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Societal and Community Resilience: Are they the same thing?

UK Resilience Academy Insight Paper

Professor Rowena Hill

Senior Visiting Fellow, UKRA
September 2026

Defining resilience to enable a whole of society approach

To achieve resilience, we need to be working in partnership with national, sub-national, regional, local and hyperlocal stakeholders as well as across many different contexts. If we are to deliver an inclusive whole of society response to risks, to deliver the Resilience Framework Action Plan and subsequent implementation updates, and to enable and empower communities across the UK, then it becomes imperative that we're all moving towards the same vision. But do we currently have a shared map to get to that vision?

When we talk about society's ability to plan, respond, adapt and recover from a major incident, we think of societal resilience, or community resilience, or resilience in general. There are many working definitions applied to understand societal resilience, but to be effective and coordinated we need to have shared meanings for these words. This paper seeks to define the differing definitions that could cause disruption between our ways of working and our communications with stakeholders and communities.

To support our communities, private industry, community and voluntary sectors, public services, not for profits, CNI and resilience professionals need to aspire to a single strategy. In essence, we need shared situational awareness and one agreed strategy on what we are trying to achieve. This is becoming challenging, as increasingly our uses of the terms 'community resilience' and 'societal resilience' are becoming interchangeable, despite the fact that they mean very different things, aside from the confusion and own goals in miscommunication that this brings. This paper is a call to resilience professionals to address this challenge, so that our communication and vision become clear and accessible to those we are working with, and on whom the whole of society approach will be delivered.



Which resilience?

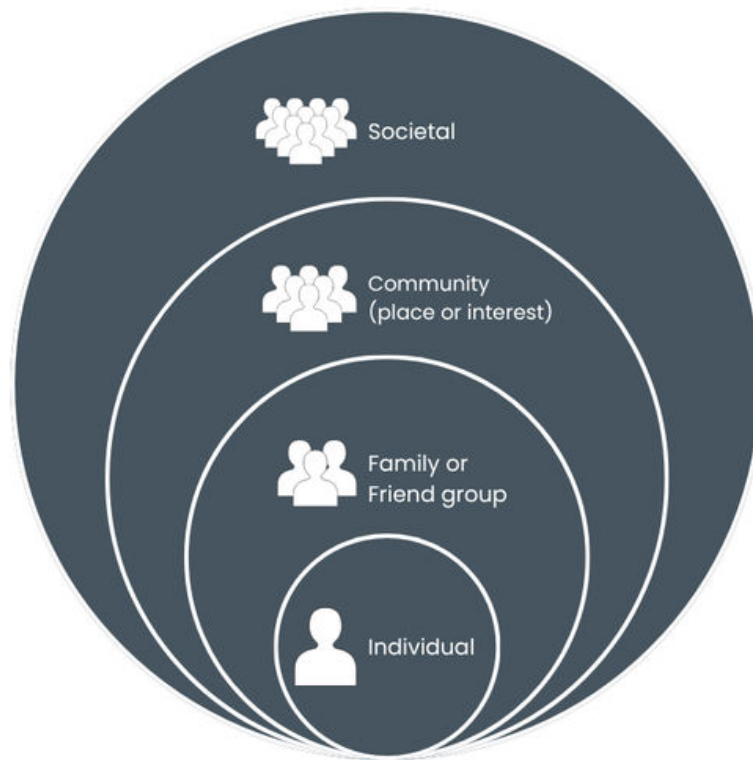
Resilience is a word used by our sector and partners every day, and yet it has no one single definition. There are many definitions of resilience across the academic and policy literature, with different outcomes dependent on the definition of resilience. This has caused many authors to conclude that resilience is a concept predicated on liberalism, or is a post-liberalism concept (Pugh, 2014; Schmidt, 2015).

In academia, most authors studying its definition have concluded that it is a phenomenon that is entirely context and culture specific, so much so that it is almost impossible to divorce it from its context and culture dependency and therefore cannot be directly shared between contexts (Doorn, Gardoni, and Murphy, 2019). The good news is that despite resilience being something that is many things, it is also entirely defined by that specific time and place, and in that context, in other words, resilience can and is defined by each specific example. The challenge comes when we are trying to speak and act across those contexts and cultures, to achieve shared outcomes. For example, carrying out work on increasing resilience in our supply chains in each local resilience area becomes problematic if, Tukamuhabwa, et al. (2015) suggests, there are 23 definitions of supply chain resilience. The outcomes vary according to definition, which means it is even further complicated to do coordinated work well, unless the definitions are aligned.

Resilience of systems, people, communities or society?

The EU funded ENGAGE project (Bodas, Peleg, Stolerio and Adini, 2022) measured perceptions of individual resilience, societal resilience and preparedness across eight countries to establish a common prevalence level of societal resilience. This came back with many different definitions across countries and citizens of those concepts. Demonstrating that it is not simply the resilience professionals who are unsure of a shared clear vision of resilience.

Some have tried to define resilience in the context of an emergency or major incident, for example the UNDRR (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction) defines resilience as “The ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate, adapt to, transform and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions through risk management.” Even in this definition, there are many different levels at which resilience can be operating. Establishing that resilience is a context-dependent concept, means for us to effectively communicate about resilience, we need to define those levels. For example, we can see the different levels or actors in the ‘system’ referred to in the UNDRR definition nested by group size, in the diagram overleaf:



This means that our whole of society approach has many layers within and across the clusters of sectors in which we partition our public. If we are to work across sectors we need to consider aligning our efforts. Having a shared understanding of what it is that we are working towards is essential. In the academic evidence, not having a shared understanding of resilience leads to very different outcomes (Southwick, 2015). This is developed further by Haimes (2009) who suggests that different definitions of resilience engineering (the paper stops at five different definitions) can lead us to very different questions, answers, and interventions.

From community to societal resilience?

Across defence (Gajauskaite, 2026), pandemics (Wernl, Clausin, Antulov-Fantulin, Berezowski, Biller-Andorno, Blanchet, et al., 2021), cities (Marana et al., 2019) and in more general examinations of the concept (Bergström, 2018), societal resilience is typically defined as the ability of societies to maintain the core functions of their society whilst an emergency unfolds. These usually include an analysis of the interdependencies and consequences of the disruption to core systems and subsystems such as governance, water, telecommunications, energy, and transport systems. These systems and subsystems were initially limited to critical national infrastructure but have recently been argued to include the ability for organisations to work together on resilience matters (Haavik, 2020).

The eighth wonder of societal resilience benchmarks

The Dowd and Cook (2022) paper 'Bolstering Collective Resilience in Europe' suggests seven benchmarks of NATO are also the seven bases of societal resilience which need to be supported collectively to support effective societal resilience. These mainly focus on keeping the main functional aspects of society running (continuity of government and critical government services, energy supplies, uncontrolled movement of people, food and water resources, mass casualties and disruptive health crises, civil communications systems, transport systems) which is needed to support societal functioning in an emergency. However, the biggest influencing factor of success or failure for a society to function in an emergency is absent from this list, that is the communities within that society. The people within those systems and processes are essential; they are not simply passive receivers of those functions.

The argument being put forward here is that an eighth base of 'community' resilience should be developed. The wider benchmarks are about systems, processes and infrastructure. Typically, people, groups and communities are excluded from these spaces in resilience. When we understand how community resilience can make a significant contribution to societal resilience, then we can truly understand how to support a whole of society approach. If not, we are simply supporting systems and ignoring the people within them.

Consequently, community resilience sits within the broader architecture of societal resilience, alongside the systems and processes which serve the communities and keep their social, economic, physical, digital, technological and critical needs met.

Communities as resilient groups

Communities are based on groups. Evidence suggests that from a policy or decision-makers' perspective groups are seen as an unsafe, seemingly unpredictable dynamic which brings with it unease through a lack of control. Communities, however, are an essential aspect of human beings. We seek social connection and a sense of belonging via in-person or digital means through those groups, which are also called communities. Communities can be of geography (ward or street, those we live in close proximity to) or of interest (membership of groups that have shared activities such as running, knitting, gaming, rugby, or shared interests such as musical tastes, pet ownership, nature, food lovers). These groups give us a sense of belonging, social connection, meaning, social support and agency (Jetten et al., 2017).

Groups have a flat network structure, are densely networked between each person, and can act collectively in the best interests of each other. Groups in emergencies are typically pro-social, innovative, care about those who they see as belonging to that group, they share resources and provide immediate and longer-term support to those who have experienced the adversity.

Our belonging to these social groups (e.g., being part of a team, an occupational group, a family, a neighbourhood, an online gaming community) provides people with a sense of who they are. Our identities which we get from being members of these groups gives us support, validation, purpose, meaning, trust and a sense of belonging.

These groups can also form in adversity when groups are exposed to the same risk. The people there share social identification in that adversity and experience a 'groupness' which is also called shared common fate (Drury, 2018). From different risks, the evidence suggests that groups who have gone through adversity to a risk (e.g. a flood), identify with others who have been through the same adversity (Drury, 2018; Ntontis et al., 2020) and engage in collective action to increase coping (Haslam et al., 2004). Collective action is seen as a strengths-based approach which focuses on social assets, building trust, strengthening communities, and fostering collective resilience (Hertwig et al., 2025).

Identity leadership crafts the group identity and provides meaning, raising awareness of group threats and goals (Drury, 2018; Ntontis et al., 2018). Identity leadership needs to be recognised in being the vehicle by which the vision and physical structures for new forms of action can be shared and delivered. That is not delivered by an external source, but by people who 'belong here' who 'know what it is like to live here' and 'understand us, cause they are one of us'.

It is supported by the strengths of social institutions and networks surrounding the community and is heavily influenced by the economic and political conditions of that community before the impact of the risk (Kwok, Doyle, Becker, Johnston, and Paton, 2016). This means that between communities, and even in the same communities over time, groups and communities will have differing capabilities, social capital and resources.

Community groups are formed and influenced by levels of pre-existing and emerging trust, leadership, collective perceived ability to change an outcome, social capital, social cohesion and sense of community, community engagement, existing norms/attitudes/values, communication and information, and resource dependency all contribute to community resilience (adapted from Maguire and Hagan, 2007, p.19).

Part of community resilience, participatory resilience is the aim of "building inclusive resilience strategies fostering participation and engagement... which emphasize the concepts of participation, coordination, and co-creation" (page 2, Mahajan, Hausladen, Sánchez-Vaquerizo, Korecki, and Helbing, 2022). This is being evaluated and documented in countries who are implementing a Whole of Society Approach.



These conceptual definitions of resilience all include the context specific nature of the place, the people, and their pre-existing inequalities, opportunities and risks. There are groups, such as those aged below 25, who have the same sense of connectedness and belonging to groups, but where place does not have the same anchor. Our own emerging research illustrates their experiences as not being tied to place at all, as they are neither homeowners nor renters, nor are they responsible for the household. However, their groups online offer the same qualities of groups of place or proximity.

Researchers such as Champlin, Sirenko, and Comes (2023) have tried to identify common facets between these groups to establish proxy measures to try and measure community resilience. These have largely been challenged in their ability to measure both groups of place and groups of interest, they tend to perform better for one or the other, but not both.

How can we empower communities to support resilience?

It requires a significant investment of time, energy and structures to understand and identify existing risks, gaps, social characteristics, norms, values, and practices of groups. None of which can be understood through the management of a system or process, or through operating at geographical scales that are not meaningful to the local people (Genik and Godsoe, 2015). Empowering local communities to self-define their boundaries demands cross-administrative working. Without this approach, any intervention or attempt to build a meaningful relationship will fail.

Successful support of community resilience recognises that different groups have an uneven distribution of capabilities and assets. Consequently, as the risk profile, social assets, needs, and resources/capabilities within communities will differ, so should the support offered. In this way, equity, not equality, of provision is what is needed.

Community groups will also have their own social norms and values which will influence that group. Although the messaging here is that communities are different and it requires a significant amount of resource and trust building to establish a relationship, the evidence from across the globe suggests that supporting hyperlocal community resilience is the only effective approach to consistently be evidenced to meaningfully work. Researchers encourage those wanting to support community groups to think about resilience capabilities as on a continuum, and not dichotomous.

To consider whether there are enough resilience capabilities for the group's level of needs at that time, rather than simply if those capabilities are present or not (Maguire and Hagan, 2007; Schäfer, Supke, Kausmann, Schaubbruch, Lieb, and Cohrdes, 2024).

People within community groups are broadly connected by types of social capital and collective assets such as social networks, social relationships, civic engagement, reciprocity, bonding, bridging and trust. These can be seen at an individual and a group level. Woolcock (2001) focuses on three types of social capital; bonding (such as family members), bridging (such as those in similar geographical locations) and linking (such as those outside of the geographical location, situated in hierarchical structures). There are differences between groups in the detail within the assets, however. Tradition, culture, values and heritage can all be viewed differently between groups.

Conclusion: Clarity is the best friend of effectiveness

This paper set out to disentangle the use of the terms 'Community Resilience' and 'Societal Resilience'. This was to ensure that as we work together to deliver the Whole of Society approach, we can work together effectively horizontally across sectors and organisations, and vertically, with national levels to the decentralised hyperlocal community groups. The definitions and premise behind the definitions have been explored, reaching two conclusions:

1

Societal resilience is wider in scope and focuses primarily on core functions, whilst community resilience focuses on the resilience of groups and how this can be facilitated.

2

Within our definitions of societal resilience, we need to add in community resilience as the main users, beneficiaries and purpose of societal resilience.



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