Resilience as a Policy Response to Crisis?

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'Resilience', both in public discourse and public policy, has become somewhat ubiquitous. We are constantly encouraged to build our resilience. We are told of how economies must become resilient to the inevitable shocks associated with an unstable world. Rating agencies directly assess economies' resilience through debt stress-testing. Communities and regions across the world must become resilient to the threats of climate change, international and domestic terrorism. Right now, the Irish government's plan to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic foregrounds resilience directly in the title – *Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with Covid-19*.

On a day-to-day level, we are probably more instinctively familiar with the individual, psychological approach to resilience: described by Colm Doody in the RTÉ Brainstorm series as a dynamic skill that enables individuals to 'face dynamic, real life problems, stresses, traumas and successfully navigate and overcome these challenges'. It has been developed as a concept in materials science, ecology, psychology, social work, political science, economics, and in sociology and public/social policy. It is highly multifaceted, and its journey through various disciplines has caused it to evolve into a complex and sometimes confused beast. It can be employed at the micro, meso and macro units of analysis and action, sometimes interchangeably and without little definition beyond its superficial understanding. This can lead to various problems of definition and measurement, which are crucial to address if the concept is to be used successfully in policy (Dagdeviren *et al.,* 2016). My own research and engagement with the concept focuses on social and/or socio-economic resilience – the ability for households and social groups to react to, survive and ideally overcome social and economic shocks, particularly in times of crisis such as the Financial Crisis of 2008 and subsequent Great Recession (e.g. Dagdeviren and Donoghue, 2019), and now the Covid-19 pandemic.

Much literature tends to treat resilience as a 'positive' concept. In poverty studies, for example, resilience is seen as an alternative to the traditional 'deficit' approach, de-emphasising issues of 'lack' and replacing them with a focus on multifaceted resources and individual resourcefulness. Various sub-fields of psychology (such as child psychology, family psychology, educational psychology) focus on the ability to not just survive, but *thrive,* despite the odds. Two common strands in almost all such approaches to resilience are thus the positive acquisition and use of resources (however defined), and being able to take on challenges and overcome them. This positive outlook, however, tends to play down the fact that becoming and remaining resilient (as resilience is never a static property, but a process and series of practices) can entail significant costs, not just

financially, but also with regards to mental and physical health (e.g. Bowers, 2020). This has some coverage in the academic literature (e.g. Dagdeviren and Donoghue, 2019; Dagdeviren *et al.,* 2016), but seems to be largely overlooked in policy.

Given these costs, why is resilience so popular? The answer is, essentially, that resilience helps governments understand and navigate crises through a lexicon and framework with which they are already familiar. Firstly, the instinctive understanding of resilience, outlined above, is powerful. Resilience as a term is strongly positive. Who would not want to be strong and thrive in the face of challenges? The connotations are positive, especially for those who only speak of resilience in general terms. This immediately makes it attractive from a political and rhetorical perspective as it can associate a whole policy programme with connotations of strength, support and enhanced well-being in the face of sometimes significant challenges.

Secondly, resilience accentuates the positive, especially when it comes to individual agency. This is attractive because it can take the pressure off the state to provide certain supports in the name of individual empowerment:

> Resilience promises a (re-) centring of individual agency in solutions to overcoming socio-material insecurity and, in turn, reduces the prospective liabilities associated with welfare state intervention. Under conditions of austerity then, resilience appeals as a process of individual risk assessment and management in which citizens take 'ownership' of their problems (Donoghue and Edmiston, 2020: 8-9).

Thirdly, resilience frameworks take as their starting point the supposed futility of overcoming complex structural crises, focusing instead on what individual units (individuals, households, communities etc.) can do to adapt within crisis conditions. This means that the difficult conversations around structural problems can be framed as an unproductive use of time and resources. Fourthly, and perhaps somewhat paradoxically, the focus of resilience on complexity provides it with a framework that can be readily applied to various crises of different scales. This is why we see it employed in the contexts of global finance, ecological change, national and regional economic stability, state-building, community and social cohesion, right down to household and individual psychology, economics and social practice. The principles and assumptions of the resilience framework writ large, then, provide a template for multiple policy responses (which, incidentally, makes the resilience framework highly compatible with the neoliberal principle of 'fast policy' – see Peck and Theodore, 2015). This, combined with the focus on the primacy of the individual, makes resilience a popular policy paradigm in (largely) liberal countries such as the UK, the US and Ireland.

Resilience in a time of Coronavirus

A pandemic represents a crisis on different levels. The most obvious is the immediate public health crisis. Other crises that need navigating include political crises (i.e. of governance and government), crises of expertise (which, as the government's recent disagreements with NPHET show, is as much political as it is epistemological), economic crises (as demonstrated by economic shocks and recessions around the globe), and social crises of poverty, inequality, social fracturing and so on. Resilience can be, and is being,

applied in all these situations. In particular, we can see three manifestations of resilience being deployed:

- Community resilience

- Economic resilience

- Individual resilience

Each of these have influenced the government's *Resilience and Recovery plan.* To understand how these three elements interact and ideally complement one another, we need to consider both the big picture of resilience, and how it looks to be employed currently.

Resilience requires a pre-emptive acquisition of resources that can then be deployed in a time of crisis. Yet, at the same time, resilience in many situations becomes a reactive process. For example, during the financial crisis, households across Europe found it increasingly difficult to plan beyond the immediate future ([Dagdeviren *et al.,* 2017](#)). Resilience was transformed from a long-term strategy for thriving into a short-term strategy for survival (which, in fact, throws into question whether this could be considered resilience at all – for a comprehensive debate on these issues and experiences and practices of resilience during the financial crisis, see ([Boost *et al.* - forthcoming 2020](#)).

Important for resilience is the ways in which the Covid pandemic has disrupted usual ways of acquiring resources. Alongside the threat of mass unemployment is the problem that preferred strategies such as retraining are of little use if various industries are shut down and may not return (either skills become quickly outdated, or there is simply too much competition for a small number of jobs). Furthermore, a large source of socio-economic resilience at the household level seen across Europe is informal networks of reciprocity and exchange. These networks are also disrupted or put under considerable strain considering the need for social/physical distancing. Thus, the social and economic restrictions placed upon households due to Covid further restrict people's options when it comes to acquiring and deploying resources. We have seen community support groups spring up across the country, which have been a lifeline especially to the more vulnerable members of society ([Volunteer Ireland, 2020](#)). However, although there is some support from the state, the majority of these groups operate on a voluntary basis. Once volunteers themselves become resource poor (they could run low on money to donate, they could become time-poor because of a return to work, or because of increased caring responsibilities etc.), these support networks struggle. Of course, many of these are supported by charitable organisations like St. Vincent de Paul, yet in some cases this only pushes the question of resources further down the road (for an example from the UK, see [Dagdeviren *et al.,* 2018](#)).

Resilience and Recovery 'wants to develop an approach that puts communities and counties at the centre of solutions for their own areas in terms of recovery' ([Department of the Taoiseach, 2020: 54](#)). However, what communities and counties are able to do is severely restricted not only by Covid itself, but by the financial, political and practical support provided to them by government. This links to a central debate in the resilience

literature between proponents and critics of the resilience approach: is resilience designed to place individual *agency* or individual *responsibility* front and centre? In Ireland the discourse on 'Covid security' places the responsibility on individual citizens/residents. It is up to 'us' to stop the spread of Covid, through social distancing, good hygiene, reducing contacts etc. Yet while this is undoubtedly crucial, it underplays the fact that contacts can only be reduced so far when working in hospitality, factories, schools and universities, and so on. It is no co-incidence that some of the highest profile Covid outbreaks have been in meat processing factories, direct provision centres, and nursing homes, where sustained close contact is inevitable. We know that policymaking is a process of trade-offs such as balancing public health with the health of the economy. The resilience paradigm in this context enables actions that may otherwise be impermissible under other frameworks of risk assessment.

This also demonstrates that the three forms of resilience outlined above are strongly interconnected. No group is perfectly self-contained, and all individuals and households each day are faced with trade-offs regarding their security – their financial security, physical health, the safety of their family and so on. The bottom line is that for these forms of resilience to be fostered and supported, in a social context, they require sustained institutional support. The most obvious way would be through direct government support for such resilience initiatives. Equally important, however, is a sustained commitment and increase of support to programmes such as the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, and indeed social security programmes beyond the immediate Covid period. As research undertaken by myself and colleagues (Donoghue and Edmiston, 2020) has shown, a crucial contributor to ontological security – an internal sense of security and wellbeing, which can lead to increased social and civic participation – is financial security (whether this is from labour or from state support etc.). On paper, the solution to this problem of security is easy: increase the coverage and generosity of social supports on a long-term basis. Of course in reality there are problems of veto players, wavering political will and perceived financial exigency. Although crises can stifle change, if there is the right leadership and vision, crises can also drive radical change – and we can see that in some sectors the ground is becoming more fertile for such change. President Higgins' address to the OECD's *New Economic Challenges* conference encapsulated this: 'The Coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the unequivocal case for a new eco-social political economy— of having universal basic services that will protect us in the future' (President of Ireland, 2020). The introduction of, and tweaks to, the Pandemic Unemployment Payment is an implicit acknowledgement that many will need long-term support, even if the economy rebounds quickly. This is a path-breaking moment; it is an opportunity to embed such supports to truly assist people in becoming resilient and financially independent.

Problems of political reality remain. Much research shows that for resilience to be successfully embedded into societies, a significant support effort is required. Yet, one of the reasons resilience has become so popular as a mode of policy governance is its commitment to individual agency and an acceptance of the inability to resolve increasingly complex problems. Thus, there is a paradox within resilience at both a theoretical and policy level that limits its efficacy. Ironically, however, in periods of crisis the usual rules governing politics and economics can be altered more easily (as we have

seen by those states that have so quickly pivoted from pursuing intense austerity to intensive Keynesian measures). As my research with colleagues suggests (Dagdeviren *et al.* 2020), to make resilience an effective framework for social wellbeing, governments must take the opportunity to change the rules that govern it, to acknowledge and address the problems of structural inequality within it, and commit to supporting communities in the long term.

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