



RESILIENCE, COMMUNITY ACTION AND SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION

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People, Place,
Practice, Power, Politics
and Possibility in Transition



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3.0. Linking Theory and Practice of Community Resilience

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Resilience – and its complement of achieving transformation to more desirable systems – is an appropriate goal in attempting to manage the complex problems of human and environmental change. However, like the Indian metaphor of blind men feeling different parts of an elephant and drawing confident but incorrect conclusions as to the nature of the object before them, there are several different strands of resilience thinking, from different disciplines or interdisciplinary fields, and there is little communication or sharing across these. Since one specialises in ecosystem behaviour (recognising society), another entirely in human dimensions, and a third in disasters (there is also 'engineering resilience'), these offer excellent prospects for reconciliation to provide us with insights and guidance for managing and where necessary changing our social-ecological systems. Community action can contribute to this reconciliation.



Figure 3.0.1 – Helen Ross. Credit: Gesa Maschkowski.

Each of these strands of resilience thinking is relevant to an understanding of 'community resilience': a term often used in both policy and activism, but which until recently has lacked a consistent grounding in resilience science. That of social-ecological systems is couched in the paradigm of complexity, a field that understands the world in terms of the behaviour of 'complex adaptive systems'. This rejects the idea of our world being governed by clear cause-and-effect relationships and predictable linear trends, to view it as consisting of far more complex sets of interacting patterns – just think of the variables and interactions involved in producing our daily weather. Despite being termed 'social-ecological', this is so far limited in the understanding and theorisation of social dimensions. A psychology and health science strand has built from studies of how some individuals thrive despite major adversities in

their lives, to understand the nature of social resilience: what strengths do communities and societies hold, and can they be enhanced? Unfortunately this strand has tended to neglect environmental roles. Meanwhile, disaster resilience combines ideas from the psychology and mental health literature (but more focused on individuals and households), with engineering resilience, the need for infrastructure that can stand up to major natural disasters.

Understanding resilience in these multiple ways is highly important for community action. Taking the best aspects of each, I first advocate understanding our world in terms of complex adaptive systems, full of uncertainties, not as a predictable system that responds linearly to interventions, or behaves according to clear trends. I advocate thinking in terms of social-ecological systems (including the economic), but developing a far more sophisticated understanding of the many ways in which the human dimensions drive their ecosystems and adapt to change. Social change through activism, and understanding and addressing power relationships in the process, is a crucial but hitherto neglected area. Then, I advocate attention to the psychology and mental health focus on people's strengths rather than their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Berkes and Ross (2013) listed a number that have been identified in research to date (Figure 3.0.2). They note that these are probably necessary, but not sufficient: agency and self-organising are needed to convert latent strengths into active processes when required.

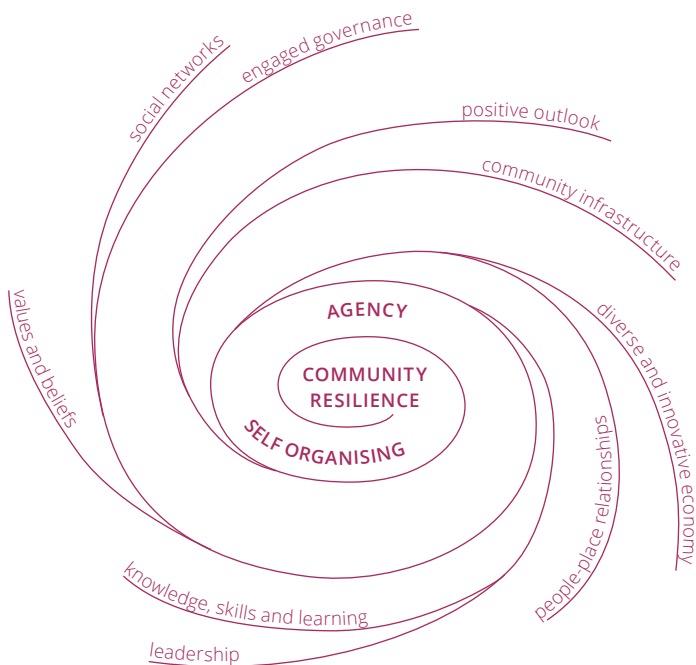


Figure 3.0.2 – Community Resilience as a Function of the Strengths or Characteristics that have been Identified as Important, Activated Through Agency and Self-organization (Berkes and Ross 2013).



Figure 3.0.3 – Repair Café, Transition Bonn. Credit: Gesa Maschkowski.

The concept of adaptive capacity, having the appropriate strengths in place to adapt when required, overlaps strongly with the idea of resilience. While there are different ways of understanding this relationship because of differing views as to how much resilience is a process or an outcome, for convenience we can view adaptive capacity as the potential to cope or thrive through major challenges (or disturbances), and resilience – or transformation - the processes and outcomes of doing so. Thus community action could be focused on building adaptive capacity, focusing on the sets of strengths known to contribute to adaptive capacity, and communities' senses of agency and capability for self-organising.

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Like the social-ecological systems theorists and activists in this volume, I advocate understanding resilience as a multi-level phenomenon, in which local links readily to global, and the

resilience of individuals contributes to and receives from the resilience of their communities and places.

I thus see two major opportunities for community action. Community developers, taking a resilience perspective, have a clear role in building and integrating selected community strengths, and empowering communities to self-organise and exert agency in order to build the resilience of the local parts of the global system they steward. Community actors, and activists, can adopt a resilience perspective to reshape their social and ecological goals: from past and current goals towards improving the world and local places, to building the resilience of their parts of the globe (and global systems such as energy use) to both known and as yet unknown threats and challenges. Successful action often links local action with global networks, producing the cross-scale effects and multi-level change phenomena recognised by social-ecological systems theorists.

Reference

Berkes, F. & H. Ross (2013). Community resilience: Toward an integrated approach. *Society and Natural Resources* 26(1): 5-20.



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Resilience has become a familiar buzz word in mainstream politics, most commonly as an excuse for 'business as usual'. Both resilience science and practical experience of community-led action for social change suggest an alternative view, in which resilience implies deep and far-reaching transformation of society.

This collection helps bring that vision into focus through a compelling blend of insights, ideas and action points from community activists, activist-scholars and leading resilience scientists. It includes direct accounts of practical efforts to build resilience at community level, theoretical reflections from a range of academic fields, and calls for collaboration among diverse efforts to create and defend community resilience worldwide.



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