What is a Resilient Society? Toward Integrated Resilient Communities: A View from Germany

Roland Benedikter and Karim Fathi

Co-Director
Center for Advanced Studies of Eurac Research Bozen-Bolzano-Bulsan
Consultant
Conflict Analysis and Resilience Management, Europe-University Frankfurt,
Germany
E-mail: rolandbenedikter@yahoo.de, karim.fathi@die-denkbank.de.

Like most Western societies, contemporary Germany is in the process of deep restructuring through change drivers, such as the migration crisis; the turn to sustainable energy; and new security needs triggered by recent terror attacks, such as the one onto the Berlin Christmas market in December, 2016. While there is a significantly growing challenge to the public management of new multi-cultural and multi-religious ambiences, particularly in urban centers and regional conurbations, climate change will play a role in transforming the agricultural and farming sector, and natural desasters, such as the floodings in Northern Germany in the summer of 2017, may become more frequent. Given all this multi-dimensional and interrelated change, the question is how German communities–with their diverse needs between the agricultural north and the industrial south, and between the so-called "old" federal states in the west and the "new" federal states in the East–may become more resilient. In addition, there is a new discourse in Europe about the overall

resilience of nation states given their increasing internal differentiation. The main question is what the decisive factors for increasing resilience can and should be.

The answers currently debated are multiple, and they try to make use of experiences both within the affected communities, and from external sources. For example, in their contribution "The Unbroken Chain in a Resilient Society," Dante A. Disparte and Les Williams have rightly pointed out that one of the most important factors for creating crisis-resistant, resilient communities are prepared people in households. Yet the concept of resilient society, which is at the forefront of the current interdisciplinary policy debate, and is destined to dominate the international prevention and applied foresight discourse over the coming decades, must integrate many more factors to get a grip on the complexity of contemporary change. Departing from the many valid sectorial contributions, such as Disparteand Williams's, we have to start a more in-depth debate on what a resilient society is, and should be as a whole. Given the multiplying crises, local and global partners will have to come together to foster a convergent concept of resilient society as soon as possible.

Questions and Issues

In the era of globalization, both today's local communities and their greater societies are faced with multifarious challenges. They increasingly need to cope with interlinked uncertainties. Although the term "vulnerability"–which means exposure to harm, as well as the inability to cope with or withstand the impact of a harmful environment– has been used in social and political science discourse over the past years in order to raise awareness of potential risks, and to push toward more sustainable and inclusive policies. It must be a positive and inclusive

term based on both prevention and protection factors, and one that could satisfactorily initiate the notion of a flexible and integrative society being able to cope with multifarious uncertainties and withstand versatile crises by constantly re-inventing itself has yet been theoretically established.

Thus, in today's advanced phase of globalization there is the need for a positive, overarching architectural strategy to convert crises into opportunities, or even temporary failure into long-term empowerment. Could the term "resilience"–which in its basic meaning suggests resistance, stubbornness, or even hardiness–used mainly in psychology and educational science since the 1970s, make an important contribution to social environments in this respect? If so, what would be viable approaches toward a resilient society? Since neither the term, nor the respective potential strategies and the resulting perspectives, have a longstanding consideration in applied politics conceptually, it is high time to start an encompassing, yet admittedly non-conclusive, debate.

Resilience as interdisciplinary approach

In view of their proliferating interconnectedness, which includes a growing trend toward notorious instability, globalized societies will need to better reflect on how they can grow resilient. The concept of resilience can be adopted by policy making as a new interdisciplinary approach enabling differing dimensions of societal development to link up with each other. The concept of a resilient society is in particular is a pragmatic way leading to a more closely cooperating national and international community, since most of its "ingredients" may only be activated across borders.

If, for instance, the European crisis, which has persisted for ten years now, has taught us a practical lesson, it is the insight that in times of political and social "hyper complexity" that many problems emerge at

the same time,and turn out to be interdependent, so that a single problem-solving approach, be it political, economic, financial, or non-governmental, will not suffice to appropriately address it. Furthermore, some problems change constantly, and thus become a permanent condition. They cannot be solved once and for all, but must wisely coexist. Former and present political action plans have often lacked the multi-dimensional approach. This has usually led to a certain paralysis of the elite, who tend to tackle problems in a separate and isolated way, even though they are aware that integration and multi-dimensionality are the keys to coping with contemporary problems.

The still relatively new concept of a "resilient society" may offer at least a heuristic remedy. It is a meta-approach of increased integration and sustainability, which further raises a politically "neutral" option to join regions with states, and individual states with the greater whole of the globalized international community. Since the notion of resilience points the way towards integration and wholeness without losing relevance or drifting off into intellectual dreaming, it can be conceived as a "natural" part of multi-level governance. Yet in what way?

Resilience in the context of social innovation movements

Whether "traditional" or digital terror, climate change, growing global social inequality, instability of financial markets, or energy insecurity, in the age of globalization societies are faced with multifarious interconnected challenges. Research and policy counselling have been focusing on mostly sectorial "risk factors." In contrast, there is little knowledge about "safety factors" that enable a society to not just avoid trends, but to positively cope with a complex and uncertain environment, and withstand versatile crises. A change in perspective away from the

question of "How do crises originate, and how do I react to them?" toward the question of "How do healthy balance and stability evolve, and how do I develop robustness to crises?" was initiated as early as in the 1970s in the educational sciences. Meanwhile, the new question has been applied to corporate and urban contexts, to which the notion of resilience (from Latin *resilire*=bounce off) has significantly contributed. Over the past few years, the resilience discourse has increasingly gained a foothold in the sustainability discourse. Often translated as "resistance" or "future viability," resilience has been interpreted as the ability of a system to manage crises with its own sources, and in turn to even exploit them for self-developing and self-improving purposes.

The notion of resilience was first introduced in the 1950s in the natural sciences, and later adopted by psychology and the educational sciences. One of the best-known applications is a long-term study by the developmental psychologist Emmy E. Werner, who explained why some children on the Hawaiian island of Kauai, where they grew up under extremely unfavourable conditions, still developed healthy and self-confident personalities. Since then, psychologists employing the concept of resilience have researched which factors need to interact for humans to withstand crises and trauma.

Since the end of the 1990s, the notion of resilience has been increasingly applied to corporate contexts. The question of which criteria an organization needs to fulfill to be robust enough to withstand unpredictable crises (the so-called "black swans") has been posed with growing interest in the United States and Europe. Notable studies include contributions by pioneers Karl E. Weick and Kathleen M. Sutcliffe, and by Annette Gebauer and Ursula Kiel-Dixon, who brought the concept to Germany in the 2000's, merging it with the Central European philosophical tradition. Both teams explored the organizational structures of so-called "High Reliability Organizations" (HRO), i.e., organizations operating in uncertain and changeable crisis-affected environments, such

as the military or fire departments, trying to learn from their experience for society as a whole. One of HRO's many important criteria is a culture based on errors, which is not limited to finger pointing, but tracks down the source of error to learn and apply insights to future situations.

Furthermore, businesses show an increased interest in the sources that can help create psychologically more resilient managers and employees, promoting their health to guard against the growing burnout trend.

In comparison, encompassing concepts on resilient societies are still relatively scarce. "Resilient cities," i.e., sub-forms of resilient societies, have been known for some time, though. The more global cities (and their elites) are connecting, the more they are theorized, as for example by Saskia Sassen's groundbreaking work, and the more they are theorized, the more the interest in overarching and transdisciplinary resilience increases. However, also outside global cities, many local communities are preparing themselves for a future of dwindling resources in joint ventures. They focus on measures to strengthen the regional and local economies, and to reduce consumption of fossil fuels. In 2011, one of the first articles comparing the resilience of different cities in an in-depth approach ranked Copenhagen, Curitiba (Brazil), and Barcelona as the most resilient cities worldwide. It was written by Boyd Cohen from the Triple Pundit organization, who analyzed resiliency from the relatively narrow focus of the climate issue, i.e., the adaptation to or the management of natural disasters in a future scenario of rising sea levels.

A more recent study from 2014, written by the Grosvenor organization, ranked Toronto, Vancouver, and Calgary, all Canadian cities, as the three out of the 50 most resilient cities in the world. It is noteworthy that this study referred to different criteria, then Cohen, and thus to a different concept of social resilience, namely: 1) governance, 2) institutions, 3) technology and learning, 4) planning systems, and 5) access to funding. These criteria enabled a broader, cross-disciplinary application of the

resilience concept towards more crisis contexts than just natural hazards. However, both examples give an impression that due to its multi-contextual applicability, measuring the resilience of complex social systems like a city, let alone a society, remains a huge challenge for further research.

This is because the contemporary challenges of (post-)modern societies are multifarious, including the migration crises, climate change, global demographic and cultural shifts, exponential technological innovation, and man-machine convergence, new political divides and security threats, cyber- as well as "traditional" terrorism, plus rising populisms–and their inherent volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA). In view of this constellation, we assume that contemporary societies require a "broad" or "general" concept of resilience, which is trans-disciplinary and applicable to multiple contexts. We call it "systemic resilience," since we refer to a competency which is inherent to the resilience of a given societal system itself, as well as to its interconnections to other systems, and which can be applied to multiple crisis contexts. Accordingly, the examples of Cohen's article and the Grosvenor report illustrate the difficulties in providing a truly integrative interpretation and implementation of the notion of resilience, as well as its imminent conceptual work.

Four current lead concepts of resilient society

How is the concept of resilient society, including socio-economic factors, understood in the current discourse, especially in the context of ecological, economic, social, political, and technological challenges? At first glance, at least four overlapping schools of thought are discernable, each defining and evaluating the concept of resilient society in different terms, with regard to different challenges, and with differing perspectives

in mind.

One of the dominant schools of contemporary resilience thought originates in security discourse. It encompasses the concept of resilient societies around the perimeter of emergency preparedness and response, as well as the systemic mitigation of damage. Accordingly, special attention is given to enhancing the durability of the technologically operated, smart infrastructure of big cities to cope with disasters. This discourse was a consequence of terrorist attacks, and especially of natural disasters, in the United States, such as hurricane Harvey. This resilience concept includes earthquake-proof architecture, fault-resistant power, resistant telecommunication networks, and heat supply. Its predominant discourse takes place in the Anglo-American world, with contributions, among others, by the Foundation for Resilient Societies in the United States, and by Loughborough University in Great Britain.

Due to its vulnerability to natural disasters combined its with state-of-the-art know-how, Japan represents another source of inspiration of such implementation. On the one hand, Japan stands out with extensive experience in developing disaster prevention programs, large-scale training measures, and advanced technologies to mitigate damage. On the other hand, the island nation is also an example of cultural practices that promote the civic spirit of resilience in the people's ability to withstand suffering, featuring a high degree of discipline and solidarity. The Japanese term *gambaru* expresses this mentality. It means persistence, or giving one's best until the very end. A similar popular saying for times of crises has been used in England during the Second World War, namely "Be calm and carry on." Many in the Anglo-American world interpret this as the mantra of resilience until the present day, although it may be to some extent reductionist.

The second, rather innovation-oriented school of thought focuses less on risk minimization and disaster management than on risk adjustment and disaster transformation. The analysis of factors influencing social

and technological change here takes priority to harmonize society within a fast-changing environment. This requires the abilities of understanding complexity, and of systemically promoting innovation. An ideal approach consists of a large-scale exchange of experts and innovators stemming from different areas, as well as in the targeted support of civil society initiatives and new technologies. Worth mentioning are a number of grassroots initiatives, promoting cultural practices of regional economy, decentralized energy generation and self-sufficiency to effect social change from the bottom up, thus distributing risk into a flexible network instead of concentrating it in one vulnerable lead point. Initiatives in Anglo-Saxon societies, such as the Transition Town movement or the Austrian project Zämma Leaba (=Live Together), try to anticipate the consequences of crises and prepare for them in time. A further key feature of this school of thought is to encourage experimental thinking about resilience in general, and in networked (community) approaches. Discussion forums, such as the Change Laboratory, offer learning platforms to develop sustainable policies, and to promote the broadest possible innovation. The spectrum of representative organizations ranges from the American PopTech innovators' network to the academic Stockholm Resilience Centre.

The third just-emerging school of thought is characterized by a specifically analytical approach of stocktaking, which tries to provide the tools to transform "natural" social resilience into feasible criteria for recommended action. In 2010, the German Pestel Institut pioneered this method, incorporating 18 markers from the areas of social affairs, housing, energy, land use, traffic, and economy to assess the capacities of regions and cities to act flexibly based on the availability of resources and social capital. Little has been researched systematically beyond this study to identify the socio-economic, political, and ecological criteria for societies to guard against social conflicts. Current developments, for instance, show that not even the OECD community of the 35 most

developed nations, with its high standards of constitutionality, environmental protection, and social welfare is immune to massive social protests (e.g., Occupy Wall Street and the 99% movement), or even riots (e.g., France in 2005 or England in 2011). At the same time, research fields such as comparative social welfare research, as well as happiness and conflict research, provide significant individual data that could be merged to (more) fruitful outcomes with regard to societal resilience.

The fourth and last school of thought about resilient society stems from the futurist discourse of Silicon Valley, the mainstay of progressive thinking in integrating technology, democracy, and society. The two key notions of this approach are liberation technology and participatory technological innovation (access). The former implies that every human being should be granted the basic right to use certain technologies, such as computer, mobile phone and the internet, as well as the knowledge of how to use them. This way, the network of society will become more capillary, and thus stronger and more flexible, i.e., more resistant by a self-learning process of exponential traits. The latter suggests that rather than being produced and transmitted by single privileged actors like international corporations, governments, or universities in a hierarchical relationship to their social environment, knowledge is generated everywhere, though in different modes. Universities tend to have a theoretical approach, whereas practical knowledge thrives in the social environment without necessitating educational stratification–and is equally fed into a circuit to form a network of knowledge institutions and their environment, with feedback mechanisms and reciprocal interactions. At Berkeley University, for instance, this new concept of knowledge usage conceived as an infinite circle among practice-theory-practice for social resilience, and as an ongoing, interminable process since the 1960s, has been called the Multiversity, among others by the then president of the University of California Clark Kerr, and again in June 2004 by the report "Learning and Academic Engagement in the Multiversity."

Resilience, new social movements and civil society

The four strands outlined above, however, cannot totally encompass a comprehensive concept of resilient society needed for the years to come. Nonetheless, they offer various possibilities to define resilience, and to pave the way for a more encompassing concept. So far the notion of "resilience" has served too often as a one-word answer to increasingly frequent crises, thus becoming to some extent reductionist. On the other hand, in view of multiplying contemporary challenges, contemporary research and practice on resilient societies requires an integrative, transdisciplinary approach enabling to understand and to promote the "overall" or "general resilience" of a society. Additionally, regarding the cognitive potential of the term, the concept of resilient society will require an in-depth look by researchers and counsellors to merge the contributions of the four perspectives in order to define, for example, happiness as one core feature of resilience socially rather than individually.

What is the outlook?

What can already be noticed today is that although resilience is becoming less of a key term in the academic sphere, it is certainly used in innovative social movements, and thus in civil society. First of all, this seems obvious, since modern social movements are characterized by triggering social processes from the bottom up, with numerous small first steps often taken on a local or regional level. Through persistence, this leads to success in the long run, which in turn is a core feature of resilience as a social factor of innovation.

Second, civil society is becoming a significant element in the discourse on security, by forming networks of organized citizens who

will be able to help and add to publicly organized aid in serious crises on the one hand, and on the other act on their own accounts by contributing on an equal level to compensate for lacking or insufficient capacities by the government. The nuclear disaster in Fukushima on 11 March, 2011, and the following public self-mobilization of citizens was a good example.

Third, in analytical studies, civil society itself becomes an expression of identification with resilience. Besides housing, energy, or traffic, basic social participation and bottom-up contributions have become quality criteria to assess the resilience level of a society.

Fourth and last, social movements and civil societies are becoming indispensable actors in coping with complexity. This does not merely apply to new global power theories of the kind of Joseph S. Nye or Hillary Clinton, who predict a tripolar power distribution for the future, by nation states, transnational organizations, and global citizens' initiatives, where all three powers will check and balance each other. This may result in a greater dependence of the resilience of the entire global order on civil society. The tripolar model of upcoming power distribution may also apply to the future democratization of knowledge, which will be essential in dealing with increasing complexity. Civil society actors will become indispensable agents in distributing, spreading, and collecting, producing, and re-distributing knowledge. The more societies evolve, the more their main task will become transdisciplinary knowledge integration. In order to analyze and tackle the proliferating multi-dimensionality of future social challenges appropriately, these processes will need to operate in organic cycles between mutually checked and balanced powers rather than stiff hierarchical structures.

All things considered, crucial factors for future societies, such as sustainable environments and social planning design, will not be able to offer adequate tools to deal with upcoming challenges without improving knowledge of resilience in a networked and interconnected multi-level

governance approach, i.e., both on local, regional, national, international, and global levels. Large-scale concepts of social development incorporating a plethora of sub-dimensions have become mandatory.

The three current macro-approaches in the international discourse to be better compared, discussed, and, as far as possible, related to each other are successful societies on the one hand (USA), stable societies on the other (China), and sustainable societies (Europe). Widely unexplored, they in large part still present half- or even unconscious cultural civilizations, and thus to some extent civil religion-related approaches, rather than conscious strategies. For example, success has been the lead principle of the U.S. due to their individualistic and competition-oriented culture; thus, de facto becoming more influential in the general mindset than sustainability.

Then in China's socio-political climate, with its collectivistic, Confucian culture used by the Communist elites as social regulation, stability prevails over individual success as the measurement what is desirable. In Europe, based on a semi-collectivistic culture of solidarity and the welfare state, plus a strong orientation toward environmental preservation and safety, sustainability as a general interpretation of resilience has become more important than both individual success and stability. All of these basic approaches influence the general notion of resilience, which therefore varies in the three different geopolitical areas. Since globalization proceeds, the question for the coming years is how these different, widely pre-conceptual approaches may make better dialog, and partly converge in the future. All of them have the potential to become large-scale, comprehensive, and all-embracing concepts, both assimilating and expanding the resilience concept by trying to integrate a multiplicity of dimensions on a higher level of complexity. Could "Resilient Society" thus become an integrative meta-dimension of the three different, geopolitically context-related approaches as a more explicit, comprehensive, and multidisciplinary notion going beyond

success, stability, and sustainability, which all nevertheless remain part of it?

By and large, the development toward the integration of concepts of how to master multiplying global crises and challenges, as well as the numerous lateral movements and aspects, show that resilience, new social movements, and civil society are going to have a greater mutual influence, and even depend on each other, both in the public perception, and as a role model of social innovation. Thus, both local and international communities, as well as the local, national, and global segments and strata of civil society, will need to face the resilience issue more actively, and with adequate eagerness.