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THE RISE OF THE RESILIENT LOCAL AUTHORITY?

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Abstract: The term resilience is increasingly being utilised within the study of public policy to depict how individuals, communities and organisations can adapt, cope, and ‘bounce back’ when faced with external shocks such as climate change, economic recession and cuts in public expenditure. In focussing on the local dimensions of the resilience debate, this article argues that the term can provide useful insights into how the challenges facing local authorities in the UK can be reformulated and reinterpreted. The article also distinguishes between resilience as ‘recovery’ and resilience as ‘transformation’, with the latter’s focus on ‘bouncing forward’ from external shocks seen as offering a more radical framework within which the opportunities for local innovation and creativity can be assessed and explained. While also acknowledging some of the weaknesses of the resilience debate, the dangers of conceptual ‘stretching’, and the extent of local vulnerabilities, the article highlights a range of examples where local authorities – and crucially - local communities, have enhanced their adaptive capacity, within existing powers and responsibilities. From this viewpoint, some of the barriers to the development of resilient local government are not insurmountable, and can be overcome by ‘digging deep’ to draw upon existing resources and capabilities, promoting a strategic approach to risk, exhibiting greater ambition and imagination, and creating space for local communities to develop their own resilience.

INTRODUCTION

‘There is further advantage to locally-led innovation - which is the freedom to take risks. Not every innovation will succeed. Some will fail..... However, when innovation is small-scale, the failures can stay that way, while the successes can spread - proven by experience. In other words, you lose small, but win big. So as well as speed, the bottom-up approach has the advantage of resilience’ (Greg Clarke MP, quoted in CLG, 2010a).

In the course of associating the ‘Big Society’ with local innovation and risk-taking, the Coalition Government’s new Minister for Devolution also directly linked the debate on localism with the concept of resilience. The use of the term in this particular context is interesting, as resilience has recently emerged as an important feature of debates on how individuals, communities and organisations can draw upon their internal

resources and capabilities to both 'bounce back' from external 'shocks' and reduce future vulnerabilities. Resilience can thus be viewed as involving three elements: the 'ability to absorb perturbations and still retain a similar function'; the ability of 'self-organisation'; and 'the capacity to learn, to change and to adapt ... the key element is about the ability to change rather than the ability to continue doing the same thing' (Adger, 2010, p 1).

The 'turn' to resilience has clearly been influenced by the search for a meaningful response to the scale and intensity of the problems now facing governments and societies. In this context, the focus on resilience has involved both normative and positivistic elements, providing both a rallying call that communities and organisations still have some capacity to influence the course of change, and an operational framework to measure and assess the characteristics of a resilient community or organisation (Adger, 2010). At the local level in the UK, the challenges of planning for civic emergencies, mitigating and adapting to climate change, and responding to economic decline, at the same time as confronting the consequences of major reductions in public spending, may even 'constitute a crisis of a different category than before – a "permanent crisis" in which the old ways must be replaced by the new ways.... including replacing our "normal" response to crisis - avoiding the causes and merely treating the symptoms' (Grint, 2009, p 1). At the very least however, the scale of the problems facing local government raise serious questions about 'how far existing institutions and practices are best equipped for future needs' (LARCI, 2010) and suggest that 'the rule book developed over the past 16 years of relative prosperity may sadly be no longer valid' (De Groot, 2009, p 15).

The original development of the resilience agenda at the local level in the UK has been primarily focussed on civil contingencies and emergency planning. This is reflected in the development of Regional and Local Resilience Teams and Fora across England to support and co-ordinate multi-agency responses to major civil emergencies. More recently however, the term has been used in a wider context, and become more firmly embedded in 'public policy, public management and third sector discourse' in the UK (Harrow, 2009, p 1). At the sub-national level, resilience has now been applied to local responses to sustainable development and climate change (Owen, 2009), the well-being and happiness of local communities (Bacon et al, 2010), the management of the voluntary sector (Gibbon and Fenwick, 2010), and local approaches to economic development (Ashby et al, 2008).

Despite this burgeoning literature however, little has yet been written on how governance agencies can develop and promote resilience (Moser, 2008), and in particular, how local authorities could facilitate and build resilience. This article aims to provide one of the first assessments of the contribution that the literature on resilience can make to an understanding of how UK local government should respond to climate change, economic recession and the 'downsizing' of the public sector. The assessment will cover four areas. Firstly, the concept of resilience will be defined and the key components assessed. In considering the relevance of the term to the local level, a key distinction will be made between resilience as 'recovery, and as 'transformation'. Secondly, the article will illustrate the different local dimensions of resilience, by focussing on how the term can be particularly applied to local government and local community responses to economic and environmental challenges. Thirdly, the article will draw upon a number of examples of international

resilience frameworks to begin to develop an organisational portrait of what a resilient UK local authority might look like? Finally, while the article acknowledges some of the weaknesses of the resilience debate - and the dangers of applying the term to widely - it contends that a focus on resilience still has benefits, both in terms of questioning some of the more pessimistic interpretations of the potential for local autonomy in the UK, and capturing examples of where local authorities and local communities have promoted innovation and enhanced their adaptive capacity within existing powers and responsibilities.

UNDERSTANDING RESILIENCE

Key Components of Resilience

Initially used in an ecological context, the concept has been defined as the “measure of the persistence of systems and of their ability to absorb change and disturbance and still maintain the same relationships between populations or state variables” (Holling 1973). From this initial use, the term has been increasingly refashioned to cover both short-term environmental disasters and long-term phenomena, such as climate change (Rose, 2009, p 1). It has also been used in the context of developing civil protection measures to meet emergency situations, including disruption to energy supplies, a swine flu pandemic, or a terrorist attack (Coaffee et al, 2008). More recently, the focus on how individuals and communities cope with the external stresses and disturbances caused by environmental, social and economic change has been particularly adopted up by academics and policy-makers in North America, Australia and New Zealand (Walker and Salt, 2006; Maguire and Cartwright 2008; Seville, 2009).

Given the definitional emphasis on 'bouncing back', resilience has also been associated with characteristics such as flexibility, innovation, managing risk and adapting to changed circumstances. For some observers this involves the 'ability to improvise' (Coutu, 2002, p 48), or the use of 'requisite imagination' (Adamski and Westrum, 2003). A resilient 'system' is also geared to 'expecting the unexpected', and is in a 'state of constant preparedness' in order to respond to unforeseen events and surprises. (Grotan et al, 2008, p 2). Indeed, decision-makers must address 'not only the crises that they know will happen, but also those that they cannot foresee' (McManus et al, 2007, p 2).

It is this focus that directly links resilience to approaches to risk-management, where the latter provides both an important framework within which organisations can be 'more proactive in thinking about and managing the unexpected' (Seville, 2009, p 11), and a willingness to experiment, to take risks, to achieve more long-term goals. For some writers resilience also involves exploiting opportunities, however problematic the context, and 'digging deep' to 'utilise indigenous resources' (O'Brien and Hope, 2010 p 2). Above all perhaps, resilience is about the ability to know when to adapt, when to change, rather than the ability to continue doing the same thing:

In practical terms, this implies that a resilient person, household, organization or community would have the ability to change practices and structures in the aftermath of a major event or change. As a result, the person or entity is not only able to function in the new environment, but also has the capacity to anticipate and prepare for the possibility of similar shocks and surprises in the future (Colbourne, 2008, p 3).

A Contested Concept ?

At the heart of many of the contemporary debates is the distinction made between 'engineering' and 'ecological' views of resilience. The former emphasises the virtues of stability, the level of resistance to external disturbances and the speed of return to the equilibrium. In contrast, the latter acknowledges that becoming resilient does not involve returning to a 'steady state' but occurs when a system changes its structure and key value-systems (Holling, 1973). This distinction has been more recently defined as 'resilience as recovery: bouncing back', and 'resilience as transformation: creativity' (Maguire and Cartwright, 2008), and has the potential to offer different interpretations of the potential for adaptation.

Thus, in the context of sub-national responses to the economic downturn, pursuing resilience as 'recovery' would involve returning to the competitive growth models associated with neo-liberal responses to globalisation, including reducing labour costs further to capture a new wave of 'footloose' foreign direct investment. However, resilience as 'transformation' would favour an economic strategy that made a necessary break with the past, and include features such as a strong emphasis on sustainable production and consumption, an emphasis on territorial justice focused on rights to the satisfaction of human needs, extensive local ownership and control over businesses, energy supplies and strategic resources, and a high capacity to be self sufficient in the event of economic or environmental 'shocks' (Bristow, 2010, p 5).

Similarly, in applying the concept of resilience to urban development, Raco and Sweet distinguish between 'conservative' and 'radical' constructs of resilience. The former views resilience planning as allowing a return to the steady-state that existed

before the external shock threatened to bring about radical or fundamental change. Hence this approach to resilience is viewed as 'an essentially conservative construct' that draws on imagined 'natural orders' and 'equilibriums' to underpin recovery planning'. In contrast, the latter interpretation sees resilience as involving a rejection of the status quo, as there can no return to the circumstances that caused the problem in the first place: since this would leave the system equally vulnerable to the next shock. Thus, resilience is viewed as a 'dynamic process' in which 'change and constant re-invention provide the grounds for social, economic, and/or environmental strength' (Raco and Sweet, 2009, p 6).

The use of the term resilience is not without its problems however. One recent review speaks of

Lingering concerns from the research community focus on disagreements as to the definition of resilience, whether resilience is an outcome or a process, what type of resilience is being addressed (economic systems, infrastructure systems, ecological systems, or community systems), and which policy realm (counterterrorism; climate change; emergency management; long-term disaster recovery; environmental restoration) it should target (Cutter et al, 2010, p 1).

Some critics point to the term's continued 'fuzziness' and the need to avoid a too rapid (and simplistic) transfer from ecological systems literature into a public policy domain (Pendall et al, 2010). As one review of the term argues, 'there is a need to proceed with caution and ensure that policy fixes do not exceed the capability of the research base to justify them. In this respect, much remains to be done' (Christopherson, 2010, p 9). In applying the concept to public policy, there is also a missing dimension in relation to questions of power (Hudson, 2010). Partly this relates to who defines (and sets the agenda) in relation to what resilience should

involve, but also to the distributional impact of promoting resilience (Morrow, 2008, p 6). In this context, Harrow questions whether community resilience can 'ever override existing community imbalances or tensions, except in cases of dire catastrophe' and acknowledges the 'remaining uncertainty about conflicting priorities of local versus national resilience' (2009, p 8). There are also problems in seeing resilience in normative terms, as something always to be desired. While coping with crises, withstanding pressures, and reducing vulnerabilities can be admired, '..what if resilience is also the very thing that inhibits necessary change? In other words, that we are so resilient that we withstand forces that ought to lead to change and ought not to be resisted' (Grint, 2009, p 1).

Thus, there are clearly potential problems in applying the term to an understanding of the challenges facing UK local authorities, including conceptual 'stretching', conflating normative and positivistic applications and ignoring issues of power. There are also dangers that the growing popularity of the term leads to the search for resilience being seen as 'the answer', a panacea for organisations and communities struggling to come to terms with a variety of external 'threats'.

In acknowledging such concerns, this article contends that the focus on resilient local government at least has the merits of 'shaking up our thinking and making us question some of our basic assumptions and measures of success and failure' (Christopherson et al, 2010, p 4). This is particularly important in the context of how local institutions and communities should adopt a transformative emphasis on 'bouncing forward' from external shocks, and not merely follow a reactive focus on 'bouncing back'. It also highlights the importance of developing a capacity to seek out 'the opportunities that always arise during a crisis to emerge stronger and better

than before' (Seville, 2009, p 10). As one review of the urban context argues, focussing on such a 'progressive resilience agenda'

...has the potential to pave the way for more radical and interventionist modes of politics in cities. It could form the basis for new visualisations of urban futures in which resilience, in itself, becomes defined through an interaction between social justice, economic competitiveness, and environmental management (Raco and Sweet, 2009, p 25).

DIMENSIONS OF LOCAL RESILIENCE

In outlining what the focus on resilience can contribute to an understanding of local responses to the current crises, a useful distinction can be made between resilient local communities and resilient local government.

Resilient Communities

The focus on building resilient communities has become an important feature of public policy debates in Australia, America, Canada and New Zealand. In Australia, the Federal Government's Social Inclusion Board defines community resilience as

the capacity of communities to respond positively to crises. It is the ability of a community to adapt to pressures and transform itself in a way which makes it more sustainable in the future. Rather than simply "surviving" the stressor or change, a resilient community might respond in creative ways that fundamentally transform the basis of the community (SIB, 2009, p 5).

In the Australian context, the key characteristics of resilient communities include a high level of social capital and possession of the necessary resources required to overcome vulnerabilities and adapt positively to change (SIB, 2009). A similar approach has been developed in Canada, where a study of coastal communities in

British Columbia highlighted how high levels of social capital served to 'cushion' the impact of a declining economy to the extent that a key feature of community resilience 'rests on whether its inhabitants chose to remain even in the face of economic hardship and potential economic benefits elsewhere' (Page et al, 2007, p 260).

Unlike the emphasis on resilient *systems*, the focus on resilient *communities* is a reminder of the importance of human agency, as such an interpretation

recognises the powerful capacity of people to learn from their experiences and to consciously incorporate this learning into their interactions with the social and physical environment. This view of resilience is important because it acknowledges that people themselves are able to shape the trajectory of change...and play a central role in the degree and type of impact caused by the change (Maguire and Cartwright, 2008, p 5).

In New Zealand, the development of a generic model of community resilience has allowed for linkages to be made between individual, community and institutional aspects of resilience. Within this framework, developing awareness that 'small things' can make a positive difference is seen as integral to individual resilience, while at the community level, it is vital that individuals 'actively participate' in their communities to identify and discuss risks and determine collective solutions. From an institutional perspective, it is crucial that 'communities are supported by civic agencies that encourage and empower community-led initiatives and that mutual trust and respect exist' (Daly et al, 2009, pp 16-17).

In a similar way to the initial approaches to community resilience in other countries,

the application of the term in the UK has been primarily in relation to civil contingencies and emergency planning. However, there are signs that the term is being utilised within wider social, economic and environmental contexts.

In 2007, the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (CIC) argued that local action can build resilience to the effects of poverty, and that cohesion is strengthened if 'key resilience factors' are developed, such as shared community facilities and a shared understanding of local history. The former, including community centres, can 'provide the opportunities for people to interact', and act as 'the locus for shared activities'. The latter in particular, is 'key to the perceptions of integration and cohesion, since the impact of negative events in the past (such as industrial decline or social disorder) can be long term' (CIC, 2007, p 57-58). The recent work of the Young Foundation on the 'Happiness' agenda, highlights the importance of developing childhood resilience through the school curriculum and how, when faced with economic decline and social disruption, households who can draw on 'extended families and wider networks of friends' are more likely to be resilient to economic shocks that 'might push others further into difficulty' (Bacon et al, 2010).

Building community resilience is also reflected in environmental programmes such as Transition Towns, which views resilience in the context of communities and settlements 'not collapsing at the first sight of oil or food shortages' and adapting to disturbances by 'rebuilding local agriculture and food production, localising energy production, rethinking healthcare, rediscovering local building materials in the context of zero energy building, and rethinking how we manage waste' (Hopkins, 2008, p 54). Local community involvement in developing environmental resilience

also characterises the 'Big Green Challenge' pioneered by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA). Through devising a competition for local communities to design and operate their own schemes to reduce carbon emissions, NESTA were able to award the £1 million prize money to four community-led projects, all of whom had achieved reductions in CO₂ emissions of between 10-32% in a short period (NESTA, 2009).

Resilient Local Government

More detailed assessments of the implications of the resilience framework for local authorities in the UK, can draw upon the rapidly-developing literature on organizational resilience. For Seville et al,

A resilient organisation is one that is still able to achieve its core objectives in the face of adversity. This means not only reducing the size and frequency of crises (vulnerability), but also improving the ability and speed of the organisation to manage crises effectively (adaptive capacity). To effectively manage crises, organisations also need to recognise and evolve in response to the complex system within which the organisation operates (situation awareness) and to seek out new opportunities even in times of crisis (2006, p 4).

There are also an increasing number of studies that attempt to establish the characteristics of resilient organisations (Fenwick et al, 2009). At the transnational level, the United Nations International Strategy for International Disaster Reduction has identified a ten-point checklist for local governments under the *Making Cities Resilient Programme* (UNISDR, 2010), while in a similar context, Cutter et al have recently identified eight key indicators of institutional resilience in the dealing with disasters (2010, p 7). A more wide-ranging study in New Zealand, sees resilience

arising from an organisation's 'resilience ethos' and involves 'situation awareness', 'management of key vulnerabilities' and the level of 'adaptive capacity'. On this basis, 23 indicators have been developed that can be viewed as an 'index' through which organisational resilience can be measured. The indicators identify such generic attributes as: the organisational commitment to resilience; an understanding of hazard and consequences; innovation and creativity; leadership and strategic vision; and devolving decision-making (McManus et al, 2007).

In reviewing the applicability of the existing approaches on organisational resilience, to local government in the UK, a note of caution is required. Much of the literature so far, has been produced within federal systems and is often located in the area of disaster management. Moreover, the emphasis on resilient *organisations* has, as yet, not been effectively integrated with a wider focus on resilient *governance*, a topic that 'continues to be an area ripe for empirical testing and experimentation and for further research' (Moser, 2009, p 38). While a small number of studies have tried to outline how 'good governance' can promote resilience (Folke et al, 2005), there has, as yet, been little attention given to what resilient democratic government at the local level would contribute, or what characteristics resilient local authorities should exhibit? However, the use of generic frameworks do at least allow a measure of 'transferability' to the UK, while the emphasis on the important linkages between local organisations and the resilience of local communities remains important, whatever the specific basis of sub-national governance.

In drawing upon the insights of the resilience literature, a picture is emerging of how a focus on resilience could be applied to an understanding of UK local authorities'

responses to economic, social and environmental 'shocks'. At an organisational level, local resilience would certainly encompass cultural change, adopting long-term planning horizons, prioritizing the management of risk, promoting innovation and creativity in tackling problems, and recognising the need for engaging and supporting communities. Such an organisational commitment to resilience will also impact across structures and processes including project design and management, data collection, monitoring and evaluation and staff training and skills development. In addition to these indicators of organisational resilience, it can be suggested that the governance dimension will also encompass additional concerns with political leadership, democratic engagement, citizen empowerment, and crucially, challenging the status quo.

THE RESILIENT LOCAL AUTHORITY: KEY FEATURES

In this section, we explore in more detail what a resilient local authority might look like, focussing - in particular - on four aspects, *innovation, managing risk, strategic leadership and enhancing the involvement of civil society*. Clearly, the generic nature of many of the characteristics of a resilient organisation invariably means that such attributes are also key elements in other approaches to public policy and public services management. It is also important to acknowledge Moser's view that since resilience is 'scale, context and disturbance specific' it is not just a system (or (organisational) characteristic, but also an 'emergent property that arises from the interaction of the system, its environment, and the forces that act on both' (Moser, 2008, p 6). However, in highlighting how the focus on resilience would inform our understanding of local authorities, the aim is to both provide a coherent overarching

framework within which local council's response to crises can be located and identified, and to begin to assess the benefits of a more explicit strategic focus on resilience within local authorities.

The Resilient Local Authority: Innovation

Recent work on public sector innovation by both the Young Foundation and NESTA, has been influenced by the 'Schumpeterian' notion that recession and economic downturns provide an opportunity for innovation and economic growth by unleashing a process of 'creative destruction' upon policy ideas and institutions. Hence, there are opportunities for policy-makers and those in charge of public services to use the crisis caused by expenditure cuts to 'prompt radical innovations in public services to make them better and more effective' (Bunt et al, 2010, pp 5-6). Such an approach would involve moving resources from 'outmoded' approaches to 'radically better' approaches, reforming commissioning to encourage new community and local provision, replacing the culture of audit with a light-touch process of assurance and developing radical new approaches to local government procurement (Bunt et al, 2010, pp 7-8; Uyarra, 2010)

Such a 'transformative' approach to economic resilience for example, would require a shift to a new economic model which is locally-based, democratic, and which measures success in terms of well-being and happiness, not material possessions (Jackson, 2009). Similarly, Hudson argues that the logic of resilient approaches to economic development (in large, densely populated regions) are closely linked to eco-industrial development (EIB), which 'offers the potential to regionalise production activities and reduce their ecological footprints, by minimising both wastes and the

costs of moving materials between production processes and facilities' (Hudson, 2010 pp 19-20). One area that encompasses this more radical focus, is the evolving role of Local Authorities in promoting 'food resilience'. Thus, the East Anglia Food Link argues that local authorities can play an important part in developing resilient food systems through making land available for allotments and 'county farms' (for small-scale commercial growing), ensuring that planning and housing policies take account of the demand for peri-urban horticultural land, linking the provision of school meals to the local supply of a lower-meat, low waste, seasonal and organic diet, and examining the employment opportunities in local food systems (EAFL, 2009).

While the resource implications of such innovative approaches cannot be ignored – particularly in the light of the new Government's plans for extensive cuts in public spending – there are opportunities for innovation even within such constraints. This relates particularly to the emphasis that resilience involves 'digging deep' in order to make the most of internal capabilities. From the perspective of local authorities, this involves making the most of their existing powers and responsibilities and, in doing so, challenge the view of one senior local government figure, that 'Too many councillors and officers can seem quite comfortable operating in a system of constrained choices where it is easy to blame government rather than seize control of their own destiny' (Milton, 2008).

Use of the power of well-being (as defined in the 2000 Local Government Act) provides an important source of innovation. For one local authority Chief Executive, use of the well-being power involves finding a way

...through uncharted territory, challenging conventions all over the place. But in spite of the heavy government directions under which we work, you've sometimes just got to say: 'Sod this, we know what we want, let's just find a different way' ... our politicians are more ambitious than others I've worked with in that they want to seize their well-being powers [in the 2000 act] and are willing to test the boundaries (quoted in Hetherington, 2009)

While a series of creative initiatives have been developed via this route, including saving rural post offices, developing municipal banking, taking over local transport, and setting up energy purchasing or service companies, the vast majority of authorities have not used the power. This issue was recently highlighted by the new Communities' Secretary Eric Pickles when he asked, 'why is it that only around 15% of councils have used their power to promote wellbeing? Power to sit on your hands and freedom to twiddle your thumbs isn't real power or real freedom'. In promising to introduce a power of general competence for local government, he also challenged local authorities to 'be as ambitious as you can, be as radical as you like...make me an offer I can't refuse' (Public Finance, 2010). For one account of how local authorities should respond to the economic downturn, the new power would allow an imaginative approach to meeting local needs, encourage innovation, and remove uncertainties in relation to measures to support local economic development. These include the raising of finance for innovative projects, enabling the tax increment funding of development schemes, and providing greater local flexibility to fund essential infrastructure and regeneration projects (CIPFA/SOLACE, 2009).

The Resilient Local Authority: Managing Risk

Managing risk is a key component of the resilience agenda. At the local level, this has mainly focused on issues associated with emergency planning. In relation to

environmental ‘shocks’, local authorities already adopt a strategic approach to risk through the use of Climate Change Adaptation Plans, which utilise the conventional risk assessment methodologies, familiar to local authority working practices’ (LGA, 2008a, p 4). Thus, Gloucestershire County Council’s early commitment to such an approach (in relation to extreme weather) enabled them to insure the counties schools prior to the 2007 floods and to promote a collaborative approach to risk assessment across the six districts in the county (GCC, 2010). While in Gateshead, the local council has produced a Community Resilience Strategy, whose purpose is to ‘anticipate, prevent, prepare for, respond to and recover quickly from emergencies affecting organisations, businesses, individuals, families, neighbourhoods and communities within Gateshead. An emergency can be any event that threatens human welfare, the environment or the security of the UK’ (Gateshead MBC, 2008, p 4).

Given the growing range of challenges facing local authorities, a focus on resilience would suggest a wider and more strategic approach to risk. One recent interpretation argues that a focus on resilience lends itself to a ‘whole risk’ approach, in which the local authorities management of risk effectively integrates ‘..enterprise risk management, operational risk management, business continuity planning, risk transfer, emergency response and incident management into a single unified framework’ (Zurich Municipal, 2010). This approach lends itself to the development of ‘Local Resilience Action Plan’ (Harrow, 2009), that would allow local authorities to assume a much clearer community leadership role in relation to risk, and to widen the focus beyond emergency planning to include economic, environmental and social dimensions of risk (and the relationship between them).

The literature on resilience also recognises that there are risks that are not identified within the traditional risk management framework. For one review, the existence of such 'ontological uncertainties'

requires strategies to be in place for managing those risks that haven't been identified – the hidden interdependencies, the complex risks that are lurking in the background.....It is important to also invest in adaptive management strategies that can get us out of a crisis situation, just in case our risk management is not quite as effective as we would have liked it to be. In the end, well-managed risks and effective planning are still no substitute for great leadership and a culture of teamwork and trust which can respond effectively to the unexpected (Seville, 2009, p 11).

This emphasis highlights some of the limitations of an 'overly planned and "tool-kitted-out" approach to resilience' (Harrow, 2009, p 10), and acknowledges the importance of a spontaneous and improvised approach. This 'intuitive' approach to unfamiliar or chaotic situations has been described as 'sense-making', as it involves the 'interplay of action and interpretation rather than the influence of evaluation and choice' (Weick et al, 2005, p 409). Such an emphasis links to the wider debate on 'agile governance', where encouraging and rewarding experimentation and risk-taking is seen as vital to adaptation but difficult to achieve in the context of a performance culture based on meeting targets and the lack of awareness of the 'boundaries' of risk-taking. This often results in the adoption of a default position of 'doing things the way they have always been done', with risk aversion caused by 'agencies making assumptions, often incorrectly, about what risks that they *think* ministers or senior officials would or wouldn't take' (Demos, 2008, p 19).

The Resilient Local Authority: Leadership

In a number of accounts of resilience the issue of leadership is seen as central. Particular emphasis is placed on a style of leadership that responds to a time of 'urgency, high stakes and uncertainty' by promoting (and gaining internal support) for adaptation (Heifetz et al, 2009, p 3). Leadership is thus linked to a clearly defined vision which empowers its stakeholders to 'view the organization's future positively' and 'successfully balances the needs of internal and external stakeholders and business priorities' (McManus et al, 2007). It also involves an acceptance that, rather than being able to control change, change, uncertainty and inconsistency are inevitable (Maguire and Cartwright, 2008). This clearly challenges 'decision-makers to accept that they do not know the answer to the problem - always a difficulty when we attribute god-like qualities to our leaders' (Grint, 2009, p 3).

In the literature on economic resilience, the role of sub-national governance is viewed as developing adaptive capabilities and identifying the appropriate stage for economic intervention, which in turn depend upon 'intelligent leadership with a heightened sensitivity and/or preparedness for rapid and pervasive change' (Pike et al, 2010). In assessing the resilience of the urban economies of Brighton, Bristol, and Leeds, the Centre for Cities highlight the importance of city leadership that promotes a commitment to change which involves reappraising priorities and revisiting existing plans for growth to reflect the 'changed economic reality' (Larkin and Cooper, 2009). While acknowledging that the prospects for the three cities will vary (given their different location and structural characteristics), city leaders do have scope to 'shape a cities resilience' and can play an 'increasingly important role in understanding and shaping their economic trajectory' (Larkin and Cooper, 2009, p 2). Indeed, given the recent Government announcement that Regional Development Agencies are to be

abolished and replaced by sub-regional Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), comprising local authorities and businesses, it can be argued that this provides the necessary 'space' to develop sub-regional bodies that are more locally accountable and allows for a wider range of economic interventions that offer genuine opportunities for both 'city' and 'county' LEPs to reflect local needs and circumstances more precisely.

The local politics of environmental resilience is also changing. In the early days of promoting Local Agenda 21, local environmental leadership was largely provided by committed individuals, was not seen as a mainstream political issue and therefore remained firmly contained in its own 'silo'. In contrast, local government action on climate change is now viewed as 'the defining feature of community leadership' (LGA, 2007, p 11), and prioritised as a major local political issue. The politicisation of the climate change agenda is also likely to be influenced by the increased representation of the Green Party in a number of local authorities (including Oxford, Lancaster and Norwich), the election in 2010 of the first Green MP in Brighton, and increased citizen involvement in the growing number of local environmental fora, pressure groups and associations. There are also increasing levels of public awareness: in a 2008 survey, 70 per cent of people believed that climate change should be one of the top five priorities for their council, whilst 62 per cent stated they would be more likely to vote for a candidate committed to tackling climate change in a local election (LGA, 2008b). The new Coalition Government's plans to expand the number of directly-elected local mayors (in 12 of the major cities outside London), also offers the opportunity to develop more accountable and transformative local leadership, particularly in local authorities where deeply-entrenched political conflicts

between (and within) local parties have impeded the development of an agreed strategy.

There are clearly tensions inherent in promoting resilient leadership in a period of 'crisis'. As Grint has noted, a resilient approach can actually produce a defence mechanism that encourages the avoidance of responsibility, and the 'denial of choice' when faced with a number of challenging decisions. Since this can lead to the dominance of a 'top-down' approach to leadership and a rejection of more collegiate and collaborate approaches (which are central to enhancing resilience), it can be argued that, 'It isn't resilience..that we need, but the wisdom to know when to be resilient and when to recognize that resilience is the problem, not the solution' (Grint, 2009, p 3).

The Resilient Local Authority: Civic Engagement

A key feature of a resilient local authority is to allow space for others to develop their own resilience, to harness and direct the ingenuity and commitment of local communities and individuals in responding to economic, social and environmental problems. Thus, 'top-down paternalistic official activities do not lead to meaningful resilience. It requires hard work at the grassroots level to build strong community social structures and for government and officials to earn public trust' (Morrow, 2008, p 12).

A partnership approach between local governments and communities in promoting awareness of social, economic and environmental vulnerabilities (and identifying subsequent responses), has been developed extensively in Australia, and has

reinforced the idea that resilience can also be seen as a process and not just 'a quality that is either present or absent in a person or group' (Hegney et al, 2008, p 3). One such model, the 'Social Assessment' approach to assessing community resilience, covers six areas, including the community and the process of change, the internal community structure, community history, community vulnerabilities, community resources, and adaptive capacity (Maguire and Cartwright, 2008).

Similarly structured approaches to promoting community awareness and self-reflection are now being utilised in some local authorities the UK. For example, the Wellingborough Climate Change 'Toolkit' was developed by the Local Strategic Partnership in the area as an interactive resource to 'enable local people to gain a greater understanding of the issues surrounding climate change and how they can personally make a contribution to its mitigation by reducing carbon emissions, and planning to adapt their lifestyles to cope with changing weather patterns' (WBC, 2008). While in Lambeth the local council has asked residents involved in the grass-roots development of the Hyde Farm Climate Action Network to explore how similar groups could be developed throughout the borough. As communities gradually take more responsibility for their own environment, through the growth of local green 'networks' or 'co-operatives', this could begin a process through which the council could then hand over other services for communities to run, ranging from community centres to primary schools. Indeed, any savings made by the council under this proposed model of service provision could be shared by residents in the form of an "active community dividend" (The Guardian, 2010).

Communities taking control is also a central aspect of international developments. In

the USA, an innovative community project in Oakland (California) has defined resilience in terms of a community's ability to withstand and recover from the 'hard times' caused by 'climate change, economic downturn and peak oil'. For the 'Bay Localize' Project

Creating resilience is up to you. No one is going to do it for you. No experts can say exactly how it should be done in your community. You are the experts on what you think will work in the places and with the people you know best. It will take courage to ask big, difficult questions. It will take creativity to use our assets in new ways. It will take compassion and time to build communication, trust, and solidarity between all members of our communities, some of whom may come from very different backgrounds and traditions. Hopefully, it also will be inspiring and often fun (Bay Localize, 2009, p 7)

In reviewing the NESTA 'Big Green Challenge', a recent report has characterised citizen-led initiatives as 'mass localism', as they

depend on a different kind of support from government and a different approach to scale. Instead of assuming that the best solutions need to be determined, prescribed, driven or 'authorised' from the centre, policymakers should create more opportunities for communities to develop and deliver their own solutions and to learn from each other (Bunt and Harris, 2010, p 5).

On the surface at least, the idea of 'mass localism' is similar to the Coalition Government's commitment to the 'Big Society', a nebulous concept that seems to broadly cover devolving power to local groups to take action on problems defined by the community itself. The term has been applied to a range of developments including plans for forms of citizen-led political action (local referenda; 'a 'right to bid' for local facilities), the further transfer of council assets and services to VCOs, and other civil society organisations, and - in the case of schools - to parents. Four Big Society 'vanguards' have also been identified (in Eden Valley, Liverpool, Sutton and

Windsor and Maidenhead) who will empower community trusts, residents groups, parish councils, and young community organisers (Inside Housing, 2010). While some view this agenda as a genuine opportunity for local innovation and risk-taking others have criticised the 'Big Society' for being a smokescreen for public expenditure cuts or as a naive and flawed vision that massively overestimates the capacity and ability of volunteers (and the voluntary sector) to run local public services (The Independent, 2010). There must also be concerns that deprived communities, who are at greater risk - and less resilient - in a recession, will not have the necessary resources and capabilities to take up the opportunities on offer in the 'Big Society'.

CONCLUSION

As this article is being written, in the autumn of 2010, local authorities are having to come to terms with the scale of public expenditure cuts announced by the new coalition government. In the North of England, one large local council is facing cut backs of £16m, which will involve a £6m reduction in Area-Based Grant, nearly £2m from its capital grants and £8.9m from specific grants (Evening Chronicle, 2010). Given the likely impact of such cuts on local service users and council employees, it is important to avoid resorting to clichés ('necessity is the mother of invention') or to fall-back on using platitudes about 'never wasting a good crisis'.

However, this article has argued that the concept of resilience can bring a number of insights to how we contextualise local government's role in adapting to external 'shocks' and provides a coherent explanatory framework within which the genuine opportunities for local innovation and creativity can be assessed. Thus, while

continuing vulnerabilities are recognised, we argue that some of the barriers to the development of organisational resilience are not insurmountable, and can be overcome by 'digging deep', drawing upon existing resources and capabilities, and exhibiting greater ambition and imagination. In utilising a conception of resilience as *transformation*, 'bouncing forward' from external shocks, rather than merely as a *reactive* focus on 'bouncing back', this article has outlined how local authority can develop its resilience by: the ambitious use of existing powers; promoting creativity and innovation; challenging the status-quo; managing risk; providing strong and visionary political leadership; and engaging and empowering civil society.

We have also acknowledged the danger of uncritically introducing a term – first used in an ecological context and then mainly developed in the disaster management literature – into debates on public policy. It is clear, at this early stage, that a 'conceptual consensus in the social sciences' is not yet in sight (Moser, 2008, p 5). Indeed, a number of questions need further investigation if resilience is to be seen to add real value to our understanding of how UK Local Government can effectively respond to major environmental challenges in a period of economic austerity. These questions might include an investigation of the extent to which the term 'resilience' is now being utilised within local authority policy debates, whether its application now covers a range of policy areas, and its strategic significance, particularly in relation to the management of risk. Capturing how local authorities view the potential for innovation, both in terms of the creative use of existing powers and their plans to use the power of general competence, would also be central to the resilience debate as would the exploration of any different perceptions of resilience *between* elected members and officers and *within* party or professional groups. Notwithstanding the

debate over the merits of the 'Big Society', there would also be benefits in capturing the development of resilience from the 'bottom up'. As this article has suggested, there are a growing number of local environmental or social enterprise projects that use the term, and who offer important opportunities for policy learning and the sharing of good practice on enhancing community resilience.

We would therefore share Harrow's optimism that there are now 'reasons to be cheerful' in relation to what the resilience debate can offer the public policy discourse. This is particularly in relation to theorising the positive features of being resilient for individuals, communities and organisations, its emphasis (for practitioners) on seizing opportunities even within a crisis, and the growth of frameworks (or 'toolkits') through which communities can define and assess their own resilience (Harrow, 2009). Above all perhaps, the focus on local resilience brings with it the recognition that 'there is an intrinsic relationship between organisational resilience and improving the resilience of communities. Enabling the continued operation of organisations, in and following crises, significantly impacts on the medium to long term recovery and health of the wider community' (McManus et al, 2007, p 2). To return to where we started our discussion, if the 'Big Society' is to promote local resilience as a positive feature of communities, it is vital that the supporting and enabling role of elected local government is recognised and strengthened.

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