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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE RESILIENT TO CLIMATE CHANGE?

Just Climate Audio Essay Part One¹

ABSTRACT

What does it mean to be resilient to climate change? Will all societies and different members of those societies adapt to the changing environment in the same way? Should they? Can we realistically expect communities who face multiple challenges, from violence to entrenched social and political inequalities, to become even more resilient? And what might a more socially and environmentally just adaptation to climate change look like? This audio essay, “Just Climate,” challenges conventional notions of resilience by exploring its complexities in diverse social, political, and economic contexts. Featuring insights from researchers in Nepal, Kenya, and Nicaragua, it critically examines resilience as both a concept and a lived reality for communities facing multiple forms of inequality and hardship. The essay is structured into three parts. First, it questions whether resilience is the appropriate framework for addressing climate change. Critics argue that the term can obscure systemic inequalities by implying that marginalized communities should simply endure rather than resist and transform their conditions. Second, the discussion moves to the feasibility of climate change adaptation in regions already grappling with violence, poverty, and entrenched social injustices. It highlights how resilience is inherently shaped by power dynamics, access to resources, and historical struggles. Lastly, the essay explores what a socially and environmentally just adaptation might look like, emphasizing resilience as a process rather than an outcome. This perspective underscores collective agency, relationality social movements, and transformative change rather than mere survival strategies. Drawing on empirical examples such as community water management in Nepal, pastoralism in Kenya, as well as coffee and cocoa farming in Nicaragua, the discussion illustrates how resilience is deeply intertwined with social relations, political structures, and economic opportunities. As such, it goes beyond conventional understandings of resilience to climate change often framed as the ability to adapt and recover from environmental disruptions. By redefining resilience as a relational process rooted in justice and equity, this audio essay contributes to broader debates on climate change adaptation and the pursuit of more just and sustainable futures.

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[00:00:00] **Ian M. Cook:** What does it mean to be resilient to climate change? Will all societies and different members of those societies adapt to the changing environment in the same way? Should they? Can we realistically expect communities who face multiple challenges, from violence to entrenched social and political inequalities, to realistically become even more resilient? [1], to adapt to one more challenge? And what might a more socially and environmentally just adaptation to climate change look like? These are all questions that I have. And, luckily for me, and I hope luckily for you, I had the opportunity to speak with researchers who have been working on just these questions in Nepal, Kenya, and Nicaragua.

The following audio essay which we've entitled "Just Climate" has three parts. First, we will explore whether we should be thinking with the concept of resilience at all. Secondly, whether adaptation to climate change is realistic in areas where violence and inequality abound. And, finally, what a more just adaptation might look like.

You'll hear from eight different researchers. Their thoughts woven together in conversation with me and one another. Probing these three different ideas from various angles and contexts. You won't learn who these different speakers are until the end of the essay, so as not to break the flow. But I'll tell you now that my name is Ian M. Cook.

I should also tell you that a full transcript with more details on those speaking and also references and resources accompanies the audio version of this essay. The ideas you hear are built on decades of scholarship, but this scholarship is better referenced in text than audio. Okay, let's move on to part one, in which I ask why talk about resilience to climate change at all? Shouldn't we be talking about fighting back and reclaiming the planet, not being more resilient?

[00:02:17] **Andrea Joslyn Nightingale:** A lot of us have shared this discomfort and in some ways our desire to speak about resilience is a desire to reclaim the term. So too much of the time the term is sort of a, a way to kind of take some of the, the more uncomfortable aspects of adapting to climate change out of the equation.

So we don't have to think about that some people are going to be better off than others or some people are going to be able to have better knowledge, better resources, more political power because the climate is changing [2]. And so when we take on this idea of resilience, we want to add back in the fact that any kind of resilient outcome, it's always emerges out of struggle [3].

So resilience itself is about struggle, and it's not about resolving the struggle, but it's about being in the struggle.

[00:03:16] **Noémi Gonda:** It really depends on how you understand resilience. And you're right, resilience has become often this wishy washy thing [4] that suggests that

it is all about people's abilities to get back to a state of equilibrium that has been lost [5; [6].

But I think our perspective is different. And we're trying, or we have tried to rethink resilience as a process. With, let's say, a normative outcome that is about justice and equity, but without ever providing a recipe on how this process should look like, or even how justice should look like. Because we recognize that the current situation in which we live in is a situation of injustices. It's a situation of inequalities, marginalization, oppression, violence.

[00:04:19] **Pierre Merlet**: taking your idea that resilience is a process. I think what is important for us is not to see resilience as a final outcome that people should achieve. So if we look at this process, what we understand by resilience is how people are actually relating and reacting with the changes that they are facing [7].

In an environment that is unequal, that is unfair, and that has a lot, a lot of, of challenges for them. So it's looking at these processes and what people actually do individually, collectively, in order to move forward, to move forward towards something that maybe could be better for themselves, according to their own views and their own expectations.

[00:05:03] **Edwige Philippine Marty**: There is this concept of also moving through change, which is really important, um, because we are going through these times and a lot of things that are happening, some of which are not going in the direction that we need for a more resilient society. But at the same time, we need to recognize that we need to effectively go on to different pathways [8].

[00:05:24] **Ian M. Cook**: So, we have this idea of resilience as a process that is born of struggle, that emerges through change, that creates the possibilities for different futures. But what does that mean in actuality?

[00:05:40] **Ben Muok**: The classic example from Kenya comes from the work that we have done so much in northern Kenya dealing with the pastoralist communities [9]. And the pastoral communities, their main economic activity is definitely livestock production. And with the droughts and the floods coming every year, they can no longer rely solely on livestock production. So one way that we have addressed the resilience of these communities is to diversify the livelihoods.

People go into small trades or other you know, other business so that they don't really have to rely on livestock [10; [11]. But they also give them other opportunities that the livestock production system can be more resilient by providing, you know, medical surveillance systems so they know when the diseases are coming and the warning systems to know when the floods are likely to come or the droughts are likely to come. And with that, they could be more able to prepare for.

[00:06:40] **Ian M. Cook:** Is such resilience in the face of climate change describing a series of individual solutions to a single problem or set of problems? Or rather, is it describing something that is social, collective, political?

[00:06:57] **Siri Ellen Hallstrøm Eriksen:** A key element of resilience is really the social and political aspects and the power relations that make us more or less resilient [12; 13]. So to me, resilience is really about the collective ability of society to relate to the environment and relate to climate change. So what resilience does it, it integrates both the politics and the social elements and the risk [14]. So it's, it's a way of looking at the social environmental aspects of a global challenge like climate change and looking at it through a lens of politics and social justice [15].

[00:07:37] **Ian M. Cook:** If it is about social, environmental, and political justice, then, I imagine, such a conception of resilience must also take into account how it affects different groups of people differently within any given society. Right.

[00:07:54] **Gyanu Maskey:** Climate impacts are differential. So it's not same within the different groups of the community and the society [16]. They are experiencing the stress due to climate change. So building resilience, particularly of the marginalized and the vulnerable communities is very important because they are the ones to suffer the most from the climate impacts with their least contribution [17].

[00:08:15] **Ian M. Cook:** And I think I know the answer to this, but I'll ask it anyway. If we need to understand how to build resilience amongst all sectors of a society, then does that mean we can do it with just a broad, global understanding of how marginalities and vulnerabilities are created?

[00:08:33] **Dil Khatri:** It's very important to, to actually really look at the local level in terms of, uh, how things happen because most of the agenda and resources are determined at a higher level centralized and it will be really important to actually unpack those local dynamics and actually sort of look at how decision making happens at local level or how their voice or agency are allowed or not allowed with a technical or more kind of a bureaucratic logic of decision making [18; 19].

So I think it is very important to look at those local dynamics and then actually also differential power dynamics within local level in terms of how some groups actually sort of are able to articulate more than others or how certain groups can actually have access to more resources than others [20].

[00:09:27] **Ian M. Cook:** How about some examples of how this plays out in actuality?

[00:09:33] **Noémi Gonda:** In Nicaragua, in the early 2000s, there was this realization that due to climate change, it would become more and more difficult to produce coffee in the areas that were apt for producing coffee. So when realizing that, the coffee

producing organizations came together with some scientists and tried to find solutions for this crisis of coffee production due to climate change.

One of the solutions that was proposed to this crisis of coffee production due to climate change was to shift to cocoa production. And many projects, climate change adaptation projects, started supporting coffee producers to shift to cocoa production. Of course, this type of solution to climate change was also very much embedded in or related to who was sitting at the decision making table when this type of decision was made [21].

The coffee producers in Nicaragua are a powerful sector, so they very much influenced the adaptation policies and projects that were being put forward. Said differently, the adaptation policies or projects that were prioritized were prioritized in such a way that they would respond to the coffee producers interests and not, for example, the smallholder staple grain producers interests.

[00:11:16] **Siri Ellen Hallstrøm Eriksen**: In our case in Kenya, there's increasing privatization of land, and there's also violence that makes certain grazing areas unavailable. And these are part of political and political economic developments that are undermining the space for pastoralism. So even though pastoralism and moving around with cattle would be, you know, well adapted to variable climatic conditions, we're actually developing the political economy in a way that's less resilient and less flexible in the face of climate change [22]. And we're doing this precisely because we're privileging certain commercial interests or certain ways of production that limit access to land, limit security, limit basically the resources available to people doing ruralism and diverse livelihoods.

[00:12:08] **Ian M. Cook**: And so, is it the case that, when all is said and done, that it's just another story of poor people having no agency, of the powerful co-opting the climate change agenda to their advantage?

That's depressing, if so.

[00:12:25] **Andrea Joslyn Nightingale**: We found in our research that a number of people who maybe on the surface don't seem to have that much political power, so not particularly wealthy, maybe not particularly well educated, perhaps from an ethnic group that's a bit marginalized within Nepali society, saying no [23]. I won't sell you my, my land that has that spring on it.

I might need that in the future. Or, you know, no matter how they're convinced, oh, but this is for the greater good, you need to participate in this community water scheme, and we need your water source. And they're like, no, that's okay, I don't think so. And we see this as being part of resilience, of people actually saying, wait a minute, maybe just tapping all our water sources and putting it into some big scheme that's going to make money for some people isn't, yes, on the one hand, it is solving a variety of different water shortages issues in that locality, but it's not really taking account what they need, and so we've been more interested in what kind of resilient outcomes

come from that struggle.

As opposed to the way in which resource sharing is imagined from outsiders and from the top. And they come in and they try to imagine how everybody will share the water resources. And it just completely disregards historical practices of controlling access to water [24].

[00:13:54] **Ian M. Cook:** The outsiders here are, I imagine, the development community or development industry? How might a grounded understanding of resilience as a collective process created through struggle, one that takes into account differences without relegating poorer groups into an agency less blob, interact with notions of development?

[00:14:18] **Siri Ellen Hallstrøm Eriksen:** We increasingly also talk about climate resilient development [25], which is about how do development trajectories actually develop over time, you know, as opposed to business as usual, development trajectory of high emissions, increasing, uh, climate impacts, uh, increasing, uh, inequity, undermining adaptive capacities and so on.

A climate resilient development is a sort of development that encompasses ecosystem stewardship [26] and equity, achievements of sustainable development goals, and that enables societies and the environment to thrive, now and in the future.

[00:14:55] **Andrea Joslyn Nightingale:** We look at the ways in which people engage with these struggles, not just with the natural world, but also with the kind of new programs, the new ideas, even the new actors [27].

There's a number of actors from whether that would be agencies that are giving money or government departments, or even, um, lay people who think they have something to say or some way to fix climate change. Oftentimes, those very well intentioned efforts are, don't, they don't allow for how local people experience change, right?

And so for us, resilience is the result of those struggles [3]. It's the result or it's the process through which people make claims and make their own experience matter in this global conversation about climate change.

[00:15:50] **Ian M. Cook:** So I think I've got it, but where to next?

[00:15:54] **Noémi Gonda:** So if you think about resilience as a process towards justice outcomes, then you're able to think about it as something political, something that demands engagement and critical thinking [28].

[00:16:15] **Ian M. Cook:** Critical thinking it is then. And one critical thought I have is whether we can still think about adaptation to climate change in places where there's conflict or severe inequalities. This is something we're going to explore in Part Two. ◻

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