

Research and Study Group '*Southern and Mediterranean Europe: Social Change, Challenges and Opportunities*'

Round Table 'Resilience strategies in Northern and Southern Europe: towards a smart and sustainable rural development?'

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Chair: María Jesús Rivera (ESRS- University of the Basque Country)

Presenters:

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Dr. Renato Miguel do Carmo (University Institute of Lisbon, IDC, Portugal)

Dr. Fatma Nil Döner (Istanbul Mendineyet University, Turkey)

Dr. Susanne Stenbacka (Uppsala University, Sweden)

Summary

Dr. Esparcia started with a brief review of the wide expansion of the concept of resilience – initially formulated in the natural sciences – to the social sciences. Referring to the main papers published in the last years, he illustrated how the concept was embraced enthusiastically by social sciences. However there was also an early concern about the fact that it was becoming a complex and confusing concept. In this sense he remarked the need to avoid uncritical application of resilience to social systems. Although it may be a necessary concept to better explain how social systems face shocks or crisis and to better define strategies to recover from shocks or crisis, there are many reasons to be cautious about the uncritical application of resilience thinking to social systems and contexts. It is necessary to wonder resilience 'to what' and resilience 'for whom'.

The number of papers published in the last six years linking resilience with rural development has increased dramatically. Why? Should rural regions or rural communities be linked systematically with risks or vulnerability? The reason of this association is that traditional strategies for development of rural areas were based on specialization, what led to a higher vulnerability. New territorial rural development are based in two standard recommendations : diversification –that arises the question of the limited capacity of small economies to diversify and uncertainty about which new sectors are less vulnerable- and clusters – that it is not a strategy to reduce risk because inter-links the risk of a firm or sector to the whole cluster.

Rural regions may approach resilience from the idea of self protection. This self protection has to do with the strategic view of vulnerabilities (instead of waiting and building individual responses after wards) and to generation of sufficient resources to manage risk –economic, human, social, cultural, natural capital to respond to shocks-. Resilience make us think about the management of risks (level of management: local, extra-local, top-down..) and the resources, that may be endogenous – namely strong social networks-, or not endogenous – structural processes linked to availability of economic resources, access to information and knowledge, etc. Anyway, development and resilience responses may not necessary be linked as some research in Spain has showed.

Three concluding remarks must be considered:

- a) The concept of resilience can be applied in the context of rural development, as rural areas are more or less vulnerable to many processes, events, changes, policies, etc. and need anticipating and managing risks.
- b) A resilience strategy implies some planned actions anticipating events or shocks. In this sense we cannot find resilience strategies in Spain: we may find mainly individual and immediate –or not- responses: this could be resilience responses but not resilient strategies.
- c) Resilient responses *are not* necessarily contributing to smart and sustainable rural development (e.g. intensive agricultural production enclaves in some Mediterranean regions of Spain are producing ecological unsustainability and deterioration of working conditions – social unsustainability). Under absence of real resilient strategies, resilient individual responses could easily imply unsustainability or, in better cases, just very short-term solutions. Unfortunately very few rural areas have the capacity and abilities to design and implement real resilient strategies.

Dr. Renato do Carmo, started his presentation defining resilience as a ‘buzzword’.

Commenting a recent paper from Devertuil and Golubchikok, he pointed out the critiques to the concept of resilience under three rubrics:

- a) Resilience is not ideologically neutral, as it props up the dominant system, which is today clearly neo-liberal in its ideology,
- b) Resilience lacks progressive potential, is inherently conservative in spite of its anodyne political appearance.
- c) Needy people and regions may be abandoned under the cynical pretence that they are resilient.

The concept of resilience, that was initially proposed and developed in the physical and ecological/environmental sciences, refers to the capacity of systems and communities to rebalance themselves and recover after a given shock. Resilience may have the meaning of returning to the previous situation or to evolve in a way that does not necessarily result in a return to the initial configuration. In the case of social sciences, this leads to the interesting idea that adaptive mechanism underlying resilience can possess more than just a function of ensuring that systems persist or reproduce themselves. Those mechanisms can also possess a *capacity to transform*, in the sense that they can alter forms of organization and practices into systems that are more sustainable and more permeable to external shocks.

The concept of resilience may be in this sense ‘redeemed’ from its conservative bias and incorporate a transformative agenda: a) resilience can sustain alternative and previous practices that contradict neo-liberalism; b) resilience is more active and dynamic than passive, and c) resilience can sustain survival, acting as a precursor to more obviously transformative action such as resistance.

Regarding rural studies, although certain analysis tend to emphasize that rural communities possess a greater capacity of resilience because of specific forms of social solidarity and engagement, in most cases the notion of resilience as a transformative process is absent.

Dr. Renato do Carmo ended his presentation remarking the necessity to go deeper in this approach that looks at resilience as a driver for transformation in rural areas.

Dr. Fatma Nil Döner illustrated the main resilient strategies reported in current research on rural areas of Southern Europe, taking into account the papers presented on this issue in three former meetings of the RSG 'Southern and Mediterranean Europe': the International Conference held in Evora, Portugal, December 2014, under the title of '*Southern and Mediterranean Europe: Social Change, Challenges and Opportunities in a Time of Crisis*'; the Working Group 'Southern and Eastern rural Europe under neo-liberal restructuring: Challenges, resistances and emancipations', at the XXVI ESRS Congress held in Aberdeen, Scotland, August 2015, and the International Seminar "Human capital, wage labour and innovation in rural areas", held in Athens, October 2015.

The aim of her presentation was to reflect on what we are calling 'resilience strategies' and what sort of social processes and institutions are present in the context of Southern and Mediterranean Europe when we talk about resilience strategies.

The more common features linked to or identified with resilience strategies are the following:

- a) The ways in which rural dwellers are easing away from a strictly agrarian existence: changing production patterns and involving in vertical cultivation, engaging in off-farm activities, or involving in nonfarm sectors, especially the service sector.
- b) The role of old population, and especially the use of retirement payments, widow payments, old-age pensions as a valuable economic resource. The same occurs with migrant remittances.
- c) The labour hiring to maintain the farm activities.
- d) Out-migration and also pro-rural migration as a way to meet subsistence requirements and cash income.
- e) Financing debts and land sales.
- f) The increasing connection between rural and urban areas.

What does the concept of resilience make us to think? The way in which this concept is being used in Southern and Mediterranean countries suggests that farming communities reflect their resistance to crisis and structural adjustment by *individual efforts* more than by collective action. Moreover, resilience strategies are identified with an increase in *informal and unregulated work*, with limited institutional protection against risk and insecurity. Resilience is also linked with *the rising responsibility of women* in the survival of families and communities. In some sense, the concept of resilience *conceals the class structure* within society.

In her concluding remarks, Dra. Fatma Nil Döner wondered if the so-called 'resilience strategies' are promoting neoliberal policies, reducing the responsibility of the state about social policies and services, accelerating exploitation of nature and threatening food sovereignty.

Dr. Susanne Stenbacka reflected on the concept of resilience in rural areas using as a practical example the refugee migration into rural areas in Sweden and how it is met at the municipality level.

She started defining resilience as a process involving *intentional acts and strategies*, a preparedness for identifying possibilities and overcome obstacles. Also as an individual and community capacity to deal with economic and social transformation – the ability *to adapt to but also to challenge* the prevailing circumstances.

A key factor of a resilience strategy is the capacity *to conceive 'a threat' or 'a challenge' as a resource*: in this case, the refugee migration has been understood by local institutions as an opportunity for local economy and a valuable workforce regarding the caring sector.

Another important feature is the capacity of local institutions to get an informal knowledge on daily community life. This way a local formal structure becomes informal and gets a great capacity to learn and build resilience strategies. In this sense it is very important the role of *institutional learning*, that makes things get easier for every year.

Dra. Stenbacka also pointed out the importance of *state action* when regarding rural resilience at local level: greater self-determination should not cause a greater burden of responsibilities on the local level as state action and state investment is important to initiate processes of resilience. Rural sustainability needs to be understood as processes involving *local as well as not local resources and interactions*.

As a practical example, she pointed out that around 100 local public libraries have been closed from 2009-2013 in Sweden, being every third library run by a non-profit organization now. This is very important as local libraries are a symbol for the community, associated with a democratic meeting-place, education an integration, that should supply by law literature and technical equipment to prioritized groups as minorities and individuals with disabilities.