, with the over-exploitation of resources, urbanization, the effects of climate change, agro-climatic and economic crises, whose frequency and intensity are increasing, as well as the combined effects of structural adjustment policies and the opening of markets without protection, inter-community tension and conflicts which lead to population displacement. One of the indicators of this change is the high prevalence of global and severe acute malnutrition, despite prevention and emergency treatment programmes. There is an urgent need to take action.

Groupe URD was created in 1993 during a conference entitled, "The Urgent Need for Development". Today it would be "The Urgent Need for Resilience in the Sahel"

And action is possible!

At the sub-regional level there is a window of opportunity which should not be missed. The international community has never been as focused on issues related to resilience: the United Nations' Sahel Plan, the AGIR Sahel alliance led by regional institutions and donors, including the European Commission, programme changes within USAID and DFID, the perception of new issues at stake among NGOs and UN agencies, etc.

But, above all, there is an extremely favourable political context throughout the region. In Niger, Mauritania, Senegal, Chad and Burkina Faso, those in government have shown that they understand the issues at stake and that they are fully engaged in this area. The 3N initiative in

Niger¹, the EPEL initiative in Mauritania, the mobilisation of national budgetary resources in Chad and Senegal are signs that things are moving forward in the sub-region.

All these factors and the perception of a contextual emergency convinced us that the RESILIENCE project should end in the Sahel. This experience exchange workshop was a success, with more than 60 participants from 4 countries in the region (Senegal, Mauritania, Mali and Chad) and their Western partners. Among the participants, there were representatives of state institutions, UN agencies (regional and national offices), national and international NGOs and donors.

8 key messages related to 8 issues which emerged during these debates.

Key message N°1: Though resilience can appear to be a new fashion, or a new buzzword, the objective should be to make it a useful buzzword. The main issue is not semantic, but rather how to make this concept operational. As such, it is important to recognize that many of the programme ingredients which contribute to the objective of resilience existed before the emergence of the concept, such as the reduction of risks and vulnerabilities, improving response capacity, LRRD or work on climate change adaptation.

→ *Recognising that these ingredients already existed is essential to avoid creating resistance to the new concept and to facilitate future synergies.*

Key message N°2: Making individuals, families, communities, societies and institutions resilient requires in-depth analysis. We are dealing here with complex systems which have both the potential for progress and delaying forces, the capacity to innovate and reluctance to change which makes risk-taking more difficult. Analysis of these complex, diversified and changing systems needs to be detailed and action needs to be taken by a variety of actors, at different levels, in a variety of sectors and at different stages.

→ *Faced with this complexity, which needs to be grasped, there is no simple, all-in-one solution which can be applied everywhere. Quality analysis is needed and this needs to be made available to all the actors involved, including the governments and civil societies of the sub-region.*

Key message N°3: It is important to take into account all the factors which can strengthen or, on the contrary, reduce the resilience of the different components of the systems involved, and particularly the most vulnerable people who are the least able to make choices that will allow them to get out of this situation in the long term: children who are threatened by severe malnutrition.

¹ Nigerians Nourish Nigerians

- ***A specific range of programmes should concentrate on the most affected children in order to help them recover (nutritional programmes) and try to protect their family environment (social security net systems).***

Key message N°4: The creation or strengthening of social, agro-ecological and economic resilience cannot focus only on the most vulnerable people. Resilience has several different levels. Development strategies need to analyse risk factors in detail and take these into account.

- ***Recreate productive and economic forces in both rural and urban areas: job and wealth creation in urban centres and support for agriculture, livestock rearing and other income-generating activities in rural environments are essential in the mid to long term to build resilience as part of a strategy which does not only aim to maximize profits, but also reduce risks and promote social justice.***

Key message N°5: The diversified approach that should be put in place should take into account local risk management strategies, such as the use by farmers of varied types of seeds in the different parts of their agro-ecosystems and the strategies used by nomads based on their knowledge of pastureland and water points, etc. Detailed analysis of needs and issues should be carried out and shared. This should take into account both endogenous and modern knowledge so that local risk management strategies can be built upon.

- ***Multi-sector strategies which support agricultural, pastoral and urban dynamics should be defined and adapted to the different scales of action, from the central to the local, and should involve the different stakeholders concerned at each level.***

Key message N°6: Though the humanitarian approach is focused on people's needs and often is a little removed from the state, supporting the different facets of resilience is achieved to a great extent by building the capacity of states both at central and local levels. But giving civil society the means and capacity to analyse their problems, identify local solutions and, if need be, negotiate additional support with the state and international organisations, is also essential.

- ***In order to build resilience on different levels of society, the important role of states and civil societies needs to be recognised, and strategies and means of supporting these two categories of actors need to be defined.***

Key message N°7: There is no simple, quick and cheap solution. The emergence of the concept and the interest that it has aroused are due to the failure of numerous development programmes and the recurring need for large-scale humanitarian operations. The different issues related to the resilience concept show that by working differently and bringing together different fields of intervention that are often disconnected, it should be possible to improve this situation.

- ***The resilience concept brings a new approach to the idea of interaction between relief and development, both before and after crises. However, it is important to be aware that the construction, or rather the re-construction, of resilience will require long-term investment and commitment. This does not necessarily mean a lot of***

additional funds, but rather the reorganisation of aid architecture and funding methods.

Key message N°8: Due to the enthusiasm for the subject of resilience and the resources that are going to be allocated/re-allocated to this approach, the question of evaluation and measuring its effects/impacts will be raised very soon. Here again, there is no simple, fast and cheap solution because the complexity of the process, the difficulties of attribution and the diversity of contexts makes the choice of factors to measure and the methods for doing this significantly more complex. It is nevertheless essential to tackle this question.

→ *Reflection is needed about the main issues, methods, predictable limits and less predictable limits which will be involved in making the concept of resilience operational.*

In conclusion – For Groupe URD, this conference, which took place in its 20th anniversary year, represents the foundation of a new commitment. The RESILIENCE project, which is now coming to an end, produced a number of tools which are available to organizations at www.reachingresilience.org and allowed work topics and methods to be defined which now need to be applied to the realities of the Sahelian Strip.

→ **Groupe URD plans to take time in the coming weeks, with its partners, to see how best to contribute to moving reflection on the issue of resilience forward in the sub-region and making this concept more operational for the benefit of the population.**