

What makes societies resilient?

The Commonwealth People's Forum (CPF) is a biennial event held prior to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. CPF 2015 took place on 23-26 November 2015 and was jointly organised by the Government of Malta (host) and the Commonwealth Foundation. CPF 2015 critically explored policy based actions under the theme of "What Makes Resilient Societies?" It provided an innovative opportunity for civil society organisations to share knowledge and learn from each other as well as to interact with governance institutions on key policy issues. The CPF2015 series elaborates on the issues covered in the Malta Declaration on Governance for Resilience.

Summary

The Commonwealth People's Forum 2015 (CPF2015) set out to expand contemporary thinking on resilience by analysing the concept in the context of people's participation and governance. Civil society from across the Commonwealth assembled in Malta asked: What makes societies resilient? Four interweaving threads of inquiry – transformation; inclusion and responsiveness; transparency and accountability; and gender – framed the discussion on how resilient societies can be built.

The term resilience has gained credence as a policy response to growing levels of insecurity, complexity and vulnerability in our everyday lives. Insecure working and living situations due to poverty and large-scale unemployment are widespread across the Commonwealth. In addition, threats from climate change, inter and intra-national migration and the growing interconnectedness of people form narratives of growing complexity and vulnerability. Many of the world's Small Island Development States are Commonwealth members. These states are at the frontline of climate change impacts and with

limited financial and human resources to cope. There is growing recognition of the pervasive impact of continuous shocks, threats and crises in eroding societal resilience and the inability of current approaches to address these.

“The term resilience has gained credence as a policy response to growing levels of insecurity, complexity and vulnerability in our everyday lives.”

This is where CPF 2015 started. It gathered civil society together to debate the validity of the concept of resilience, its policy implications and came up with new takes on what makes societies resilient. The paper captures key elements of that discussion.

Deconstructing Resilience

CPF 2015 participants began their deliberations by deconstructing the concept of resilience; they highlighted the contradictions of mainstream narratives on resilience.

Mainstream approaches define resilience in the context of the capacity to rise again after a shock and to “bounce back.” In this approach, resilience is associated with coping abilities and allows for an understanding of a community’s ability to recover from external shocks. However, from this point of view, resilience assumes emptiness: underlying causes of vulnerabilities are undermined and ignored; the purpose of resilience building has therefore become to “correct” self-created vulnerabilities. Bouncing back to the status quo means returning to this flawed system, not addressing it; negating, not contributing to achieving structural transformation.

Resilience as a coping response and as acceptance of the status quo has created further perverse challenges: it places the burden to become resilient on the poor, vulnerable and excluded. Yet most societal stresses arise from external factors beyond their control, for example climate change, poverty and the inability to secure meaningful employment, making it more difficult to be truly resilient.

Instead, building the capacity of people and communities to engage and challenge the system creating their vulnerabilities may be a more appropriate objective of resilience building.

Current governance systems were identified as key in perpetuating vulnerability, leaving many voices in the margins and unheard. Dominant and hegemonic interpretations of resilience are compounding, not addressing vulnerability. Instead they imply acceptance of this dominance. Power imbalances, for example, between man and woman and between North and South requires consent by the majority to simply cope with an unfair social and global system, rather than addressing its root causes; and with adoption of this definition, in turn aiding and supporting this system.

In the current analysis of what makes societies resilient, the important role of democratic

institutions and people’s participation has been largely unexplored.

Culture is at the heart of resilience. Culture is fluid, awake and living. In the face of oppression, adversity and conflict, it does not stop, instead seeking for itself new forms of expression. Resilience through a cultural lens is the capacity to absorb resistance and to undergo significant change while remaining essential – allowing for the continuing construction of identity. Cultural diversity is also a source of strength. In an environment of continuous crises, cultural diversity strengthens and contributes to adaptive resilience.

“Culture is at the heart of resilience. Culture is fluid, awake and living. In the face of oppression, adversity and conflict, it does not stop, instead seeking for itself new forms of expression.”

In building resilient societies, indigenous peoples and other marginalised groups emphasise the role of their cultural heritage, the importance of intergenerational connectedness. The primacy of collective rather than individual benefit and the need to sustain a close affinity to Earth, its gifts and resources. The survival of cultural and linguistic identities, the preservation of indigenous knowledge and ownership of indigenous people’s territories and resources are integral components of resilience.

Dr Vandana Shiva challenged participants to view resilience through more coherent and sustainable logics than the dominant narratives. She defined resilience as life. If a system is resilient, it should, like all living systems, have the capacity to self-organise and to self-heal – to repair from within. Resilient systems do not create disasters – disasters materialise through influences external to resilient systems.

People and societies do not invoke resilience in the face of disaster. Instead they are able to define how to deal with external issues and are therefore constantly able to adapt without collapse. Living systems are also complex, diverse and multi-dimensional and this complexity allows for different pathways and constant adaptation. Consequently, resilient systems are

not static, and adaptability – the constant ability to move into the next stage of life, in a constantly changing society, is an important characteristic of resilience. Resilient systems should provide the internal capacities for societies, species and ecologies to adapt.

Governance for Resilience

CPF 2015 placed resilience building and the quest for substantive transformation in the context of governance and development. Using the four threads of inquiry – transformation; inclusion and responsiveness; transparency and accountability; and gender, participants explored the rules, institutions and processes through which, people, organisations, governments, and others work toward common objectives, make decisions, generate legitimate authority and power, and promote and protect human rights. Civil society considered what ingredients of governance systems have been shown to contribute to resilience.

Substantive Transformation

Substantive transformation necessitates changing the current governance model that is pervasive, driven by a focus on economic growth, and assigns a reduced role for the state. In contrast, substantive transformation requires new narratives of resilience and participatory governance systems and processes to be built. This should be inclusive, responsive to all peoples' demands, be open and capable of hearing and acting on the voices of those most at risk and able to transform gender relations.

Resilience has been weakened by the current pervasive system. Building a resilient society requires a shift in approach, to a focus on social development and social dialogue. A key element could be equal access to a quality education system as well as education capable of enabling citizens to demand substantive transformation. Education, health, gender equality, more equal patterns of income distribution are all positively related to improvements in social development. Examining alternative measures of human progress, including the Happy Planet Index, Ecological Footprint, Gross Happiness Index and Health per Acre, provide new ways to gauge societal resilience and progress.

Participants illustrated how fundamental transformation can be catalysed, by demanding the kind of governance systems that build resilience. Transforming our societies to be resilient requires a profound understanding of power dynamics that are apparent in governance systems. Cosmetic changes to the ability and space for community participation in governance decision-making are not sufficient for transformation.

“Building a resilient society requires a shift in approach, to a focus on social development and social dialogue.”

For example, in exploring the challenge of planning resilient cities in the context of rapid and largely unplanned urbanisation, participants emphasised the need for informed participation in governance processes. This necessitates the interconnectedness of systems thinking and requires continuous interaction among stakeholders. Effectively planned urbanisation can be transformative for vulnerable communities.

Transformative shifts in governance, that can address intergenerational inequity and remove the burden of climate resilience on small states, the poor, young people and other marginalised groups are needed. Examples of government policies that would help to achieve this include: the identification of sustainable economic opportunities for young people; the establishment of an index to track the impacts of increasingly prevalent natural disasters on youth; the establishment – through national and international agreements – of carbon pricing mechanisms that internalize the real cost of negative impacts of high-carbon economies in market prices; and reporting on any fossil fuel subsidies introduced.

Power can build resilience if it is used to demand more public information and knowledge, which will improve citizen's understanding of public policy decisions. The Open Budget Partnership, for example, represents an example of engagement between civil society and Government in a process of addressing people's priorities

In all initiatives, participants recognised the integral role of civil society in mobilising community action and in identifying transformative local, national and international initiatives.

Inclusion

Inclusion and responsiveness to the needs of all sectors and communities will ensure equal access to resources and services and contribute to making societies resilient. Resources and services are linked; without land there is no food, without education there can be no income and while systems – for example health care – may be present, they are inaccessible, particularly to the poor. The availability of infrastructure offers no assurance of access to it. Therefore a rights-based approach to access to resources and services must be employed when building resilient societies.

For example, building resilient health systems requires investment in community based health systems, improved access to education, access to community transport, gainful employment and access to nutrition. Health care needs to be taken to vulnerable people, not relying on the vulnerable having to travel to health care. Identifying policies that are inclusive and responsive to the demands of all communities can help focus attention on communities and policy action.

Basic, critical resources, essential for survival and a resilient society such as: clean air; clean water; shelter; food; and, sustainable sources of energy are not available to many in Commonwealth countries. Effective social protection can offer a means to address risks which disproportionately affect vulnerable groups such as natural disasters. The careful choice of instruments to manage risks, together with community participation in developing the policies and tools to address risks is crucial.

To address the need for progressive policy to build resilience requires a commitment to decent work. Having a constant and guaranteed salary allows the opportunity to manage resources, to save and to invest, allowing subsequent generations to inherit status and to leave behind the stigma of being poor.

Addressing youth employment through inclusive and responsive policies will also build resilience. The challenge is acute. For example, the number of young people in Africa will double by 2045. With 72% of the youth population in the continent living on less than two dollars a day, building resilience will necessitate addressing youth unemployment, most of which is and will, be concentrated in the informal sector.

“While mainstream policies aim to formalise the informal economy, inclusive and responsive policies are needed instead to strengthen the role of the informal economy, harness its potential, and scale up”

The informal economy demonstrates the resilience of people to find and carry out work. It is where the majority of the poor, women and young, in Commonwealth countries are working. Participants emphasised the critical need to foster and support the informal economy: In sub-Saharan Africa, the informal economy contributes 55% of GDP and 80% of the labour force and nine out of ten workers have informal jobs. This is a global phenomenon: in the UK more people are self-employed than work in the public sector. Self-employed workers have no or limited employment rights. Building resilience requires finding ways to support self-employment while ensuring it comprises decent and safe work.

While mainstream policies aim to formalise the informal economy, inclusive and responsive policies are needed instead to strengthen the role of the informal economy, harness its potential, and scale up and unleash the entrepreneurship of informal workers. Adding a safety net, as well as justice and autonomy to eliminate the oppression faced by participants in the informal economy will contribute to achieving this goal.

Here, the role of non-state actors, including the private sector, is important in empowering local stakeholders, enhancing opportunities for micro entrepreneurs to get in to business and to develop the local economy.

Transparency and Accountability

Transparency and accountability of institutions are also fundamental to building resilient societies. CPF 2015 examined how the voices of those most affected by insecurity, complexity and vulnerability are and should be accounted for. Transparent and accountable governance enables diversity and the participation of all sectors and groups in decision-making. Access to justice and opportunities for broad-based employment, secure employment rights - for accountable and transparent dialogue between employers and employees, and transparent access to social protection, are all fundamental to accountable governance and resilient societies.

Building resilient societies requires recognising, analysing, valuing and incorporating local solutions, which can protect vulnerable people and which need not be costly or complex such as: utilizing indigenous knowledge as an example.

“The voices of migrants as well as those policymakers that defend and protect the lives and rights of vulnerable people need to be heard.”

The discussion on migration and resilience highlighted that migration has been dehumanized in both policy and media discourses. There was emphasis on the need for transparent and accountable institutions that explain the rationale of public policies on migration. Civil society – and Commonwealth governments – have strong roles in influencing and changing the way in which governance institutions work with migrants; and the voices of migrants as well as those policymakers that defend and protect the lives and rights of vulnerable people need to be heard.

Gender and sexuality power imbalances

While all people are vulnerable through their shared humanity, all people and all groups are not equally vulnerable: the poor, women, LGBTBI people, migrants and marginalised groups all experience unequal access to food, energy, shelter, finance, infrastructure, environmental resources as well as to political and economic participation. Colonialism has had a pervasive impact on perpetuating power imbalances, impacting people’s world views – of themselves and others.

Women have always been resilient in the face of adversity, they can and have served as a reference point for societies seeking to become more resilient. However, governance failures contribute to causing and exacerbating the vulnerability of women in many ways, including when policies are not implemented and through a lack of access to basic sexual health and rights.

Governance needs to promote diversity, self-reliance and a participatory approach that offers real platforms for the voices on the ground, while enhancing service delivery as a means of effectively addressing power imbalances. Participants emphasised the need for recognition from governance bodies that there are multiple ways in which women are disempowered which further impacts and disadvantages them. A multi-level governance structure that brings together global and regional frameworks that offer advantages for women’s agency, underpinned by a national commitment to protect, promote and reinforce women’s rights through service provision is needed.

The criminalisation of LGBTBI in several Commonwealth countries has deepened vulnerabilities and weakened societies’ resilience. Instead, inclusive processes that address discrimination and exclusion, protect the lives of people who experience violence on the grounds of their sexual orientation and gender identity or expression can all make societies stronger, more innovative and more resilient and in turn contributes to substantive transformation.

Next Steps and Further Actions

Across 18 sessions, CPF 2015 highlighted the need to identify new approaches and pathways to resilience building, new institutional mechanisms and ways for existing governance systems to engage with marginalised groups and channels for unheard voices. A review of CPF 2015 proceedings highlights at least six distinct issues for policy implementation, policy development or further inquiry and analysis. These comprise:

1) Implementing Policy Outcomes agreed at CPF 2015

Taking forward policy recommendations from the two policy dialogue sessions on LGBTI and Transformative Education, in each case identifying a work programme and targets to achieve in the period leading to CHOGM 2018.

2) Enabling Platforms for Unheard Voices

A targeted and focused programme of Commonwealth work to uncover, celebrate, share and dialogue with unheard critical voices and to ensure inclusion of marginalised groups into discussions on what makes societies resilient. This should include special recognition of groups that have had long-term exposure to vulnerability.

3) Concerted Action for Indigenous Peoples

CPF 2015 discussions yielded a set of recommendations to strengthen representation of indigenous people, safeguard their rights and knowledge, increase opportunities for knowledge sharing between these groups by leveraging the Commonwealth's convening capacity. These can be developed into a strong programme of action, with specific goals and targets, in the period leading to CHOGM 2018.

4) Expanding Knowledge of Climate Change Impacts

There is a strong opportunity to strengthen knowledge at the local level on the impacts of climate change and to identify opportunities to increase sustainable production and consumption patterns for regional and pan-

Commonwealth dialogue. This could be facilitated by Commonwealth civil society action.

5) Strengthening the Role of Civil Society

There is scope for a more detailed interrogation of civil society's role in supporting resilience building. CPF 2015 discussions were across many thematic policy issues, for example in sustainable energy, in identifying new measures of progress, in increasing awareness of the harmful impacts of climate change and in better utilising the "local" lens for analysis and advocacy. All these highlighted the need for a closer and more methodical examination of the role that civil society can play in helping design, develop, implement and monitor policies; in having a stronger say in public policy choices; and in fostering the sharing of good practices.

6) Concerted, Practical Actions by Commonwealth Governments

CPF 2015 identified a series of actions to be taken by Commonwealth governments, each of which can be pursued, in supporting the building of resilient societies. These include encouragement to engage with civil society, condemning violence on any and all grounds, and advancing policy initiatives and dialogue on the complexity of migration and its links to efforts to build resilience.

Concluding comments

Examined through new eyes, using new lenses and focusing on many less heard voices, the discourse on resilience in the context of participatory governance exposed a largely hidden, unheard and complex narrative. It brought to the forefront discussions on the meaning of resilience, its context, its purpose, application and impact. A question in four simple words "what makes societies resilient", interrogated through four interwoven threads and set against four decades of pioneering Commonwealth analysis, research and advocacy. It unlocked new perspectives on how resilient societies can be built; and yielded an array of practical opportunities to develop policies and to mobilise governments, civil societies and communities to act. Key areas of this discussion informed the Malta Declaration on Governance for Resilience.

Developed by Cyrus Rustomjee, Chief Rapporteur,
Commonwealth People's Forum, May 2016

Edited by Reineira Arguello Sanjuan, Gillian Cooper and Mithika
D'Cruz

Design by Leo Kiss

Disclaimer

The Commonwealth Foundation encourages the use, translation, adaptation and copying of this material for non-commercial use.

We ask that appropriate credit be given to the Commonwealth Foundation. The perspectives expressed are the views of the author while documenting the opinions expressed by delegates of CPF 2015 in their deliberations and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Commonwealth Foundation.