Rural households in sub-Saharan Africa: conceptual considerations and methodological issues on resilience

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Abstract

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This paper aims at critically assessing the scope and meaning of the notion of resilience at the household level, commonly used in humanitarian approaches. We argue that this notion has to be specified on three aspects: 1/ the nature of the stress; 2/ the time scale; and 3/ the sustainability of the household. Our analysis is based on field studies conducted in rural areas of Central African Republic, Niger and Madagascar.

1/ To "what" kind of shock is a household resilient?

The conceptual framework of resilience studies relies on the definition of "shocks", on the one hand, and "core variables" on the other hand: to what extent can a household resist shocks without jeopardizing its most important assets. First, we identify three types of shocks: first, brutal shocks or "disasters"; second, protracted shocks, or crisis; third, diffuse shocks, related to social, economic and political structures. Second, in order to identify core variables, we use the Livelihood framework and we mobilize a stake-based approach, identifying what assets and activities people prioritize in case of shock. This approach enables a better understanding of how households perceive shocks and adapt their practices preventively (ex-ante) or as a response to hardships (ex-post).

2/ "When" can resilience be assessed?

Stressing on the time dimension of resilience introduces a new methodological perspective, distinguishing resilience as a state (observed some time after a shock) and resilience as a process. It requires a study not only of household practices, but also of household trajectories. We identify three types of trajectories: survival (avoiding the household’s destitution), adaptation (organizing to face the consequences of the shock), and resilience (successfully rebuilding the household’s most important assets, for example the herd). Studying household trajectories can be implemented through different tools, such as observatories for a diachronic monitoring, qualitative survey in order to understand how a shock is felt and responded to (social networks, humanitarian support, etc.). These tools can bring to light factors of resilience and obstacles households face.

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3/ "Who" is resilient or vulnerable?
This involves changes in the scale of analysis, both beneath and beyond the household unit, and questions links between resilience and sustainability. First, such an approach means entering into the household’s black box in order to consider the agencies of its members and inequalities in the family, specifically gender inequalities. At what price, in terms of its members’ agencies, did the household maintain its "core variables"? Second, one needs to consider a broader scale beyond the household unit: in a community, does the resilience of a household hinder other households? Third and finally, we insist on the political dimension of resilience. Public policies (regarding land grabbing for example) can improve or curb household resilience. Trajectories can’t be seen only as the consequences of the household practices at a local level.

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