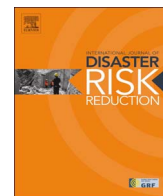




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Resilient communities? Experiences of risk and resilience in a time of austerity



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ABSTRACT

The recent floods in the UK underlined the importance of community resilience, however we know little about the extent to which people are prepared for different emergencies and often their resilience (or lack of) is only revealed post-event. This paper draws on empirical evidence from a case study of Swansea, South Wales, which explored everyday experiences and understandings of resilience and risk, and considers how the broader context of austerity shapes community resilience to disasters and crisis. It suggests that austerity measures function to undermine and dismantle collective institutions of social protection, and to limit the capacity of different government departments to tackle key risks, as well as contributing to the proliferation of risks in people's everyday lives. In this sense, austerity can be seen to undermine resilience whilst also contributing to increasing vulnerability. At the same time, participants' accounts outline some of the difficulties faced in engaging the public in thinking about and preparing for different kinds of risk. It is suggested that there is a need to address these engagement issues as well as to acknowledge the relationship between community resilience and broader questions of social, economic and environmental security.

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1. Introduction

The recent severe flooding which affected areas across the UK has intensified interest in the resilience of local communities, in the sense of their ability to “*resist, absorb, accommodate to and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner*” whilst preserving “*essential basic structures and functions*” ([45]: 4). But often the resilience (or otherwise) of communities is only revealed *post hoc*, and we know little about what factors shape the distribution of resilience, or to what extent people are aware of or prepared for different kinds of risk. The UK government's community resilience agenda focuses primarily on geographical communities (i.e. neighbourhoods) as the “*most obvious choice and... primary beneficiary*” of this aspect of emergency planning policy (Cabinet Office [9]: 12), which involves encouraging the public to develop their capacity to “*help themselves in an emergency*” ([9]: 4) and to “[*take*] responsibility for their own... recovery” ([9]: 7). As such, it forms part of a broader shifting of responsibilities to local levels and attempts to encourage individual and collective self-sufficiency amongst the public. However, so far there is a lack of evidence about the extent to which this resilience agenda has been taken up — or indeed noticed — by the public, or how it is shaped by the broader context of austerity. The effect of welfare cuts and

state retrenchment has been to push the everyday lives of many into chronic crisis, involving routine reliance on emergency measures such as food banks [28] and payday loans [33]. At the same time, cuts to public spending and government departments have led to numerous plans and projects to manage or mitigate risks — such as flood defences — being postponed or cancelled. Questions are raised about how cumulative experiences of different kinds of crisis and insecurity, alongside the dismantling of collective institutions of social security, might affect resilience at community levels. How do people prioritise what risks to engage with or prepare for, and how do increased levels of vulnerability affect people's capacity and inclination to develop their resilience? What interrelationships exist between different kinds of social, economic and physical risk, and what are the implications of these relationships?

This paper explores these issues using evidence from case study research which explored experiences and perceptions of risk and resilience in Swansea, South Wales. It outlines the issues and problems local residents and stakeholders felt were most pressing, the strategies they had for dealing with or preparing for them, and their sense of what might facilitate or undermine their resilience in the face of different kinds of threat. Participants' accounts suggest that experiences of chronic crisis — particularly those relating to social and economic risks — tend to focus people on survival in the present rather than on preparing for future challenges. Furthermore, the variability of people's understanding and

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awareness of risks and their impact, and of appropriate responses, is demonstrated. The paper suggests that the current political programme of austerity plays a significant role in helping to catalyse and intensify downward social and economic trajectories, whilst leaving little to support people to tackle and prepare for the range of risks they face. As such, it is suggested that in UK emergency planning policy, resilience functions primarily as an “*aspirational rhetorical device*” ([29]: 14), and the paper concludes that developing resilience to disasters and emergencies is unlikely to be successful without a broader commitment to collective social, economic and environmental security.

2. Policy background

Community resilience is frequently framed within the context of emergency planning and preparation across areas such as international development and poverty reduction, and in multi-lateral initiatives for disaster reduction. Most countries' emergency planning strategies refer to resilience, and there are a number of multilateral initiatives and agreements which address resilience to disasters and emergencies (e.g. see UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005–2015 and the Yokohama Strategy 1994). Within the UK, the development of the community resilience agenda can be located amongst a number of shifts in policy approaches to emergencies, disasters and security threats over recent decades. Driving these policy developments have been a number of different factors, including attempts to reduce public spending, changes in the types of threat facing the UK, and broader reconfigurations of the roles of citizens, state, and other agencies and organisations. During the late twentieth century, the role of citizens in matters of national security changed from the collectivised, participatory approaches epitomised by the Civil Defence Corps (disbanded in 1968), to a focus on individual, household level ‘containment’ as seen in the *Protect and Survive* campaign of the 1980s [42]. The Labour government introduced new legislative frameworks for emergencies during the 2000s, following a range of disasters occurring from the mid-1990s onwards, including terrorist attacks, severe weather, outbreaks of Foot and Mouth disease, and flu pandemics. This legislation involved new definitions of emergencies and the various duties of different bodies to prevent and respond to them, and brought together all forms of military and non-military emergencies under the *Civil Contingencies Act* (2004). These different aspects of emergency planning are framed within the broader concept of Integrated Emergency Management (IEM), a “*holistic approach*” which emphasises the outcomes or consequences of emergencies rather than their causes [7,8].

Whilst overall responsibility for prevention and management of risks has remained with the government, responsibility for civil protection is devolved and diffused throughout networks of partner organisations. For example, the Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has overall responsibility for flood risks and supplies funding for flood-related projects through grants to the Environment Agency and local authorities, whilst other organisations directly involved in flood management include highway authorities, water companies, regional flood and coastal committees, and the Department for Communities and Local Government. New bodies like the National Pandemic Flu Service have been set up to deal with particular kinds of emergency. Local authorities, NHS bodies, and emergency services are now “*subject to the full set of civil protection duties*” [7,8], and along with Local Resilience Forums play a central role in disseminating information and raising awareness. The localisation of emergency planning is to some extent based on the idea that “*emergencies are...inherently local...[and] occur in a particular place and point in*

time” [36]. However, community resilience also links into broader trends towards the local as a site of distributed governance, in which localities and citizens are increasingly looked to for solutions to social problems [14]. As will be discussed, there is a limited engagement with how local patterns of risk and resilience are shaped by factors operating at different spatial scales and at different levels of governance, and are distributed unequally across different groups and different places.

No dedicated funding is made available for the community resilience programme, which focuses primarily on sharing information, advice and good practice. The government's main role in promoting community resilience is to “*remove the barriers to [public] engagement*” [9], and to provide information about risks through the regularly updated *National Risk Register* (NRR). The most recent register was produced in 2015, when it was updated to include new risks including ‘poor quality air events’. The register outlines risks in two categories of natural hazards (including human diseases, flooding, wildfires, and severe weather) and major accidents (industrial accidents, electricity failures, transport, disruptive industrial action, unconventional terrorism, and cyber security). Notably, the NRR excludes social and economic risks whilst in other registers these are included, for example Finland's risk register includes “*serious disturbance in the functioning of the economy*” and events which might affect people's income security ([15]: 12). Similarly, the World Economic Forum's *Global Risk Report* [51] includes – and ranks highly – risks including fiscal crisis, structurally high unemployment/ underemployment, and failure of major financial institutions, alongside physical and security risks. As will be discussed, the omission of different kinds of risk from the NRR helps to obscure the interrelationship between different risks as well as, perhaps, to reflect government priorities for action. The government also provides online case studies of community resilience activities as a means of sharing existing good practice. These include advice on setting up emergency action groups, flood committees, neighbourhood snow clearing policies and volunteer emergency warden programmes.

The responsibilities of citizens are outlined in the *National Strategic Framework on Community Resilience* [9]. It is hoped that the public will inform themselves about risks and take appropriate action to prepare for them, with resilient communities understood as those who are able to “*adapt their everyday skills and use them in extraordinary circumstances*” ([9]: 15). There is also, however, seen to be a need to work with people “*to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to become better prepared for, more resilient to, and better placed to recover from emergencies*” (Cabinet Office, 2015). There is some acknowledgement of how resilience might vary according to characteristics such as “*health [and] financial stability*” ([9]: 11), as well as to the places where people live. It is also acknowledged that certain forms of crisis, such as climate change and extreme weather, might “*disproportionately affect the most vulnerable...such as older people, low income groups and those with multiple health problems*” ([54]: 50). The suggested solution is to target particular kinds of support at vulnerable groups, and to gather information from relevant organisations about who is vulnerable and where they are located. This kind of ‘special treatment’ of vulnerable groups can be seen to “*detract attention from the structural forces that disadvantage people*” as well as to illustrate that those not classed as vulnerable are seen as autonomous, ‘capable’ individuals, able to take on the responsibility of increasing their self-sufficiency ([6]: 64; [25]).

Of course, the drive to enhance community resilience (as part of a broader emergency planning approach) has unfolded against a background of austerity politics which influence community resilience at a number of different levels [25]. There have been large cuts in spending to government departments and local authorities, involving the loss of 631,000 public sector jobs – largely outside of

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