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Governance for Resilience: How Can States Prepare for the Next Crisis?

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Introduction

The pandemic has presented policymakers with daunting, interlinked, and often unprecedented challenges. From health emergencies that also upend economies to trade disruptions that also pose new multilateral diplomatic dilemmas, the pandemic has generated challenges that seem exceptional in both scale and degree of interconnection. Although the coronavirus pandemic has generated a dizzying series of harsh social, political, and economic firsts, such dilemmas will not be the last. Trend lines around a series of domestic and multinational governance issues, including climate change, migration, rising geopolitical tensions, and citizen alienation from governing institutions, suggest that complex, interlinked crises will be features of the future. While national and multilateral policymakers should work to alleviate the drivers of such crises, they must also strive to prepare their countries to adapt and recover from complex shocks. In short, they must try to build resilience.

The need for resilience will be especially acute in developing and fragile states. These countries will need to respond to compounding shocks across multiple domains, without the head start that their developed-world counterparts enjoy. Equally, donors and policymakers from the Global North must also elevate resilience and adaptation as key components of their approaches to supporting fragile states.

This call to bolster countries' resilience is hardly new. Even before the pandemic, the policy arena featured increasing calls for resilience; now, the chorus has become almost deafening. Recent seminal policy and analytic documents—including the U.S. National Intelligence Council's flagship report,[1] the UK's Integrated Review,[2] and the U.S. Interim National

Security Strategy[3]—have underscored that states' resilience and capacity for adaptation will be key to their future success in the geopolitical arena. In donors' peacebuilding and development policies, high-level emphasis on resilience has also swelled over the past few years, including in official communications from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development,[4] the United States government,[5] and the European Union.[6] In some development practitioner and civil society circles, the need for resilience is so frequently invoked that it sometimes borders on cliché.[7]

The increasingly ubiquitous recommendation to "bolster resilience" is valuable for at least two related reasons. First, it offers a more specific strategic objective than conversations around "state fragility" writ large, which have often been too broad to generate concrete policy responses. Second, recent, failed international statebuilding projects have underscored that state fragility is not to be "fixed"—instead, it is to be managed and mitigated.[8] The emphasis on resilience thus marks a helpful shift away from maximalist policy framing and toward a more attainable one.

But concrete insights on how developing or fragile countries actually achieve resilience are less clear and less common. Given the broad consensus that state fragility is deeply linked to governance, for many policymakers, good governance is central. To be sure, many other factors beyond governance—including demographic, geographic, military, and economic ones—affect a state's resilience. But a country's governance and political institutions generally undergird all other dynamics in determining how effectively that state can bounce back from setbacks.

What exactly does the concept of "good governance for resilience" entail in practice? This paper surveys the evidence. Below, it reviews the governance-related characteristics and capabilities that affect a country's resilience. For the purposes of this paper, resilience at the national level can be understood as a country's capacity to respond to, adapt to, and grow from stresses and shocks.[9] Resilience focuses on bolstering the overall performance of a system in the face of unpredictable and often interconnected hazards, making it different from risk management, which relates to specific hazards.[10] A country's resilience depends on the internal characteristics that allow for states and their institutions to navigate a variety of disruptions.[11]

An overarching insight from the evidence is that governance for resilience is complex and often multidirectional. Several characteristics, such as decentralization, have an ambiguous effect on resilience: they enable a country to withstand some setbacks but leave it more vulnerable in other ways. Still other characteristics—including whether a country is a democracy or an authoritarian political system—do not appear have a clear-cut effect on resilience. In contrast, a few governance "super-factors"—such as control of corruption, societal trust, and high quality political leadership—are exceptionally powerful in enabling a country to augment its resilience through multiple pathways.

Finally, this paper considers the broader implications of governance for resilience as a policy agenda. The framing of bolstering countries' resilience is a valuable one, but it also raises several vexing trade-offs and dilemmas. In particular, it prompts the question of whose resilience, in specific, it refers to, since resilience of state institutions does not always mean resilience of all parts of the population. Looking ahead, the policy refrain of "building resilience" in fragile and developing states, appealing though it is, should be refined to encompass these thorny realities.

Governance for Resilience: Complex Factors

The majority of governance-related characteristics do not have a straightforward impact on a state's resilience. Some characteristics can help aid a country's resilience in certain ways yet undermine it in others. Other factors can either augment or undermine resilience, depending upon the specifics of how they manifest in the country. Below, this section profiles several governance characteristics that affect resilience—state capacity, regime type, institutional memory, decentralization, elite cohesion and political inclusivity, and presence of civil society and nonstate actors—to examine their complex impacts.

State Capacity

At the most basic level, states need capacity—an ability to synthesize information, connect observations to government action, and effectively operationalize those actions—in order to successfully respond to shocks.[12] Citizens' reliance on the state often becomes more acute during times of crisis. Accordingly, resilient states are those that are able to not only deliver routine services but also effectively integrate information and adapt service provision to changed circumstances.

Unsurprisingly, if a state's bureaucracy is professionalized, well-resourced, and low on corruption, then it is likely to be effective in responding to crises; if not, then it is likely to fall victim to ineffectual outcomes, among other negative effects.[13] Institutionalized mechanisms for incorporating citizen feedback are key to improving response capacity; in most contexts, citizen engagement on state initiatives yields improved outcomes, especially in areas like health, education, water, and infrastructure.[14] In the Philippines, for example, a fractious, disconnected, and dysfunctional bureaucracy—made worse by weak rule of law and high levels of corruption—has made it difficult to implement policies in response to the country's rising crime crisis.[15] In contrast, Rwanda's well-resourced bureaucracy rests on a streamlined, educated civil service with low levels of corruption, and it consequently has seen improved performance on issues like poverty reduction, economic planning, and public health responses.[16]

Additionally, states that invest in areas that bolster long-term capacity—as opposed to effectively mobilizing only when crisis strikes—prove to be more resilient in responding to shocks. In Rwanda, long-term investments in technology, for example, provided the government with flexibility in responding to the coronavirus pandemic, from deploying robots for supply deliveries to leveraging mobile phone usage for health updates and cash transfers.[17] Smart, long-term investments reduce short-term stress on bureaucracies and offer the spare capacity necessary for responding to unforeseen crises.

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However, state capacity must be appropriately directed in order to effectively build resilience. Having a state that is highly effective in one area—for example, implementing taxation—does not necessarily predict effectiveness in other domains, like emergency service provision. As Rachel Kleinfeld and Elena Barham have shown, many of the highest-capacity developing states (in terms of development indicators) have some of the worst records on extrajudicial killings, suggesting that many effective governance outcomes are more a question of political will than raw capacity.[18] Separately, in the case of the early months of the coronavirus pandemic, health outcomes varied within different parts of the United States largely due to politicization—observance of health measures broke down along partisan lines—not state capacity.[19] Robust state capacity alone therefore does not guarantee effective responses in cases of managing challenges.

Regime Type

Whether a country is a democracy or autocracy does not appear to have a clear bearing on its effectiveness in responding to exogenous shocks. Multiple studies, whether on climate change mitigation, response to the coronavirus pandemic, or otherwise, have shown no clear relationship between regime type and performance.[20] Each system has attributes that could conceivably benefit them: Democracies tend to be more transparent, better able to self-correct, more accountable, and more meritocratic, all of which should lend themselves to better crisis response. Meanwhile, many autocracies have less internal elite friction, quicker response times, and more ability to leverage close relations with the media.[21] Though many authoritarian leaders claim that their more unilateral decisionmaking enables strong leadership, there is scant evidence that this translated into a better pandemic response.[22] Although some argue that authoritarian regimes enjoy higher levels of societal trust in government, data from undemocratic systems is unreliable in accurately capturing public opinion.[23]

Looking ahead, a key question is whether democracies or authoritarian systems are better able to execute long-term plans to bolster resilience. Some critics of democracy claim that democratic leaders fall victim to short-termism—the inability to tackle long-term planning

to solve big problems—and that democratic politicians have an aversion to supporting politically unpopular short-term sacrifices to make longer-term progress. If this were true, authoritarian systems would clearly have an edge in their ability to augment resilience capabilities over the long run. Yet as Thomas Carothers has shown, not all democracies are beset by the challenges of short-termism and pain aversion; further, many authoritarian systems fare no better in managing these challenges.[24] Relatedly, some authoritarian systems like China's rely on multiyear planning systems to set policy goals across levels of government. However, while successful in setting a general agenda to address the most pressing issues, such policymaking arrangements can inadvertently cause confusion between central and local authorities with regard to their respective responsibilities, performance monitoring, and resource mobilization.[25]

Institutional Memory

In the medium to long term, lessons learned from prior crises can enable states to build technocratic resilience—if the states choose to act on these lessons. Repeated crisis events allow for governments and other actors to attempt various response strategies and adapt capacities to prepare for another analogous crisis event. In the domain of public health, some scholars argued that the comparatively low per capita coronavirus infection and death rates across the African continent during the first few months of the pandemic was partially due to many countries' experience with prior disease outbreaks, including HIV/AIDS, Zika, and Ebola.[26] Technical know-how within some countries' bureaucracies in implementing quarantines, surging medical capacity, and public education reportedly allowed for many African countries to apply those capabilities to the coronavirus pandemic, reducing viral spread.[27] African countries' pandemic response also benefited from prior investment in the African Centers for Disease Control, a central repository of expertise and a facilitator of intercountry collaboration, which was developed in the wake of the 2014–2016 Ebola outbreak.[28]

In responses to natural disasters, technocratic institutional memory is also an important determinant of resilience. In India, after a 1999 cyclone in the state of Odisha killed 10,000 people, the state's government engaged in disaster management planning. When the similarly strong Cyclone Phailin arrived in 2013, it killed less than fifty people, a strong indication that sustained risk management and learning paid off and successfully mitigated some of the worst risks of extreme climate incidents.[29] Institutional memory can also prove effective across different types of shocks. In the Indian state of Kerala, experience managing two major floods as well as the Nipah virus outbreak in 2018 helped to institutionalize effective emergency management protocols.[30] When the coronavirus pandemic emerged, before the state had recorded a single case, fifteen health districts had already set up control rooms for monitoring, and hospitals had been designated to treat infected patients.[31]

On the other hand, in some cases, institutional memory can undermine a related source of resilience. Flexibility in dealing with crises and informality of systems can be a strength that allows countries to adapt quickly to newer types of shocks. Although some states may feel

compelled by past shocks to build state organs to institutionalize resilience against future ones, this can lead to unwieldy bureaucratization.

Decentralization

Decentralized administration is a mixed blessing in enabling resilience. In many cases, decentralization can empower government officials to respond more effectively to shocks, because it allows for local innovation and adaptation. Subnational policymakers generally know more about their constituents' needs because they are closer to them; bureaucratic decentralization, when coupled with autonomy that permits government officials to tailor their responses, allows for crisis response to be locally appropriate and quicker. These ideas were embedded in Vietnam's coronavirus response, for example, where local, regional, and national authorities understood their respective responsibilities, innovated interventions, and coordinated vertically and horizontally to implement measures as conditions dictated.[32] Over the first year of the pandemic, Vietnam had one of the lowest coronavirus infection rates in the world.[33] By contrast, some scholars argue that in India, an overly centralized approach reportedly disempowered federal states from taking necessary interventions, increasing response times and sowing confusion about who was in charge.[34]

On the other hand, bureaucratic decentralization does not always increase state resilience. Effective response to many crises requires coordination across local administrations; this, in turn, either requires empowered national-level leadership or incurs high coordination costs. Further, if lines of authority are unclear or if the subnational levels of government are not adequately resourced, then state responses can suffer under decentralized systems. In Myanmar and Indonesia, for example, well-intentioned efforts to decentralize natural disaster response mechanisms devolved into bureaucratic infighting over resources and jurisdiction.[35] In Kenya, bureaucratic decentralization was infused with patronage and favoritism, resulting in resilience-building projects in regime-friendly regions but not in others.[36] Ineffective decentralization of disaster management can also lead to backlash and recentralization, undermining future resilience. In Turkey, de facto decentralization after earthquakes in the late 1990s took a turn to centralization after earthquakes that occurred in 2011. Research suggests that the failure of the central government to match local needs with funds, and a lack of collaboration between local and central levels of government, in turn might undermine context-specific, localized responses in the future.[37]

Elite Cohesion and Political Inclusivity

Elite cohesion has a complex bearing on countries' levels of resilience. In many ways, it enables resilience: when faced with shocks, a state's resilience is often contingent on the ability—and the will—of elites to band together and uphold the norms and institutions of governance. Such cohesion can emerge in a number of ways: potentially through a wholesale elite transformation, as in post-apartheid South Africa, or through co-optation, as in

President Nicolás Maduro's kleptocratic system in Venezuela. Elites who band together and come to an agreement on political order tend to be more invested in maintaining it.[38]

Consensual, rather than co-opted, cohesion is better for state resilience. During normal times, many authoritarian regimes will employ a combination of co-optation and patronage strategies to manage elites; during crisis, evidence suggests that these strategies often yield defections—especially during crises relating to the economy and internal conflict.[39] Some scholars argue that in contrast, elites bound together by consensus on political order, especially one forged through sustained violent struggle—like the tight band of now-ruling revolutionaries in Zimbabwe—have been considerably more resilient in response to shocks.[40]

Even without a discrete shock, elite factionalism is one of the most significant drivers of chronic state fragility, and for postconflict states, exclusionary political settlements are a key determinant of the return to violence. In nonconsolidated political systems, a high level of polarization rooted in exclusive identities or ideologies among the elite is one of the most potent predictors of instability. Research suggests that partial democracies affected by deep elite factionalism are thirty times as likely to face instability than consolidated, unified democracies.[41] In political contexts where decisions are viewed as zero-sum and various parts of the state are run by different factions, manipulating the state itself becomes a mechanism for gaining and maintaining power, often to the detriment of state resilience. This is well illustrated by Lebanon's sectarian political contest, which has crippled the state's ability to respond to recent compounding shocks, including the pandemic, runaway inflation, the Beirut port explosion, rising internal conflict, and migration.[42] More broadly, in countries emerging from conflict, evidence suggests the importance of inclusive politics in staving off the return to violence—or of what are termed "inclusive-enough" coalitions in mitigating fragility.[43]

However, despite all this evidence suggesting that elite cohesion and political inclusivity advances resilience, significant caveating is needed when investigating the links between elite cohesion, in particular, and resilience. The Maduro regime example earlier, or the case of President Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, demonstrate a common scenario: a political ruling elite maintains resilience, and the organs of the state largely endure in diminished form, but the vast majority of the population suffers. This complexity indicates a broader question raised by the policy focus on resilience: for most policymakers, a resilience that benefits only part of the population is not a normatively desirable policy goal. This thorny question of "whose resilience?" will return in the conclusion.

Civil Society and Other Nonstate Actors

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are often invoked in policy discussions on resilience, and they can indeed contribute significantly to states' resilience through several distinct mechanisms. First, CSOs can deliver services, either in cooperation with governments or filling in gaps, often reaching the most marginalized and serving as the first line of defense

against shocks. In Afghanistan, for example, CSOs working on polio eradication pivoted to containing COVID-19 in the early months of the pandemic, providing remote provinces with health services in the absence of robust government infrastructure.[44] Second, CSOs can provide early warning by monitoring local developments and alerting authorities to security, environmental, or societal risks before they escalate. Though demonstrating the utility of early warning systems is hard—because it usually involves trying to prove a negative—the West African Network for Peacebuilding has been widely commended for blunting the emergence of conflict across West Africa via its alerts.[45] Third, CSOs can bridge divides by bringing communities together to help mediate or reduce conflict, as religious associations have done in Nigeria to reduce intercommunal violence.[46] Fourth, in some cases, CSOs can be a channel through which citizens can express their preferences and discontent, both reducing the risk that they resort to more violent means and helping to push authorities to address their grievances.

At the same time, the presence of civil society is not automatically a guarantee of resilience.

However, the ability of CSOs to perform any of these resilience-bolstering functions is highly dependent upon several factors. One of the most important is the level of trust accorded to CSOs by local communities. Though individual CSOs vary widely, in many countries with low government capacity, CSOs do enjoy high levels of trust, meaning they can readily serve as an alternative information and service provision structure in the absence of a strong or trustworthy state.[47] In addition, a country's operating environment for civil society also affects CSOs' ability to bolster resilience. Some developing countries are clamping down on the ability of nongovernmental organizations to operate in-country, directly hampering shock response. This is the case in India, where a recent law restricting foreign contributions prevented nongovernmental organizations from buying lifesaving equipment during the coronavirus pandemic.[48] In the Gambia, by contrast, a recent opening of civic space is facilitating local organizations' crisis response during the pandemic-related economic downturn.[49]

At the same time, the presence of civil society is not automatically a guarantee of resilience. In some cases, CSOs replicate polarization in society; for example, research from Kenya indicates that a very active civil society can amplify rather than bridge societal cleavages. Although civil society groups there may work together briefly after shocks such as electoral violence or terrorist attacks, once these crises recede, individual organizations revert to their ethnic affiliations, hampering longer-term resilience-building efforts.[50] Extreme actors within civil society can further exacerbate polarization, as some religious groups in India have done.[51] Further, when CSOs shed light on, or even amplify, government failings, such revelations can obviously increase citizen discontent. Though this transparency is normatively a good thing, this may undermine state resilience in the immediate term. The picture is complex.

Moreover, armed nonstate actors sometimes take on similar roles to civilian CSOs during crisis response, with mixed implications for state resilience. This has particularly been the case during the coronavirus pandemic, with groups ranging from Mexican drug cartels to Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces stepping in on crisis response.[52] Such groups have provided handouts and public goods; while local populations desperately needed these deliveries, this often allowed the groups to leverage these engagements to expand recruitment and financing and tighten local control. Further, states aiming to provide access to vaccines at times were required to negotiate with armed nonstate actors, a trend that could unintentionally shift political power to such groups.[53] In the long run, the impact may thus be detrimental to a state's resilience as nonstate armed groups expand their support base and build competing centers of authority.

The presence of armed nonstate actors can also be linked to greater instability during a shock, in turn lowering resilience. In Colombia, for example, diminished state presence (due to lockdowns) during the coronavirus pandemic led not only to existing illegal armed groups consolidating control but also to competition between groups.[54] Unfamiliar armed groups moved into new areas, increasing territorial competition and violence and putting communities at greater risk of human rights violations.[55] The presence of illegal armed groups may therefore, in some circumstances, reduce states' resilience during shocks by exacerbating violent conflict.

Super-Factors: Governance Characteristics That Aid in Building Resilience

In contrast to the complex impacts of the factors profiled above, a small number of governance characteristics reliably promote countries' resilience in multiple, often reinforcing ways. These super-factors appear almost wholly positive in building resilience. Three super-factors are reviewed below: high levels of societal trust, low corruption levels, and high-quality political leadership.

Societal Trust

A high level of societal trust in government greatly assists a state's potential for adaptability and resilience.[56] Exogenous shocks often pose problems of collective action as they require short-term sacrifice for longer-term benefit.[57] While both trust among citizens and citizens' trust in their government are important, trustworthy governments are especially consequential because they can influence two types of interpersonal trust: communal trust and generalized trust.[58] The state affects communal trust by eliminating personal dependencies

between individuals and resolving conflicts, and it can facilitate generalized trust by solving information, monitoring, and enforcement problems.[59] States are most likely to positively affect these types of interpersonal trust when their political leaders have demonstrated consistency, proven their character, and act for principle rather than self-interest and when they can make credible commitments and have self-enforcing institutions such that citizens do not have to personally invest in monitoring the government.[60] Moreover, trust of the state directly affects the extent to which citizens comply with government demands and regulations. The more trustworthy a government, the more likely its citizens will agree to the necessary, though often painful, adjustments that are needed to weather shocks.[61]

This dynamic has been especially evident in the public health domain. Survey data taken during the coronavirus pandemic show a strong relationship between higher levels of trust in government and compliance with measures like social distancing, quarantine, and hand-washing.[62] Conversely, lower levels of trust often correlate with lower rates of compliance. For example, during the 2014–2015 Ebola outbreak in Liberia, citizens who expressed low trust in government were much less likely to take precautions against the virus or abide by mandatory social distancing measures.[63] Appearances and strategic communication matter: governments that are perceived as well-organized and are clear, fair, and unambiguous in their statements are much more likely to be trusted.[64] In addition, effective government communication in times of disaster requires ongoing community engagement, an evolving technical knowledge of the shock, and the ability for states to navigate rapidly changing media landscapes.[65] Finally, the related, yet distinct, phenomenon of sociocultural "tight-ness," wherein some societies closely uphold norms that are often heavily influenced by the state, also affects states' adaptability and resilience. Tighter societies—like Malaysia, Pakistan, and Thailand—tend to be more responsive to collective action problems, poten-tially contributing to those countries' relatively lower infection rates over the first year of the coronavirus pandemic than they might have had otherwise.[66]

Controlling Corruption

Controlling corruption is a key precondition for building resilience. In order to respond to exogenous shocks, states need to be both willing and able to take action—yet corruption often erodes both the government's will to act, through perverting incentives, and its ability to act, through draining resources and hollowing out the state. This dynamic is exacerbated during episodes of crisis, which often precipitate increased aid flows on an accelerated time frame and thus offer more opportunities for graft.[67] In many places, corruption has undermined resilience during the coronavirus pandemic, delaying recovery as it diverts resources from healthcare and weakens trust in public health institutions.[68]

In addition, when countries face natural disasters, public sector corruption can exacerbate humanitarian crises. One analysis of 344 earthquakes globally between 1975 and 2003 found that public sector corruption positively correlated to earthquake deaths.[69] In Turkey, bribes and political favors normalized in obtaining government building permission led to unsafe conditions prior to the shock of an earthquake, leading to higher death tolls.[70]

Researchers in disaster studies argue that disaster outcomes are primarily a function of local management.[71] In cases such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, evidence indicates that local-level government corruption (related to tsunami planning regulations and development approvals in Thailand) can lead to heightened negative disaster outcomes.[72] Corruption that emerges in the immediate period *following* shocks—such as in post-disaster recovery efforts—can also further increase vulnerability to future disasters.

Another particularly striking example of corruption's corrosive effect on resilience is that of resilience to climate change. One study found that of the $13 billion annually appropriated for water system resilience building globally, a full $1 billion–$2 billion is lost to corruption.[73] In Indonesia, moreover, a $40 billion dike-building project designed to manage rising sea levels was marred by bribes to circumvent building standards, resulting in a low-quality build that ultimately saw the entire project suspended.[74] Corruption can thus impede the very projects states undertake in order to increase resilience from effectively protecting against shocks such as climate crises.

Even beyond corruption's direct negative impact on resilience, corruption-fueled poor responses to shocks can also erode public trust in governments—one of the key factors examined above. For example, reports of mismanagement of pandemic relief funds have undermined trust in some African governments and institutions.[75] COVID-19 data manipulation has also undermined public trust in many countries, thus affecting resilience by impeding the effectiveness of public health measures.[76]

Quality Leadership

Undergirding each of the above sections is an essential truth: the choices and quality of political leadership are of paramount importance in determining a country's level of resilience. Leaders make consequential decisions that affect, in some way, almost all of the governance characteristics profiled above. Leaders at multiple levels of government determine whether states chose to reap lessons from prior shocks—or instead, as the saying goes, let a good crisis go to waste. Leaders determine whether state capacity is directed in an effective manner to respond to crises or instead oriented toward a more personalistic agenda. By influencing the tone and norms of politics, senior officials also have an outsized influence on whether or not a period of crisis will bring unity or fragmentation. If leaders govern in a deliberately polarizing manner—as during the COVID-19 crisis in Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines, Tanzania, Turkey, and elsewhere—politics are likely to become more confrontational and increasingly divided, further exacerbating the impact of shocks.[77]

Individual leaders often also determine their country's ability to harness international partnerships that often aid in building resilience. The past decade's leadership changes in the Gambia vividly demonstrate this point. In his first term, current President Adama Barrow intensely pursued agreements with external donors to support economic development and build infrastructure, which will presumably serve his country well in future crisis response; in contrast, his predecessor Yahya Jammeh's abuses and kleptocratic misrule led donors

to limit partnerships.[78] That said, a leader's ability to pursue donor partnerships does not automatically mean quality political leadership, and it thus does not automatically yield resilience for her or (usually) his country. As Judd Devermont notes, some African leaders are pragmatically approaching increased global interest in Africa as an opportunity to expand surveillance on domestic opponents or pursue corrupt kickbacks rather than to promote other goods, such as institutionalizing country-level resilience.[79] The fundamental question of "whose resilience?" returns in the conclusion.

Projecting out to the coming decades, the quality and choices of political leadership in specific developing countries are among the most consequential characteristics of all in shaping countries' prospects of adaptability and resilience in the face of future shocks. Yet predicting countries' leadership and their choices are among the most challenging of all assessments for analysts to make.

Beyond the Resilience Slogan: Conclusions and Dilemmas

In the policy arena, the chorus to build resilience in fragile and developing states has become loud and almost ubiquitous. Framing the policy goal as supporting resilience is a valuable development on at least two fronts: First, it offers a more specific objective than conversations around state fragility writ large, which have tended to become too vast to prompt a meaningful policy response. Second, it is a more attainable framing than previous aspirations to fix failed states. And as the above sections demonstrate, there is rich evidence available on what specific characteristics enable "governance for resilience" to be achieved and under what conditions.

Yet this closer look has also revealed several vexing dilemmas that policymakers must face as the focus on resilience gains further steam. Looking ahead, officials can integrate several concrete policy recommendations into their policies and programs—and should grapple with a few thorny, recurrent tradeoffs.

First, policymakers should focus efforts on bolstering the few key super-factors that have outsized impact in promoting resilience—but also recognize the limits of external policy tools. The three governance-related super-factors highlighted above are worthy of extensive focus in policy deliberations. For example, societal trust improves states' resilience through multiple pathways, rendering it an unusually powerful governance factor in strengthening resilience. Bolstering anti-corruption efforts is equally important, as corruption undermines resilience for at least three discrete reasons: by eroding a government's will to act in responding to crisis, by undermining its ability to act, and by decreasing public trust in the government. High-quality political leadership is also deeply consequential:

whatever governance-related strengths a country may have, it is often political leadership that determines whether or not these assets are channeled into an effective crisis response.

At the same time, policymakers outside of the country in question—for example, for donors trying to bolster a fragile state's resilience—must acknowledge that their policy tools to affect these super-factors are limited. Donors can try to affect the choices of a country's political leadership by providing advice. But—even presuming that advice is sound—partner government leaders obviously have their own incentives and preferences, and uptake of donors' counsel is out of donors' hands. Outsiders are similarly minor players in affecting whether a country enjoys high levels of societal trust, although some programs working in partnership with a motivated host government to augment trust may be able to help. Anticorruption is one area where donors can make significant headway, not least by affecting their own systems, and so the recent focus on anticorruption in the policy arena represents an important advance. However, here, too, national-level players will still be the preeminent ones.

> **Looking ahead, officials can integrate several concrete policy recommendations into their policies and programs—and should grapple with a few thorny, recurrent tradeoffs.**

Second, policymakers should acknowledge that several other governance-related factors have less clear-cut effects on resilience, and they should design nuanced policies and programs accordingly. Beyond the super-factors, most other governance characteristics can potentially serve to either bolster or undermine resilience. An active civil society can greatly help enhance resilience—except when particular types of civil society actually exacerbate polarization. A decentralized bureaucracy can help enable effective local responses but only if subnational officials have the autonomy and judgment to make that happen, and only if national-level coordination is not needed. Institutional memory usually helps resilience—except for when it constrains bureaucracies from preparing for emergent new shocks. Robust state capacity is, unsurprisingly, usually valuable for crisis response—but only if it is channeled toward that end, not toward utilizing the crisis as a pretext to favor some citizens over others.

Accordingly, the policy community will need to integrate a deeper recognition that when trying to build resilience, specifics matter greatly. Any future policies to support resilience will need to encompass these nuances, moving beyond recurrent bumper stickers such as the calls to "empower civil society" or "build the state's response capability." Instead, policymakers should move toward a model of resilience analysis that identifies how particular interventions might affect specific governance factors that aid resilience—and that also accounts for countervailing headwinds and unintended consequences.

Third, policymakers must more fully grapple with the complex relationship between resilience and democratic freedoms. In the donor community, political leaders often invoke resilience and democracy as two good things that go together.[80] Reality is more complex. As discussed above, democracy has not proven to uniformly correlate with better crisis response

or adaptability. Though democratic countries have many attributes that should aid in resilience—such as transparency and an ability to course-correct—the coronavirus pandemic has offered numerous examples of democracies that did not leverage these attributes toward better performance. Notably, authoritarian systems did not uniformly perform better, either, despite their own purported advantages.

On a related but distinct note, when countries face crisis, they often take steps that potentially do augment resilience to shocks but that come at the expense of democratic freedoms, such as heightened surveillance and decreased freedom of association. Here again, the relationship between democracy and resilience is not simple: specifics matter.

As a policy matter, the emphasis for policymakers should be a turn away from the refrain that "democracy delivers" and toward a focus on enabling democracies to deliver, particularly in crisis response. In particular, they should focus on helping address the practical challenges of lower-income democracies in building resilience.[81]

Finally, and above all, the wholesale rhetorical embrace of resilience needs refinement. Oftentimes, policy discourse overwhelmingly focuses on "building resilience" at the country level, suggesting that it is an unmitigated good for both state and society. Yet, as noted above, resilience of the state apparatus does not automatically bring resilience for the general population. The remarkable durability of some governments—such as the Maduro regime in Venezuela, or the Assad regime in Syria—are cases in point. Recently, the U.S. secretary of state noted that the new Global Fragility Act (GFA) would commit the United States to "working together" with selected countries to create plans to "build resilience."[82] Yet in some GFA-selected partner countries, resilience is less needed than reform.[83]

As a partial antidote, policies and programs that focus on communities' and societies' resilience are important. But calls to "build resilience" at the community level need nuance, too. Programs that aim to support local-level resilience, or resilience of the most vulnerable, should not be seen as a means to delay much-needed structural reforms. Community-level resilience is not a substitute for equitable power structures. Though grappling with the complexities of all different forms of resilience are beyond the scope of this paper, for policymakers, the message should be that an embrace of resilience should always grapple with vital questions: resilience for whom? Resilience of what?

Taken as a whole, the trend toward resilience as a policy objective is a positive one. Particularly for donor policies toward fragile and developing countries, framing the goal as bolstering resilience is an important conceptual improvement from previous efforts to attain maximalist goals or build up countries that are mirror-imaged on a Western ideal. But the embrace of resilience should not be unalloyed. As policymakers look ahead, they must find a way to balance the need for inclusive resilience with the imperative for meaningful reform. Though capturing these twin objectives makes for a less catchy slogan than resilience alone, it is this more nuanced strategy that holds immense potential in helping prepare for the next catastrophe.

About the Author

Frances Z. Brown is a senior fellow and co-director of Carnegie's Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program, who previously worked at the White House, USAID, and in nongovernmental organizations. She writes on conflict, governance, and U.S. foreign policy.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1   The U.S. intelligence community's flagship report argued that in a future threat environment marked by fragmentation and contestation, "adaptation will be both an imperative and a key source of advantage for all actors" in the future. See *Global Trends 2040: A More Contested World*, (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, March 2021), 3, https://www.dni.gov/index.php/gt2040-home.

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