



# Experiencing local community resilience in action: Learning from post-disaster communities



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## ABSTRACT

Although increasing attention has been given to the need to engage local communities and facilitate community resilience, discrepancies between theory and practice remain evident. Myths, misconceptions and mistakes persist in post-disaster emergency operations, and in the reconstruction and re-development efforts following disaster. The 'command and control' approach typically deployed by disaster management agencies results in an increasing dependency on external support and annihilates the potentialities of local communities. Learning lessons from post-disaster interventions is important in order to better understand how to orient development interventions, especially those addressed to the sustainable development of vulnerable areas, such as mountain and rural territories. We emphasise the importance of recognizing community resilience and the capacity of local communities to self-organise. We describe examples of community resilience in action as it occurred following the earthquake in the Province of L'Aquila in the Abruzzo region of central Italy on 6 April 2009. We discuss the aftershock economies and aftershock societies that developed in the extraordinary communities that emerged around rural villages in the mountain areas around L'Aquila. A multi-methods approach was used, primarily drawing on personal experiences of life in the autonomous locally-organised camps that were established in rural areas following the earthquake. We conclude that the persistence of various disaster myths and the failure to acknowledge community resilience undermine more effective, socially-sustainable, disaster management and rural development planning. Learning from the post-disaster communities that arose in the L'Aquila post-earthquake mountain territory, we argue that in post-disaster management and in rural development planning, there should be a greater awareness of the underlying community resilience, and we suggest that greater attention should be given to understanding, recognizing and strengthening the capacities of local communities and the resilient social processes they put into action in order to address the negative social and economic impacts they experience during crises.

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## 1. Introduction

The unpredictability and uncertainty of a world in crisis and overexposed to disasters has encouraged planners and policy-makers to attempt to understand local development through the concept of resilience (Cutter et al., 2008; Brown and Westaway, 2011; Mitchell, 2013; Saunders and Becker, 2015). More than many other concepts, 'resilience' represents the adaptive and evolutionary dynamics that allow systems (including rural

communities) to respond to disturbance and change (Davidson, 2010; Darnhofer et al., 2016), and to some extent resilience is replacing sustainability in many policy discussions (Wilson, 2012, 2013). A perceived increasing number of disasters and economic and social crises that destabilize vulnerable areas has resulted in the concept of resilience gaining currency in the discourses of regional development (OECD, 2011, OECD and University of Groningen, 2013; McManus et al., 2012; Scott, 2013; Schouten et al., 2013; Tonts et al., 2014; Kelly et al., 2015; Wilson, 2015), disaster risk reduction (Tobin, 1999; Paton and Johnston, 2001; Adger et al., 2005; Norris et al., 2008; Brown and Westaway, 2011), and climate change adaptation (Pelling, 2011; Khailani and Perera, 2013; Arnold et al., 2014; Dale et al., 2015). Policy discourses around the world also reflect this trend (e.g. UN-ISDR,

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2005, 2007, 2015; Mitchell, 2013; GFDRR, 2014, 2015; EC, 2013, 2014). A crucial challenge for the future will be enhancing understanding about how to achieve positive outcomes for local communities in disaster-prone territories and other vulnerable areas, such as mountain and rural areas, using the lens of resilience. There is a flourishing and vibrant literature in the field of rural studies that acknowledges and implies the relevant contribution that the resilience thinking can have especially in providing alternative analytical methods and insights, and an alternative policy narrative (Scott, 2013; Herman, 2015).

While we define community resilience as the social survival processes that occur within places and that are put into action by local communities to address the negative social and economic impacts experienced during crises, there are, however, theoretical and practical limitations that hinder a full comprehension of resilience and its use in the social world. At a theoretical level, the concept is vague and ill-defined (Gaillard, 2010; Manyena, 2014; Matyas and Pelling, 2014), with Davoudi (2012, p.299) suggesting that “it is not quite clear what resilience means, beyond the simple assumption that it is good to be resilient”. Many articulations of resilience inadequately address its social dimensions, and even some progressive interpretations (e.g. ‘bouncing forward’) are often little more than clichés (O’Hare and White, 2013; McEvoy et al., 2013). Current understandings of resilience are generally too weak to provide planning practice with the tools and methodologies needed to address, engage and strengthen local communities (Mitchell, 2013; Hutter and Kuhlicke, 2013).

At a practical level, the lack of clarity about how to understand, recognize, engage and enhance the social processes and dynamics of resilient communities enables traditional models of managing and planning (often coming from a technocratic engineering perspective) to be perpetuated. Because of time pressure and the inadequacy of alternative models, decision-makers often adopt a ‘command and control’ approach towards local communities. While it is known that top-down approaches can produce pathologies at the environmental level (Holling and Meffe, 1996), little has been said about the negative consequences of such approaches on local communities (Coles and Buckle, 2004; Cote and Nightingale, 2012; Fan, 2015). Thus, an improved understanding of the social processes and dynamics of resilience that allow local rural communities to survive socially is needed, especially in less-favoured areas and post-disaster situations.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how community resilience actually comes into action in post-disaster situations in rural communities. In doing this, we provide a better understanding of how the concept of resilience can be applied to the social world. Rather than the frequently-relied upon command and control approach, which has the potential to obliterate community resilience, we argue that an awareness of the dynamics of community resilience and an understanding of how to harness the resilience embedded in local rural communities would be desirable. By examining the post-disaster situation in the rural villages surrounding the city of L’Aquila in the Abruzzo region of Italy, following the April 2009 earthquake, we discuss how community resilience in action was activated and revealed in both lay and professional contexts. Using first-hand experiences of life in the emergency camps, especially in the self-organised camps that autonomously sprang up in rural villages, we strongly reject the ‘disaster myths’ that are promulgated in post-disaster situations and that frequently drive the responses of disaster management agencies.

## 2. Transferring resilience into the social world

‘Resilience’ has many definitions and a long history (Adger,

2000; Davidson, 2010; Alexander, 2013a; Berkes and Ross, 2013; Brown, 2014). The simplistic mechanistic understanding considered that resilience was a force that made a system return to a pre-designated state. In this approach, the resistance of a system to disturbance and the speed by which it returned to equilibrium were the measures of resilience (Davoudi, 2012). In contrast, the ecological systems approach focused not on the ability of systems to persist, but on their ability to adapt (Fiksel, 2006). However, both these perspectives have an equilibristic view of resilience, with notions such as stability, steady-state or new state, equilibrium or multiple equilibria, which all evoke “a Newtonian world view which considers the universe as an orderly mechanical device; a giant clock whose behaviour could be explained and predicted by mathematical rules and monitored by command and control systems .... In this clockwork universe, a resilient system is one which may undergo significant fluctuation but still return to either the old or a new stable state” (Davoudi, 2012, p.301). As Holling and Meffe (1996, p.333) argued, many theories of ecosystem resilience reinforce the pathology of equilibrium-centred command and control. These theories “carry an implicit assumption that there is global stability – that there is only one equilibrium steady-state”, and that these theories “transfer the command-and-control myopia of exploitive development to similarly myopic demands for environmental regulations and prohibitions”.

What is missed by equilibristic interpretations of resilience is that, in the natural world, systems continually evolve, not only by adapting to external disturbances, but also by modifying their internal dynamics and recombining their structures and processes for transformation and change (Pelling et al., 2015; Koontz et al., 2015). Systems, especially social systems, arguably learn and transform (Folke, 2006; Wals, 2007; Krasny et al., 2010). Such transformations are healthy and necessary for the system’s continued survival (Magis, 2010; Davoudi et al., 2013). Change is a dynamic and a constant in human society. Therefore, evolutionary resilience (or social-ecological resilience) seems more appropriate than equilibristic approaches in interpreting community resilience as a healthy process that enables social change (Cote and Nightingale, 2012; Fabinyi et al., 2014).

The on-going economic, social and environmental transformations affecting mountain and rural areas demand that local communities develop capacities to mitigate their negative impacts while exploring new opportunities for healthy transformations and social change (Steiner and Atterton, 2015). Despite some detractors (e.g. Joseph, 2013; Cretney, 2014), the flourishing literature in rural development studies largely highlights the relevance of resilience thinking in providing epistemological tools to better understand the need for innovative adaptive strategies to ensure the social survival of rural communities, increase rural communities’ well-being, and improve the governance of rural changes (Sánchez-Zamora et al., 2014; Steiner and Atterton, 2015).

The resilience concept, when grounded in socio-ecological systems (SES) theory and the new ecology – or what has been termed disequilibrium ecology thinking (Cote and Nightingale, 2012) – can help in understanding the importance of internal change and “more specifically on the unpredictability of change, thus encouraging an approach to SES dynamics in terms of the ability of their components to allow change to happen and adapt, rather than to control or avoid it” (Berkes et al., 2003 cited by Cote and Nightingale, 2012, p.477). Resilience thinking plays a promising role in providing a conceptual framework and epistemological tools that are likely to cater for changes and surprises, rather than seeing them only as exceptions or discounting them as noise. These new understandings of resilience, however, have had difficulty in gaining legitimacy in the academic literature, especially when translated into social terms. The social-ecological understanding of

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