Land Use Policy 31 (2013) 298–310

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Land Use Policy

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/landusepol

Community resilience, policy corridors and the policy challenge

Geoff A. Wilson

School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Plymouth, Geography, Drake Circus, Plymouth PL4 8AA, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 4 March 2012
Received in revised form 11 July 2012
Accepted 16 July 2012

Keywords:
Community resilience
Policy corridors
Policy challenge
Global resilience transition

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the complex interlinkages between community resilience and the policy challenge, linked especially to the notion of state-led policy corridors and who should be in charge of the 'global resilience transition'. State policies affect every community within a nation state either directly or indirectly, and pathways of change are channelled into specific 'corridors' which can have both malign and benign repercussions for community resilience. While the most effective policies are usually tailored specifically at the needs of particular communities and dependent on appropriate timing of policy implementation, state policies also often lead to a reduction of community resilience. The increasing embeddedness of most communities into the global capitalist system also makes it difficult to raise resilience and trade-offs become inevitable. In many communities (often in the global South) policies may have to focus on preventing further loss of resilience at community level, while in others (often in the developed world) the focus may have to be on the rediscovery of strongly resilient pathways. A new contract between the state and communities may have to be established, as new forms of institutionalisation, regulation and spatialisation become significant in the uneven development of spaces of resilience where the rediscovery of strong resilience has to become an inherently moral process. Building strong community resilience is often an endogenous process linked to local customs that, at times, may operate, change and influence decision-making outside of the state policy realm, although community-level actors cannot always be left alone to guide their own resilience pathways without interference from the state. Some external regulation of resilience transitions may be needed and in most cases the state has to play at least some role in guiding and influencing the transition towards strong community resilience – i.e. resilience is not 'made' and does not emerge out of a vacuum, but it is transferred through complex processes of policy and other exchanges between communities and wider society.

Introduction

Critical debates in the literature suggest that the resilience of human systems is increasingly threatened in a rapidly globalising world in which environmental, social and economic vulnerability are often the outcome (Adger, 2000). The notion of 'community resilience' is, therefore, rapidly gaining ground as both a targeted process of societal development and as a research topic in its own right. 'Resilience' in this context is often defined as the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while undergoing change to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks. As a result, 'resilience' has become a powerful notion that transcends both the natural and social sciences, increasingly used as a basis for decision-making in studies of the complex interactions between society, land use management and policy. While much resilience research has been conducted with a focus on understanding social-ecological resilience (see Folke, 2006, for a good summary), most recently a focus on *social resilience* has placed understanding the response of human systems to environmental, economic and social change at the heart of investigations. This approach criticises notions of seamless and stable processes of adaptation that have underpinned much social-ecological resilience research, especially as in human systems resilience adaptations can be both anticipatory or reactive and, depending on their degree of spontaneity, can be ad hoc or planned (Smit and Wandel, 2006; Davidson, 2010). Human anticipation means that *social learning* enables adjustment processes that propel the post-disturbance system to a different (sometimes 'better') state (Oudenhoven et al., 2010). Social resilience is, therefore, about both pre-emptive changes which see resilience as a desirable state, rather than simply a process to avoid disturbances. Resilience in this view is not only about reactive change simply responding to disturbances, but also a process linked to improved adaptive capacity involving dynamic changes over time associated with learning and the willingness to take responsibility and control of development pathways (Wilson, 2012). This highlights that the notion of social

E-mail address: Geoff.Wilson@plymouth.ac.uk

0264-8377/$ – see front matter © 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2012.07.011

resilience is essentially about understanding 'positive' attributes of a community such as opportunities for learning, communication and stakeholder engagement, not dissimilar to the notion of 'strong sustainability'.

Human-induced and natural disturbances affect communities in their quest for resilience, including weather-related and geological disasters and anthropogenic disturbances associated with human environmental mismanagement, socio-political disturbances, economic disturbances, disturbances linked to globalisation processes or negative impacts emanating from technological innovation (Folke, 2006). Such events include both sudden catastrophic disturbances (e.g. earthquakes) as well as slow-onset disturbances such as changing environmental ideologies or politics (Cumming et al., 2006). As a result, disturbances can have both internal (i.e. from within communities; e.g. local change in leadership) and external causes (i.e. outside communities; e.g. technological or policy change). However, communities that may appear to be resilient are frequently vulnerable, especially if disturbances force communities beyond tipping points and thresholds of survival (e.g. disturbances leading to the death or mass exodus of large parts of the community; cf. Wilson, 2012).[1] In addition, resilience processes are rarely a whole-community endeavour, and on many occasions just one powerful individual can define, shape and influence resilience pathways of 'their' community (Rival, 2009). Understanding the quality of local leadership is, therefore, often as important as understanding community-wide adaptation processes, as is the recognition that dissent (as opposed to notions of cohesive communities) may also be a cornerstone for successful community-level coping strategies (Neal, 2009; Magis, 2010).

Research on resilience is burgeoning and has highlighted complex issues of non-linearity, heterogeneity and spatial complexity in the adoption of resilience pathways by communities (Davidson, 2010). Emphasis has been placed on understanding specific drivers of change and how they affect resilience, often with a focus on effects of natural catastrophes on resilience. However, despite the recent focus on understanding social resilience, less attention has been placed on understanding *human causes* of loss of resilience such as social, economic, cultural or political factors (Wilson, 2012). In particular, questions related to interlinkages between resilience and macro-scalar human drivers such as politics or policies have received little attention. Yet, undoubtedly these are important issues associated with questions of transitional pathways in resilience processes, especially at a time of accelerating globalisation, rapidly changing political and policy-based decision-making pathways and global uncertainty linked to the post-2008 recession. Rival (2009, p. 296), therefore, argued that we need "to question resilience theorists for a lack of attention to power relations, politics, and culture".

In particular, little emphasis has been placed on interlinkages between 'policy corridors' and resilience. As Martens and Rotmans (2002) emphasised, policy corridors can be interpreted as macro-scalar *exogenous* processes and pathways that shape human decision-making at multiple scales that influence environmental and societal transitions (i.e. structural political and policy-making related factors). As contemporary global societal organisation is (still) centred around the nation state (Johnston, 1996), policy corridors are most frequently conceptualised within the boundaries of nation states. In other words, the nation state emerges as a key structural boundary within which political, social and economic decisions are taken that, in turn, 'trickle down' to community level. Cumming et al. (2006, p. 8) referred to these scalar interactions as 'scalar mismatches' between different and often conflicting resilience pathways, and argued that "as societies have shifted towards the model of a nation-state with rigid boundaries and a central government, natural resource rights have been increasingly sequestered in the hands of centralised agencies such as government departments".

National policy corridors influence direct resilience action by individuals/households at community level, as almost all communities on Earth are embedded in wider regional, national and global political structures, i.e. community-level pathways will almost always be influenced by exogenous policies – forces upon which communities often have little influence (Cumming et al., 2006). Within nation states, policy corridors are closely associated with ideological and structural paradigms defined by societal worldviews, norms and accumulated institutional and organisational knowledge (Johnston, 1996). National policy decisions are ultimately *mediated* by the individual/household within a community and turned into action with tangible effects on resilience/vulnerability 'on the ground'. Local communities are, therefore, embedded in *nested hierarchies* of scales, with policy corridors representing the sum total of scalar interconnections between the community and the regional, national and global levels.

Policy corridors are rarely static and often fluctuate based on various factors of change at national and supra-national levels. This means that a change in the direction of a policy corridor towards either weaker or stronger resilience will also automatically affect pathways of resilience at community level (e.g. nationally set targets for carbon reduction measures). Policy corridors are, therefore, directly related to political and policy-related processes that often 'lock-in' decision-making within specific 'pathways of the possible' (Martens and Rotmans, 2002). This means that state policies are among the most important *lock-in effects* affecting community resilience (both positively and negatively as below discussion will show), and the role of policy and other institutional interventions is particularly relevant in defining, shaping and, at times, distorting, the direction and pace of transitional corridors (Jordan et al., 2003). That policy formulation and implementation occurs often within relatively narrow 'corridors of the possible' inevitably has important repercussions for local community resilience and vulnerability.

The aim of this article is, therefore, to analyse the complex interlinkages between community resilience and policy, with specific emphasis on both policy challenges associated with raising community resilience and discussing the importance of state-led 'policy corridors' and policy-related 'lock-in effects'. Is it possible for state policy to raise resilience of communities, do trade-offs have to be made accepting that the concurrent weakening of some resilience aspects are inevitable, and how can resilience at community level be best managed at global level? Although several examples will be mentioned from both the global North and South, the discussion will be largely conceptual and aims to provide a framework for debate and analysis for future studies. While the discussion will focus on national and global drivers affecting policy corridors, the spatial focus will be on how these macro-scalar policy processes affect the resilience of *local* communities and associated land-use decision-making processes. It is at this level that resilient pathways are implemented 'on the ground' (Adger, 2000), and it is important to understand environmental action at the local level first before scaling-up to regional, national and global environmental decision-making levels (Oudenhoven et al., 2010). This article will, therefore, restrict itself to the discussion of resilience and environmental pathways of geographically bounded communities, e.g. an 'urban', 'rural' or 'village community' with which residents can still

[1] This raises important questions about how community resilience can be assessed and 'measured' – issues that lie beyond the scope of this article (see in particular, Cumming et al., 2006; Cutter et al., 2008; Wilson, 2012, for detailed discussions of methodologies how to assess resilience).