



# IN SEARCH OF COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

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Since its introduction in the early 1970s, the notion of resilience has gained widespread appeal. While its roots are in ecology, resilience has influenced a wide variety of fields such as anthropology, human geography, psychology, cultural theory, management sciences, urban theory and, most recently, security studies. The concept of resilience is alluring, suggesting an ability to 'bounce back' from adversity and, possibly, even achieve a state that is better than the original one, prior to the misfortune. When applied to communities, the label can be an affirmation of their resourcefulness and capacity to mobilise when faced with shocks and stresses. But there is a danger in using the term uncritically, particularly if its interpretation is devoid of an understanding (or critical questioning) of power, agency and responsibility.



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THIS PAPER PROVIDES a brief overview of the origin, uptake and interpretation of the concept of resilience. It explains how resilience relates to social vulnerability and provides a short critique of the concept. The paper reviews how the National Development Plan (NDP) interprets both community resilience and social vulnerability, introduces a set of features that define a resilient community and presents a framework for advancing community resilience. The paper

concludes by briefly summarising the key themes and dimensions of community resilience as reflected in the papers in this edited volume.

## ORIGIN AND UPTAKE OF THE CONCEPT OF RESILIENCE

The concept of resilience stems from the field of ecology and was traditionally defined by the Canadian ecologist CS Holling as the factor that 'determines

the persistence of relationships within a system and is a measure of the ability of these systems to absorb changes ... and still persist' (in Folke 2006: 254). This concept of resilience within the ecological context emphasised the amount of shock or change a system can absorb and the extent to which a system can reorganise to reach a level of stability in order to maintain the status quo. Holling's contribution was to recognise that ecosystems are characterised by complexity, multiple equilibria and change, rather than a single-equilibrium and stable state.

The definition of resilience developed, as ecological studies progressed and the multi-layered complexity of an ecosystem was acknowledged. In particular, attention shifted to the interaction between human and ecological systems. Initially, much emphasis was placed on the influence of human actions on the capacity of ecosystems to generate natural resources and ecosystems services (for example, over-fishing of certain species, or soil erosion or any other human action that causes erosion of resilience). Over time this led to an appreciation that the erosion of natural resources and ecosystem services is likely to have adverse impacts on societal development, and the reciprocal nature of interactions between human and natural systems (Berkes 2007). This influence of systems theory on resilience thinking became more and more pronounced, with a recognition that systems (ecological and human) are complex and adaptive.

### DEFINING RESILIENCE

Resilience is often associated with an ability to cope, withstand, absorb or recover from shocks and stresses. For example, Adger (in Folke 2006: 259) defines social resilience as 'the ability of human communities to withstand external shocks to their social infrastructure such as environmental variability or social, economic and political upheaval'. However, emphasising the robustness and persistence of a system following a disturbance assumes a level of

constancy and predictability that, more often than not, is non-existent, particularly in relation to complex systems. In fact, resilience thinking recognises that uncertainty is inherent to complex systems, and that living with change and uncertainty is unavoidable (Berkes 2007; Folke 2006). As John F Kennedy once remarked, 'there is nothing more certain and unchanging than uncertainty and change'.

Carpenter et al. (2001: 766) identify three characteristics that define the concept of resilience in relation to social-ecological systems: (a) the amount of change the system can undergo while still retaining its structure and function; (b) the degree to which the system is capable of self-organisation; and (c) the degree to which the system can build the capacity to learn and adapt. Although located within the field of ecology, the concepts of adaptation, transformability, learning, innovation and self-organisation have become quite influential in subsequent resilience thinking, particularly in relation to social/community resilience (e.g. Berkes 2007; Folke 2006; McAslan 2011).

Adaptability refers to 'the capacity of people in a social-ecological system to build resilience through collective action', whereas transformability refers to 'the capacity of people to create a fundamentally new social-ecological system when ecological, political, social or economic conditions make the existing system untenable' (Walker et al. in Folke 2006: 262). The notion of collective action underpins both these notions and is returned to later in this paper.

Folke et al. (in Berkes 2007) further develop the notions of learning, innovation and self-organisation, identifying four critical factors that interact across temporal and spatial scales and are crucial to building resilience in social-ecological systems. These factors have particular relevance for what a resilient community looks like.

#### 1) *Learning to live with change and uncertainty.*

Emphasis is placed on the importance of social memory, to learn from past events and enable

system renewal. In the words of Nelson Mandela: 'In the life of any individual, family, community or society, memory is of fundamental importance. It is the fabric of identity'.

- 2) *Nurturing diversity in its various forms.* Diversity (in relation to ecology, economy, livelihoods and actors/partnerships) is critical for renewal, and diversification is an important strategy to reduce risks.
- 3) *Combining different types of knowledge for learning.* Recognising the complementarity of different knowledge systems (including local, situated knowledge systems) and establishing cross-scale platforms for dialogues are important for stimulating learning and innovation.
- 4) *Creating opportunity for self-organisation and cross-scale linkages.* Resilience involves renewal and reorganisation, with some of the key aspects being social organisation, community-based management, multi-level partnerships and nurturing learning organisations.

At this stage it is important to consider briefly the notion of vulnerability, with a particular focus on social vulnerability. Berkes (2007: 292) refers to resilience as 'the flipside' of vulnerability, i.e. the factors or characteristics that makes a system less vulnerable to shocks and stresses. Similarly, building community resilience means focusing on issues that reduce the vulnerability of communities (McAslan 2011).

## SOCIAL VULNERABILITY

Vulnerability can be defined as 'the degree to which a population or system is susceptible to, and unable to cope with, hazards or stresses, including the effects of climate change' (Pasteur 2011: 11). Much of the resilience literature focuses on vulnerability to natural disasters and emergencies, such as floods, droughts and fires, often as a result of changes in ecosystems (e.g. climate change). Factors such as location (i.e. proximity to hazards) and access to relevant

information (regarding risks and available responses) clearly contribute to such vulnerability.

McAslan (2011) argues that vulnerability stems from the overlap of human systems, the natural environment and the built environment. In addition to location and access to information, key factors that contribute to social vulnerability are the quality of (public and private) infrastructure, housing type, density of the built environment, economic wellbeing of a community, access to resources and political status (i.e. inclusion/marginalisation).

The notion of social vulnerability is valuable for two reasons. First, it allows for an appreciation that shocks and stresses are not necessarily (exclusively) environmental in nature but can also be the result of changes in the social, economic or political environment, such as illness, death, loss of employment or political conflict.

Secondly, and more importantly perhaps, it recognises that vulnerability is the sum total of factors in the socio-cultural, natural, physical, economic and political environment. In other words, it is multi-dimensional. As Pasteur (2011) reminds us, people who live in impoverished social and economic conditions are more susceptible to environmental hazards, as they have less resources to draw on to cope with, and recover from, these shocks. And, 'if people have weak access to, and influence over, the institutions and policies that govern their access to resources and decision making, they can do little to address the underlying causes of their vulnerability' (Pasteur 2011: 9).

This focus on systemic issues underlying vulnerability and, in turn, undermining resilience brings us to a critique of the notion of resilience.

## CRITIQUE OF RESILIENCE THINKING

The concept of resilience is very appealing, as its widespread uptake across various fields suggests.

But it is also an elusive and contested term, partly because it has seen so many applications. For the purpose of this paper, the critique of resilience theory is limited to three issues.

First, much of the resilience literature presupposes a norm that does not correlate to the daily reality of a large part of the global population, or indeed the population of South Africa. Resilience literature tends to speak about shocks and stresses as an event, an occurrence, something that is considered 'abnormal' and results in loss of some sort. For example, McAslan (2011: 1) states that 'the concept of resilience ... suggests the ability ... to recover and return to normality after confronting an abnormal, alarming and often unexpected threat'. This does not speak to what could be called a state of generalised precariousness, which tends to characterise poor communities, where shocks and stresses are a part of daily life, not once-off blows. In contrast, the norm (or state of normality) suggested in much resilience literature takes a certain standard of living and quality of life for granted.

Secondly, resilience theory fails to take adequate account of systemic factors that result in (or aggravate) social vulnerability and undermine resilience. It does not critically examine how power, ecology and development intersect. The relations of power are left intact, and the notion of social justice is excluded from the purview, because of the blind spot of how power is exerted (globally, regionally, nationally, locally) and manifested (Ernstson 2014; Slater 2014). Although the concept of resilience incorporates an element of transformation, as mentioned previously, this does not mean that it is grounded in a radical agenda of transformation of power relations.

When resilience is mooted in a context of 'generalised precariousness' and entrenched inequality, the danger is that people are expected to reach a state that may well prove unattainable,

particularly if the systemic causes of vulnerability remain intact. Moreover, as Slater (2014) cautions, it may (inadvertently, perhaps) support a neoliberal agenda of austerity, capital accumulation and dislocation of the poor.

The third criticism is that the strong influence of systems thinking has resulted in a high level of abstraction, where context, difference, history and particularity of place or process, cannot be adequately accommodated (Ernstson 2014). Ironically, perhaps, systems theory has proven to be extremely resilient to revision by virtue of presenting an abstract overarching framework that can absorb almost any textured account.

These critiques form the starting point for the papers in this publication, which seek to redefine the notion of community resilience with reference to specific causes and manifestations of social vulnerability and with regard to social organisation in the face of, and sometimes in response to, social vulnerability. In other words, a fine-grained contextual reading is essential to appreciate community resilience, as and where it manifests itself, and to identify the core components that enable communities to become more resilient. The papers describe realities that are more representative of the 'average South African experience' than the norm implied in much of the resilience literature. The papers also highlight issues of power/empowerment, with some articulating an explicit agenda for transformation. Finally, most papers in this publication provide detailed contextual accounts of particular communities (of location, interest or circumstance) who organise around particular issues, draw on community assets and engage in collective action.

Before proposing a framework for enabling community resilience, we briefly review how the NDP reflects the notions of resilience and social vulnerability, and what a resilient community looks like.

## RESILIENCE AND SOCIAL VULNERABILITY IN THE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN

As the first overarching strategic plan for South Africa, informed by a progressive development agenda, the NDP is a useful reference point for assessing how the notions of community resilience and social vulnerability are understood.

The NDP makes numerous references to resilience/resilient, in particular in the chapters dealing with environmental sustainability (Chapter 5), human settlements (Chapter 8) and social security (Chapter 11). Even the chapter on fighting corruption refers to the need to build a 'resilient anti-corruption system' (NPC 2012: 447). With the exception of this last reference, the understanding of resilience reflected in the NDP is similar to that in the broader literature on social-ecological systems. For example, Chapter 5 states, 'Development challenges must be addressed in a manner that ensures environmental sustainability and builds resilience to the effects of climate change, especially in poorer communities' (NPC 2012: 197). The chapter on human settlements introduces the principle of spatial resilience, which is defined as 'Vulnerability to environmental degradation, resource scarcity and climatic shocks [which] must be reduced. Ecological systems should be protected and replenished.' (p.277).

By and large, however, the NDP does not escape the criticism levelled earlier against the use of resilience in much of the literature. Resilience is reflected as an ideal outcome, without defining clearly the characteristics of a 'resilient society' (p.209), 'resilient economy' (p.209), 'resilient towns and cities' (p.284) or 'resilient transport networks' (p.189), let alone a resilient anti-corruption system, as mentioned above. All that is implied is the ability to somehow withstand, adapt to or mitigate the effects of climate change and resource scarcity/dependency. Resilience is presented a desired state, something to aspire,

without acknowledging any current manifestations of community organisation or collective action as characteristic of community resilience.

The NDP has quite a sophisticated interpretation of vulnerability, particularly in the chapter dealing with social security. It recognises that vulnerability manifests itself in different ways, such as health status, employment status, income status and housing/tenure status and can further stem from natural disasters, crop failure and accidents. The chapter on human settlements refers to informal settlements as being 'associated with high degrees of physical and social vulnerability' (p.273).

Throughout the NDP, only one explicit reference is made to the need to address systemic factors when seeking to bring about a resilient society and economy:

South Africa's primary approach to adapting to climate change is to strengthen the nation's economic and societal resilience. This includes ensuring that all sectors of society are more resilient to the future impacts of climate-change by:

- ✦ Decreasing poverty and inequality
- ✦ Creating employment
- ✦ Increasing levels of education and promoting skills development
- ✦ Improving health care
- ✦ Maintaining the integrity of ecosystems and the many services that they provide (p209).

Apart from this reference, the NDP does not link the notion of preparing the poor for future shocks (largely seen to be related to shocks and systems in the natural world) to current day realities and struggles of the poor (characterised by perpetual precariousness, as argued before, but also by diverse forms of social organisation and collective action). It remains conspicuously silent on the global, national and local political economy that produces, reinforces and perpetuates social vulnerability – and in fact creates

and aggravates environmental hazards, shocks and stresses that are disproportionately felt by the poor.

### WHAT DOES A RESILIENT COMMUNITY LOOK LIKE?

Drawing on Folke et al. (in Berkes 2007), a resilient community is one that learns from the past and values memory, values diversity and pursues diverse strategies to meet its needs. It draws on local knowledge, which it combines with other sources of knowledge (including specialist knowledge). It organises around collective issues and links up with other communities and actors. However, resilience in a community cannot be decoupled from the imperative of an acceptable standard of living and basic requirements for human survival, livelihoods, safety, belonging and respect.

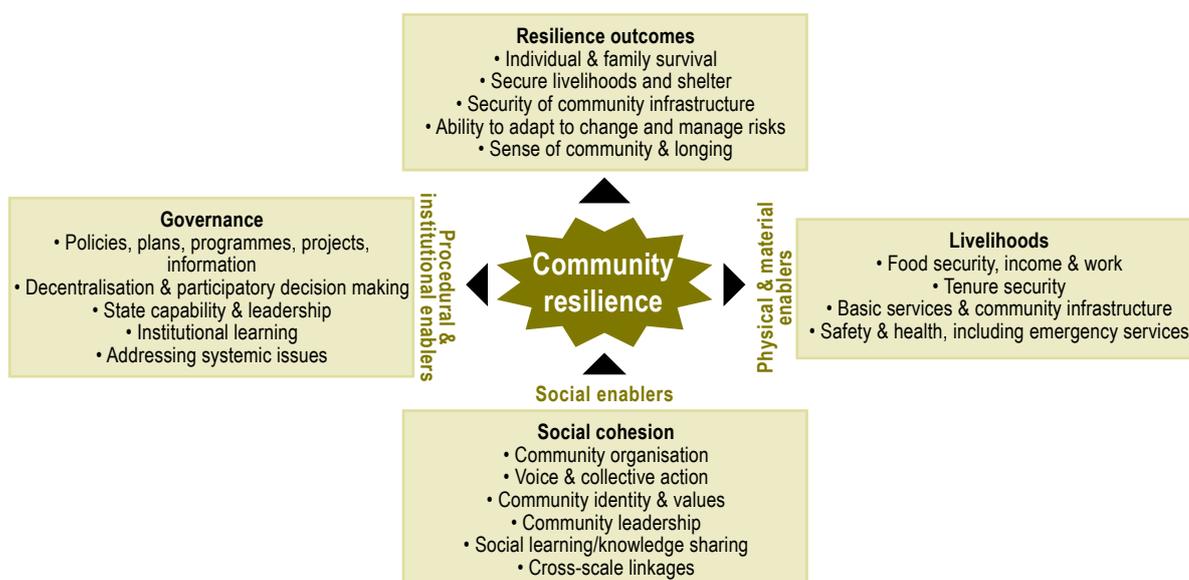
Communities are faced with challenges and stresses brought on by factors (including systemic ones) that are beyond their control. It is therefore important that other actors, especially in the state, provide an enabling and supportive environment,

which includes addressing underlying systemic issues.

McAslan (2011) presents a framework for community resilience that outlines three sets of enablers of community resilience: physical, procedural and social. *Physical enablers* refer to the physical assets and infrastructure required to satisfy basic human needs for survival (air, water, food, shelter) and safety (including personal security, health and wellbeing), and also includes the physical state of individuals. *Procedural enablers* refer to institutional knowledge or information, policies, plans and strategies to facilitate disaster management. *Social enablers* refer to a community's skills and preparedness for change and uncertainty, as measured by social cohesion, motivation and leadership.

Although written for a particular context (Australia) and issue (disaster management), this framework can be adapted to suit the South African context, with its high levels of poverty, inequality, fragile livelihoods and low levels of human development (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Community resilience framework**



Adapted from McAslan (2011) and Pasteur (2011)

As Figure 1 shows, community resilience has three components: livelihoods, social cohesion and governance. Each of these components translate into specific enablers of community resilience: physical and material, social, and procedural and institutional. The conceptual framework is broadened to reflect South Africa's particular contextual realities, stemming from systemic causes of social vulnerability. The notion of livelihoods is foregrounded and refers to 'the resources (including skills, technologies and organizations) and activities required to make a living and have a good quality of life' (Pasteur 2011: 29). It expands McAslan's interpretation of physical infrastructure, assets and enablers, to take account of precarious living conditions as a daily reality, rather than as a result of a (future) natural disaster or hazard.

Similarly, the notion of governance is introduced to indicate that the task at hand is also to address systemic factors underlying social vulnerability, not merely to arrive at a state of preparedness to pre-empt or deal with future shocks and stresses as a result of environmental hazards or disruptions. In addition to McAslan's more circumscribed focus on policies, plans, programmes, procedures and information, emphasis is placed on state capability to address current development challenges, institutionalise learning and adaptive management, and a shift to partnership-based modes of decision making and service delivery. Public leadership is an important aspect of this.

Social cohesion is the product of common values, commitment to shared learning and collaboration, responsive leadership and community organisation.

Thus, as Figure 1 suggests, community resilience is about, on the one hand, the process of organisation, knowledge sharing, collaboration and resource mobilisation and, on the other hand, tangible improvements in standards of living and quality of life. To appropriate a phrase from McAslan (2011: 11),

these can be called the 'ingredients' of community resilience. Resilience outcomes help us to clarify what resilience looks like in practice, which includes individual and family survival, secure livelihoods and shelter, and security of community infrastructure. It also speaks to an ability to adapt to change and manage risks, as well as a sense of community and belonging.

Figure 1 indicates that some core 'ingredients' of resilience can also be outcomes of community resilience. For example, social mobilisation can make a community more resilient to current and future stresses but may also be a manifestation of a community able to manage (or even steer) change, improve their living conditions and successfully lay claim on the state to take its share of responsibility.

## ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

The papers in this edited volume reflect a strong focus on a 'bottom up' approach to resilience, with particular attention given to how communities (of location or of interest) mobilise around substantive issues (housing, sanitation, food security, income, neighbourhood planning or historical injustice) and engage in collective action aimed at addressing particular vulnerabilities. In this regard, leadership (both individual and collective) is clearly important, as discussed in the papers by BESG, CORC, DDP and TCOE.

While community agency is recognised and affirmed, other actors and interventions clearly need to complement the actions of communities. Without external action and support, there are limits to what communities can achieve, whether it concerns microfinance as a means to address income poverty (as described in the paper by Khanya-aicdd), tenure security, housing and basic services (as elaborated on by BESG and CORC), food security and land access (TCOE), historical trauma (Afesis-corplan) or community revitalisation (DDP). A common thread is

the notion of partnerships, both within and between communities, and between communities and the state, aspects that are further elaborated on in the papers from BESG, CORC, DDP, Isandla Institute and TCOE.

The papers by CORC, DDP and Isandla Institute also pick up on the notion of social and institutional learning, while the Afesis-corplan paper speaks to the theme of memory and the need to address historical pain and woundedness.

Thus, the papers speak strongly into the three components of resilience: livelihoods, social cohesion and governance. A particularly critical conclusion is that the nature of governance needs to change, to be deliberative and collaborative, enabling and supporting community voices and initiatives, and be geared towards addressing systemic factors of vulnerability. This implies that the relationship between the state and communities is transformed to one where the state is a development enabler and partner, rather than a provider and decider.

A prominent feature is the notion of power, both internal and external to the community. The DDP paper reflects on how a dissolution of power in community processes can lead to the emergence of innovative and lasting community-driven solutions to local problems. BESG reminds us that community structures set up to coordinate particular community struggles run the risk of being hijacked by local political elites, and patronage permeates development opportunities, such as shelter and work opportunities. TCOE argues for

an explicit political agenda and mobilisation strategy for transformation to address the structural causes of landlessness and marginalisation of the rural poor. The paper by Isandla Institute posits that contestation and conflict, which are intrinsically linked to power and powerlessness, need to be recognised, managed and harnessed in the interest of bringing about a more inclusive, community-based and sustainable development practice.

### CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the critique of resilience thinking, the concept of community resilience provides a useful lens to review current examples of self-organisation and collective action around critical development concerns in South Africa. This paper has argued that we need to understand resilience in the context of continual stress and shock (i.e. a state of generalised precariousness), as opposed to the usual once-off shock or disturbance that most resilience literature is about. While it is important to recognise and celebrate resilience from within/from below, it is equally important to acknowledge that other actors, particularly the state, have a vital role to play in creating the material, physical, procedural, socio-cultural and political conditions that allow community resilience to flourish. As we prepare for an uncertain future, the time is now to put the necessary building blocks, relationships and values in place to enable communities to be resilient and empowered.

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