



After the Crisis: The Role of Resilience in Coming Back Stronger

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Abstract: The world has entered a period of increased tension marked by larger and more frequent disasters, a widespread socio-economic crisis, and a growing sense of mistrust towards institutions and international legal frameworks. In the midst of these challenging times, the idea of resilience has caught the attention, especially that of the western world, which has been shocked by the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this article is to place the word resilience within the context of contemporary crises so that the international community is not tempted to redirect some of their funds reserved for prevention and preparedness toward something 'new.' Specifically, the article makes three arguments. First, the concept of resilience ought to be understood rightly as a sign of elasticity. Second, resilience is not an alternative to prevention and preparedness but, rather, their result as properly identified in the Sendai Framework. Third, modern crises and the challenges they pose are an opportunity to improve the way we work, reinvigorate international and domestic systems and relations, and ultimately move forward.

Keywords: resilience, crisis management, Sendai Framework.

Introduction

There is widespread confusion about the term resilience. The starting point is that its meaning changes depending on whether one speaks in a technical or non-technical sense. Thus, the idea of resilience discussed in engineering is different from the one conveyed in social science. In this article, the author carries out an analysis based on the latter meaning and discusses resilience in the context of global crises and emergencies. The author explains how this term is often used vaguely in crisis management, probably due to poor discrimination be-

tween the phases of crisis management cycles. Resilience is not a ‘blanket’ concept that covers the before, during and after of dramatic events; instead, it belongs to the final stage of crisis management cycles. Such a rough interpretation of the term has important practical consequences as funds and resources that should be earmarked for prevention and preparedness can be ineffectively and prematurely redirected to strengthening or building resilience. Lastly, the author concludes that resilience is an important concept as it prompts us to take a reality check. In other words, through the pretext of building or enhancing our ability to adapt to and survive difficult situations, we offer ourselves an opportunity to take a moment to reflect on our condition and how we wish to move forward.

As a general overview, the article is structured in three parts. First, the concept of resilience is presented through an explanation of its meaning and the reason why it has seized so much attention. Second, resilience is placed in the context of crisis management, and it is argued that the Sendai Framework might be an interesting base for further work on this topic. The third part reflects on where we are and where we are going as an interconnected and interdependent society, and the conclusion includes some final remarks.

Elasticity and Crisis

Resilience is a skill. Though we all have different levels of aptitude for it, nobody is born resilient. Instead, it is something that we acquire through time and experience. Thus, faced with the difficulty of living in crisis-prone times, the international community has decided to look into resilience and elected it as an indispensable tool for our survival.

The Quality of Elasticity

The word resilience derives from the Latin verb *resilire* – *re* being the prefix and *salire* the verb to jump, which means to leap, spring back, or recoil.¹ With the scientific progress of the XVII century, the Latin adjective *resiliens* began to indicate not only what bounces but also something that can stretch and resume its shapes.² Thus, in its original connotation—which still applies in technical fields such as engineering—resilience represents a body’s ability to absorb energy from an impact with another body, bend or contract, and then return to its original physical structure.³ However, with time, the word resilience transited to other non-scientific fields, eventually turning into something more than the innate quality of elasticity of inanimate objects. Specifically, it started to symbolize

¹ James Morwood, *The Pocket Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

² “L’elasticità di Resilienza,” Risposta ai Questiti, Accademia della Crusca, last modified December 14, 2014, <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/lelasticit%C3%A0-di-resilienza/928>.

³ Krista S. Langeland, David Manheim, Gary W. McLeod, and George Nacouzi, *How Civil Institutions Build Resilience: Organizational Practices Derived from Academic Literature and Case Studies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), 5-9.

the quality of preserving one's integrity and purpose despite the occurrence of dramatic events. In corporate governance, resilience became "the intrinsic ability of an organization (system) to maintain or regain a dynamically stable state, which allows it to continue operations after a major mishap and/or in the presence of a continuous stress"⁴; in ecology, "the capacity of a system, enterprise, or person to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances."⁵ However, one of the most interesting perspectives is presented in psychology, where resilience has been identified as something more than the quality to repair and renovate in the face of adversities. Here, resilient entities are expected to maintain their integrity and return to their original state, *at least* as strong as they were before the significant event occurred.⁶ This interpretation carries an aspect of potentiality for enhancement—*growing better and stronger*—through the capacity of individuals to take advantage of negative events and foster positive and enduring developments within and around them.

Regardless of the field, the quality of elasticity remains the fundamental ingredient whenever we talk about resilience. Thus, it is important to set a clear distinction between resilience and resistance, which are often used as synonyms, although they carry different meanings. The latter indicates flexibility. It presumes the application of force against an object which resists this force, like a tree that bends to withstand strong winds. If the pressure is too great, however, the body can break. The former, as explained above, is a form of elasticity. The body does not fight the impact but rather absorbs the energy, dampens it, and ultimately resumes its original shape. Another important consideration regards the interpretation of resilience as applied to non-inanimate objects such as people and all entities that are intrinsically connected to and dependent on human beings like organizations and governments. In this context, resilience becomes the skill that allows us to adapt to challenging situations and come back from them enhanced. This is not a consideration of a body that can physically bend and then bounce back; rather, it implies a more abstract idea of elasticity. It is the ability to maintain core integrity and purpose, take stock of and adapt to the situation, reorganize, and then start again. This is not something innate for humans nor human-led entities. Instead, it is contingent on the amount of work and effort that is devoted to it. This is also confirmed by the language usually associated with resilience: you do not unleash resilience; you *build* or *enhance* it. Thus, resilience allows us to move forward from disruptive events as improved entities, provided we invest in it. Resilience needs work and dedication, so we have to strive for it. If no hard work is put in to attain it, then there is no becom-

⁴ Karl E. Weick and Kathleen M. Sutcliffe, *Managing the Unexpected, Resilient Performance in an Age of Uncertainty* (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley, 2001), 14, citing Constance Perin, *Shouldering Risks: The Culture of Control in the Nuclear Power Industry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 267.

⁵ Langeland, et al., *How Civil Institutions Build Resilience*, 5.

⁶ "L'elasticità di Resilienza."

ing stronger, and we remain at the same point we were at before the dramatic event hit us.

The Discovery of Resilience in Times of Crisis

News headlines have been fiercely drawing our attention to the growing number of crises, emergencies, and threats that we are facing. Significant disrupting events are occurring more frequently, with greater strength, and often concurrently.⁷ In such a complex landscape, the call for resilience has inevitably reached the realm of social science.⁸ In 2016, the members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) agreed on a resilience-focused approach to resist and recover from major shocks and threats.⁹ They signed the Commitment to Enhance Resilience, where resilience is identified in Paragraph 1 as “the basis for credible deterrence and the effective fulfilment of the Alliance’s core tasks.”¹⁰ The United Nations (UN) has also become fascinated by the idea of resilience. In 2013, the United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund published a position paper where resilience is described as an “end state” for communities and households to endure stresses and shocks,¹¹ and in 2011 the UN Development Program published a report to discuss the role of resilience to ensure sustainable economies in developing countries.¹² The European Union (EU) has also embraced resilience in its 2016 European Union Global Strategy, with resilience promoted to the status of guiding principle for the EU’s external action.¹³

These are only a few of the many examples of how the concept of resilience has made it into the work of the international community. Unfortunately, such a great proliferation of ideas and commitments has also fostered great confusion. That is because the way the term resilience is interpreted and what it is supposed

⁷ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Global Humanitarian Overview 2020* (Geneva: OCHA Geneva, 2019), 17-19.

⁸ Eugenio Cusumano and Stefan Hofmaier, *Projecting Resilience Across the Mediterranean* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 5.

⁹ “Commitment to Enhance Resilience,” *E-Library*, NATO, last modified July 8, 2016, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133180.htm.

¹⁰ “Commitment to Enhance Resilience.”

¹¹ “Position Paper on Resilience,” *United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*, last modified May 11, 2013, https://cerf.un.org/sites/default/files/resources/OCHA%20Position%20Paper%20Resilience%20FINAL_0.pdf.

¹² “Towards Human Resilience: Sustaining MDG Progress in an Age of Economic Uncertainty,” *United Nations Development Programme*, last modified November 3, 2015, www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/poverty-reduction/inclusive_development/towards_human_resiliencesustainingmdgprogressinanageofeconomicun.html.

¹³ “Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy,” European External Action Service, EUGS, last modified June, 2016, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf.

to achieve differ from one entity to another.¹⁴ For NATO, resilience serves the purpose of ensuring that the capacity of its members to resist attacks is preserved, thus fulfilling Article 3 of the Washington Treaty.¹⁵ Understood in this way, resilience is about pliability and flexibility rather than elasticity, thus losing its core characteristics of absorbing and dampening energy.

Moreover, such an interpretation does not carry the idea of an opportunity for positive growth in the face of adversities, remaining fixated on a rigid guarantee for defense. The EU and UN seem to be on a different mission. They have welcomed a wider notion of resilience, raising some questions as to whether this word might carry different meanings depending on the context in which it is used.¹⁶ It is also worth noting that both the UN and EU have pledged to implement resilience across all societies and regions, which is a very ambitious goal.

Resilience after Crises

There is a strong connection between preparedness and resilience. Respectively, they define the beginning and end of crisis management cycles. However, resilience is often misinterpreted as a “blanket” concept for all phases. This lapse means that resources are wasted while we are also missing out on an opportunity for enhancement. Though no perfect schemas are available yet, the Sendai Framework might be an interesting step in the right direction.

Crisis Management Cycles and Resilience

There is a crisis when there are three elements.¹⁷ First, there must be a threat to the integrity/scope of an entity. Second, the time for decision-making is limited. Third, the amount of information produced is so significant that processing it systematically proves challenging. Time *per se*, however, does not determine whether there is a crisis.¹⁸ Both sudden (e.g., cyberattacks) and protracted (e.g., climate change) events can still satisfy the elements mentioned above and give rise to disruptive circumstances. In order to address these situations in an organized and effective manner, blueprints of crisis management can be employed. The idea is to divide the tasks according to three timeframes: the “before,” “during,” and “after” of the crisis.¹⁹ It should go without saying that the allocation of time and tasks is not set but relies greatly on the judgment and sensibility of those involved in implementing these cycles. That is, you move forward to the next phase of a crisis management plan whenever it is appropriate based on the

¹⁴ Cusumano and Hofmaier, *Projecting Resilience Across the Mediterranean*, 5.

¹⁵ “In order more effectively to achieve the objectives of this Treaty, the Parties, separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack.” North Atlantic Treaty art 3, Apr. 4, 1949, 63 Stat. 2241, 34 U.N.T.S. 243.

¹⁶ Cusumano and Hofmaier, *Projecting Resilience Across the Mediterranean*, 7.

¹⁷ Christer Pursiainen, *The Crisis Management Cycle* (London: Routledge, 2017), 2.

¹⁸ Pursiainen, *The Crisis Management Cycle*.

¹⁹ Pursiainen, *The Crisis Management Cycle*.

specific circumstances of the case at hand. Though this statement could appear to be vague and not necessarily useful, it gives us the opportunity to reflect on the fact that crises like those that are testing the scope and integrity of governments and populations are exceptional circumstances that require high-level leaders and professionals in order to be appropriately addressed.

The pre-crisis phase begins with prevention and preparedness and ends with the alert of a crisis.²⁰ This is a phase of foresight that is often neglected as there is a widespread perception that it is better to hold back on intervention until any potential situations arise.²¹ Although everyone certainly has the right to organize their resources as they see fit, and there is wisdom in the idiom *I'll cross that bridge when I get there*; the decision not to invest in forward-thinking planning is a costly one. A serious approach to prevention and preparedness can significantly mitigate the immediate impact and subsequent consequences of dramatic events.

The second phase is about the response.²² This can develop very quickly, and it ranges from early warning to action to recovery. While some decisions can be based on previous prevention and preparedness findings (e.g., activating business continuity plans), most critical decision-making occurs in this phase. It is very burdensome to make the call on many important matters at the same time (i.e., set strategic objectives, allocate and re-allocate resources, lead teams, learn about changing interests and adjust the response accordingly), and that is probably the reason why this phase is the one that attracts more attention. Then there is the third phase, which is devoted to recovery and learning.²³ As opposed to the previous dynamic phase, this is the moment of adaptation to the new conditions, when communication flow restarts and lessons learned are drawn out. It is in the context of this last phase that we find resilience. Indeed, there can only be elasticity, and a return to the original form after the event has occurred.

Nevertheless, if it is true that resilience is the ability to “dampen the energy and bounce back” from challenging circumstances, that is only one part of the picture. As seen in the previous chapter, resilience in non-inanimate entities also entails the idea of coming back stronger than before. To gain such strength, the entity needs to pause, take stock of the situation, adapt to the new reality, and appreciate how things can be transformed for the better. Thus, resilience is a quality that needs time and awareness to be developed, preconditions that are very hard to get during a crisis. Furthermore, waiting too long to do such an exercise of self-reflection and renovation usually leads to not doing it at all. For these particular reasons, it would be inefficient to place resilience anywhere but at the end of a crisis management cycle. Resilience is something we can and

²⁰ Pursiainen, *The Crisis Management Cycle*.

²¹ Patric Lagadec and Benjamin Topper, “How Crises Model the Modern World,” *Journal of Risk Analysis and Crisis Response* 2, no. 1 (2012): 21-33.

²² Lagadec and Topper, “How Crises Model the Modern World.”

²³ Lagadec and Topper, “How Crises Model the Modern World.”

should work for, but we need to invest in it at the right time. It would be unfortunate to allocate and spend resources for projects on resilience at a time when we are engrossed in other equally important tasks.

Sendai Framework

In 2015, the United Nations adopted the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030.²⁴ The agreement, composed of seven global targets²⁵ and four priorities for action,²⁶ calls for a more inclusive and coherent way of dealing with crises. The objective is twofold. On the one hand, it seeks to shift the attention from the emergency response (phase two) to reducing and managing risks (phase one). On the other hand, it seeks to ensure a global alignment in the way crises are managed. In other words, the Sendai Framework aims at fostering a universal approach where the drivers of crises (“hazards, exposures and vulnerabilities”)²⁷ are identified, prevented, and reduced before the occurrence of severe events. The argument is that crises can be avoided, precluded, or at least limited by paying more attention to their root causes, requiring all actors to join forces.

In the context of the Sendai Framework, resilience is mentioned as the third Priority for Action, *Investing in disaster risk reduction for resilience*.²⁸ The idea is that it is essential to invest in work that seeks to address the drivers of crises to enhance the strength and ability of “persons, communities, countries and their assets, as well as the environment” to recover from disasters.²⁹ Thus interpreted, resilience is not an alternative to prevention and preparedness, but their result. Resilience is the “end game,” and how well those affected will be able to move forward after crises hit greatly depends on the work done before the event even occurred. Unfortunately, the Sendai Framework wording is vague when it comes to resilience, likely because the core of the agreement is risk management rather than resilience *per se*.

Further, the Sendai Framework does not suggest direct investment for resilience; rather, funds would have to be directed toward preparedness and prevention activities and from there flow down to projects engaged in resilience. In a

²⁴ “Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030,” United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, last modified March 18, 2015, www.undrr.org/publication/sendai-framework-disaster-risk-reduction-2015-2030.

²⁵ i) Lower disaster mortality by 2030; ii) reduce the number of people affected by 2030; iii) reduce economic loss; iv) reduce disaster damage to fundamental goods and services; v) increase the number of states with risk reduction strategies; vi) enhance international cooperation; vii) increase and improve early warnings.

²⁶ i) Understand disaster risk; ii) strengthen disaster risk governance to manage disaster risk; iii) invest in disaster risk reduction for resilience; iv) enhance disaster preparedness for effective response and recovery.

²⁷ “Sendai Framework.”

²⁸ “Sendai Framework.”

²⁹ “Sendai Framework.”

global financial crisis like the one we are experiencing, one might legitimately question whether it is realistic to believe that any investments will make it all the way to the final stage of crisis management and fulfill the third Priority for Action.³⁰ Moreover, it is foreseeable that at least some of those criticizing the Sendai Framework for failing to deliver on its promise to address the root causes of disasters will also develop skepticism about resilience.³¹ Nevertheless, the ability of the Sendai Framework to raise attention on the broader spectrum of crisis management represents a valuable step forward and could be promoted as the basis for more work on resilience-centered approaches.

The Opportunity

Though crises are a constant of human societies, we are witnessing an increasing number of black swan disasters that challenge our systems and ability to respond. Over the last decade, we have been engrossed by the task of refining our understanding of crises and their risks. Today, we have the opportunity to complete the picture by carving a space for resilience. If not for the sake of becoming stronger, we should do that because it is a good exercise of awareness.

“Black Swans” Are the New Normal

In the past, the view was that crises were seldom unpredictable, and “black swans” remained the exception.³² Then, ten years ago, we realized that things have been changing, and black swans are occurring at a higher rate than expected. Thus, we have witnessed wars, incidences of social unrest, financial crises, health crises, natural disasters, technological disasters, and industrial disasters even coinciding with one another. A major factor that has to be considered when thinking about this change of trends is the interconnected and interdependent nature of the complex society in which we live. As a result, the effects of crises occurring anywhere tend to spill over geographical and political borders.³³ COVID-19 pandemic is a good example. The outbreak of an unknown disease in China at the end of 2019 spread across the world in a matter of months, reaching everybody from remote communities to those in the most accessible countries. This health crisis has also brought humanitarian and economic challenges while exacerbating the already precarious situation of many vulnerable people. Moreover, the crisis has been unfolding in conjunction with other emergencies such as an above-normal Atlantic hurricane season, endemic social unrest, and systematic cyberattacks, just to name a few.

³⁰ Mami Mizutori, “Reflections on the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction,” *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science* 11 (2020): 147–151.

³¹ Ben Wisner, “Five Years Beyond Sendai—Can We Get Beyond Frameworks?” *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science* 11 (2020): 239–249.

³² Lagadec and Topper, “How Crises Model the Modern World,” 23.

³³ Daniel S. Hamilton, ed., *Forward Resilience: Protecting Society in an Interconnected World* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2016).

The bottom line is that we feel fragile.³⁴ We understand that exceptional events will occur and have a transformative impact on our lives and integrity of our societies. To limit any sense of dizziness from feeling at the mercy of the unexpected, we have resolved to change our mindset and invest in preparedness and prevention approaches. Unfortunately, it appears that predicting risks and addressing drivers is not enough. So, to foster more reassurance, we have turned to resilience. Indeed, there is comfort in thinking that we will survive whatever emergency happens, we will make the best out of the situation, and that we will come out of it even stronger. Thus, presented and contextualized in our global society, resilience becomes the exercise of enhancing countries' communication systems,³⁵ organizations, and alliances' agreements,³⁶ and communities' readiness.³⁷ These are undoubtedly important kick-offs, but how serious are we about fostering resilience?

Have We Forgotten Something?

Too often, we recycle data, news and information for our conversations on resilience. We also do it with time and resources. That is, we are not yet convinced that resilience deserves its own space. Certainly, we talk about it, but between the response to crisis A and the prevention/preparedness for crisis B we seldom allocate meaningful time to reflect on how our condition and the environment around us have changed and how we wish to move forward. Instead, we take some of the funds from the next prevention and preparedness programs, we book in some time whenever possible, we come out with lessons learned, and that is the end of the current resilience-centered approaches. The author argues that this is not enough and, even worse, it is a missed opportunity. To set aside time for building or enhancing resilience means to find a space where we can work on those skills that help us regain our stability after the recoil from the dramatic event. This is not space where you do the planning for the next crisis, but it is the one where the organization, system, individual, or community take a deep breath and thoroughly reflect on what has happened and how it wishes to move forward.

Meanwhile, crises will continue to happen. If we do not make a conscious effort to include resilience in our routine of crisis management, then we will still

³⁴ Arjen Boin, Louise K. Comfort, and Chris C. Demchak, "The Rise of Resilience," in *Designing Resilience: Preparing for Extreme Events* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), 1-12.

³⁵ P.H. Longstaff and Sung-Un Yang, "Communication Management and Trust: Their Role in Building Resilience to "Surprises" Such as Natural Disasters, Pandemic Flu, and Terrorism," *Ecology and Society* 13, no. 1 (2008): 3, <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-02232-130103>.

³⁶ Anna Wieslander, "How NATO and the EU Can Cooperate to Increase Partner Resilience," in *Forward Resilience: Protecting Society in an Interconnected World*, ed. Daniel S. Hamilton (Washington: Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2016), 137-148.

³⁷ "Sendai Framework."

move forward, just a little blinder and weaker. However, it is unfortunate that we are not ready yet to take this potential for enhancement seriously. Of course, even if we invest more in resilience, we still have to deal with black swans and predicted crises. However, if we embrace this, we will have the capacity to take advantage of these negative events and foster positive and enduring developments within and around our systems. In particular, we could come to approach modern crises and the challenges they pose as an opportunity to improve and reinvigorate international and domestic systems and relations. We have to move beyond our backyards and work together as an international community to develop transnational channels of exchange and support to prevent, prepare for, and ultimately emerge stronger from the complex crises we face. Until we recognize that resilience plays a pivotal goal in delivering meaningful and overarching crisis management cycles, our planning for and responses to crises will be regrettably incomplete.

Conclusion

The word resilience has gained a lot of traction in the last decade. Applied to different fields, it assumes nuances that time and again give it slightly different meanings. Nevertheless, the idea at the core of resilience remains the same whenever applied, and it can be summarized in the word “elasticity.” In this article, the author focused on the idea of resilience as applied to global crises and asked what exactly it means and whether it is really needed in this context. While recognizing the hard work required to achieve it, the author concluded that resilience is indispensable and should be strived for, as it would be regrettable if we were to emerge from ongoing and future crises unchanged.

It is promising that we care enough to continue engaging in this conversation. This is not just a matter of wording or abstract thinking. How we decide to interpret and pursue resilience has a real impact on the lives of many people, the integrity of many systems, the plans for distribution of funds and, most importantly, the global security landscape at large. We ought to exchange ideas, seek feedback, and hear what others have to say as that is the way to sharpen our critical thinking and make the right adjustments to foster progress as a global and strongly interlinked community.

In the author’s opinion, the Sendai Framework represents an interesting opportunity for setting the record straight about resilience. Though it could be argued that it has not yet achieved its own goals and that the idea of resilience therein is somewhat vague, the Sendai Framework is one of the few instruments available that presents an overarching approach to crises. Through the medium of the framework, greater emphasis could be placed on the difference between the before (prevention and preparedness) and after (resilience) of crisis management priorities. In turn, this could help to more meaningfully respond to at least some issues related to crises, such as the allocation of resources and the need for more enduring solutions.

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