

UNDERSTANDING RESILIENCE IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Paper 7 in PSJP's Defining Key Concepts series



Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace | TrustAfrica
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About PSJP's Defining Key Concepts series

For philanthropy and development practices to have a significant impact on root causes of poverty, marginalization and violence, they need to be better aligned with social change agendas that are people-led. This involves defining the key concepts that are commonly used in development and elucidating their meaning and implications in practice. PSJP is facilitating a peer-learning environment in order to do this and is exploring themes such as dignity, community resilience, measuring change, sustainability, community philanthropy, leadership and power among others.

These terms are frequently used in development and philanthropy, and they are included in many organizations' mission statements and performance indicators, but often there is no clear understanding of what they mean in practice or how they can be measured. As a first step to develop this understanding, we are facilitating discussions among a diverse set of practitioners in the field on these topics and producing papers which are shared on <http://www.psjp.org>. We hope to stimulate wider discussion in response to the papers and invite you to share your perspectives, experience and research on these themes. To contribute a blog, write to us at chandrika@global-dialogue.org

This paper is published by PSJP, Impact Trust, TrustAfrica and Global Greengrants Fund, UK.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of resilience has come to the fore in development circles recently, particularly following the financial crisis of 2008 when the old paradigm of ‘transition’ (based on a linear approach to understanding social change in which a results chain of inputs, processes and outputs leading to desirable outcomes would drive a model of societal improvement), which had governed international aid in post-communist settings over the 20 years since the collapse of the Berlin Wall failed to explain abrupt systemic changes and crises. In 2014, the Montpelier Resilience Conference described resilience as ‘a new paradigm for development’. Since then, many donors and implementing agencies have presented resilience as a new standard for development assistance to the public.

In 2020, the concept became even more salient as the global pandemic forced the world into the limen - an ambiguous zone of change in which time feels elongated and all outcomes are unpredictable. This experience produced an overarching question from PSJP’s community:

How do we (collectively) build resilience in difficult times?

To seek answers and understand the concept in practice, in June 2020, PSJP organized two online dialogues with 27 participants to examine the practices in development that build (rather than undermine) community resilience. Three case studies were offered based on the work of Tewa, a women’s fund in Nepal; the Global Greengrants Fund (GGF) and research in community resilience by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (HHI). These have since been published in a working paper¹ showcasing those development practices, such as supporting a strong local leadership, strengthening civil society organizations and their networks and promoting community philanthropy, that build resilience.

However, we have come to see that this understanding of resilience is far from universal and we have learned that it does not necessarily translate into the components of leadership, agency, connection, advocacy, etc that are essential to push for justice. For example, Ambika Satkunanathan from Sri Lanka, a country affected by decades of conflict and hardship, writes:

‘The ability of people, who have endured the loss of life and property, immense suffering and trauma, to make it through another day is labelled resilience and praised and admired. Resilience, though viewed as positive,

¹ Shreshtha, U., Rehse, E., Bollettino, V., Knight, B. and Sahai, C. (2021) ‘*Building Resilience in International Development*’. Tewa, GGF, PSJP. Available at: <http://www.psjp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Building-resilience-in-international-development-Jan-2021.pdf>

romanticises struggles for survival and through that romanticises the coping mechanisms people have constructed. The danger in this is that romanticising resilience may make us oblivious to the fact that these survival/coping mechanisms could be exploitative and increase the vulnerability of people in unforeseen ways.’²

What is considered resilience, she says, is sometimes ‘survival at great cost’. ‘In order to survive people may become part of, and even enable exploitative and oppressive structures.’ Further, she argues, resilience frameworks often ‘take refuge in the local’, dealing with the symptoms of structural problems locally while absolving state actors and institutions that are supposed to safeguard democracy and human rights. ‘When the macro, i.e. the national context, appears hopeless, particularly with regard to obtaining justice, there is a tendency, particularly amongst human rights activists, to focus on the micro, i.e. the local.’ She cites Neal Lawson: ‘the fact that all we do now is go incredibly local and incredibly resilient just shows that we’ve lost the big arguments, the big debate about what kind of world and society we want to live, that’s what we’ve retreated to. To me, it’s completely and utterly the politics of eventual defeat.’³

It is clear that an understanding of resilience is constructed from our personal experiences and, while it is abundantly used in development and other fields, it lacks a solid theoretical base. It is a polysemic concept, and has both descriptive and normative content. Furthermore, it is a cluster concept made up of many different components, none of which is either necessary or sufficient to define the term.⁴ These characteristics make the term ‘resilience’ highly ambiguous.

In the discourse of development and philanthropy, the term resilience is used across the spectrum. In some contexts, resilience means weathering the transition to change (such as for the three case studies mentioned above), while in others (such as in the Sri Lankan example), it is used to protect the structural frames of the status quo and so to absolve the state and other actors of responsibility.

In this paper, we explore this paradox. The goal is to develop an understanding of resilience in development and philanthropy so that it can be applied more meaningfully in our work to achieve the transformations we seek.

² Satkunanathan, A. (2021) ‘Romanticising resilience: Why the struggle to survive should not become a way of life’. *Groundviews*. Available at: <https://groundviews.org/2021/04/18/romanticising-resilience-why-the-struggle-to-survive-should-not-become-a-way-of-life/>

³ Satkunanathan (2021) op.cit.

⁴ Knight, B. (2018) ‘The strange case of dignity’. PSJP. Available at: <http://www.psjp.org/the-strange-case-of-dignity/>

In December 2021, we organized two sessions with Eva Rehse of Global Greengrants Fund and Halima Mahomed, a research fellow at TrustAfrica, as provocateurs who drew out the tension between two poles of resilience and set up the conditions for us to explore where we stand.

The sessions were moderated by Barry Knight whose facilitation followed the principles of 'Bohm dialogue' in which there are no right or wrong answers but where we co-create meaning from our experience. The conversations were initiated with each discussant presenting their position on the term 'resilience' as it has come to be used in development. They both then had an opportunity to respond to each other briefly before the other participants (14 across two sessions, representing diverse organizations in civil society from CSOs to philanthropy, from across the world) joined in to share their experience and position on resilience as a concept in development. The sessions were organized in collaboration with the Impact Trust, and PhD researcher Tamzin Ractliffe who has been studying resilience served as an interlocutor.

A relative term?

Eva's position was that 'resilience is inherently political and integral to systems change', while Halima's was that the burden of resilience is unduly put on those bearing the brunt of unjust systems and that 'our ability to be resilient and withstand and even challenge the status quo will be severely constrained until and unless the systems that demand resilience as a response are transformed.'

While an appreciation of the polarity of resilience: resilience as a necessary means to political agency vs resilience as passive absorption, was evident in their starting positions as both also suggested that resilience is neither necessarily a repressive notion that maintains the status quo, nor does it have a universal transformative potential. Eva conceded that resilience is popularly understood as endurance in the face of injustices.

'...Too often when we think about resilience, we understand it as an individual strength, an ability to bounce back when something bad happens to us - you can keep beating me down, but I'll stand up because I am resilient. That's not what I'm talking about.' said Eva in her opening statement.

While her main stipulation was that resilience has a transformative potential, she acknowledged that this isn't already happening everywhere.

On the other hand, Halima recognized the transformative potential but cautioned:

'in practice it's often not seen that way, and while it can be a form of power, it can also be used by those in power as a form of oppression, in furthering inequality, and we need to guard against this.'

Starting from this spectrum set out between two poles we attempted to explore together where our experiences in the world placed us in relation to 'resilience' as a development concept. What emerged was a lot of complexity.

CONTEXT MATTERS

‘I get it, and this is where I have some cognitive dissonance, because I get that in the context of climate change, and climate mitigation, it makes absolute sense. But in the context of social development work around public health and social security, I find it very problematic. I just feel that, usually it’s reserved for black and brown folks and people who are oppressed, who need to be resilient in the face of sometimes insurmountable obstacles.’

These words, spoken by one participant, reveal both the importance of context and the dilemma that often underlies the idea of resilience. When is it about reinforcing the status quo and when is it about transformation?

The transformative potential of resilience is seen much more easily in contexts where people have to deal with multiple shocks and sudden changes. The three case studies shared in PSJP’s previous publication draw on development strategies for building resilience in communities in times of disasters: the work of Tewa, a women’s fund in Nepal at the time of the devastating earthquake in 2015, of Global Greengrants Fund’s (GGF) grantmaking programme targeted at building climate resilience, and the research in community resilience by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (HHI) particularly in the Philippines, a country affected dramatically by natural hazards. In such an unpredictable and volatile context, individual and collective resilience, built over time, to disasters or climate impacts can help people move from survival mode to opening up opportunities for power shifts as local leadership and local networks develop and communities begin to organize and advocate to achieve big picture shifts.

Eva provided an example that speaks to these small steps to systemic change:

‘we’ve supported for a number of years women farmers across different African countries to meet their immediate livelihood challenges through solutions that they develop themselves. And so what we’ve seen over time is that their resilience to climate impact for example increases, they start using the spaces where they get together to talk about land rights - land rights advocacy, patriarchal systems, dominant and economic food systems - and they start to develop the solutions to tackling those.’

A participant working in South East Asia noted that in a context of different kinds of risks such as climate change, natural disasters and even social and economic impacts, resilience again becomes a tool that can build up to transformation.

‘We are looking at resilience from the perspective of the interaction of individual psychological resilience with the resources that they can actually obtain from the communities. When these individuals will be able to eventually

cope at the individual level, and transform and this is the bouncing back that we're talking about. At the same time as a community, they champion themselves, so that they can support each other, and as a community also bounce back - cope and then transform as they go through the different changes due to climate change, every other day... so they are always having to deal with a lot of these sudden changes and resilience is actually a really big thing for them.'

However, their work across different countries, namely Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines, which have radically different contexts in terms of local governance and politics, has allowed them to study how the transformative capacity of individual and collective resilience is affected by the differences in structural contexts.

The experience of other participants in contexts of persistent and sustained systemic suffering caused by economic, social and political systems sheds light on the perception of resilience as a counter-force to transformation. The experience of a 'broken' but resilient system that doesn't serve the interests of the community was shared by many:

'Resilience in and of itself can be of great value, but the system is broken, and when we focus primarily on the resilience of those bearing the brunt of our unjust systems, what we end up doing is normalising the system, and placing the responsibility of survival, adaptation and growth on them ...'

This strongly resonated with one participant, who was speaking from Mozambique.

'Context is essential. Mozambique has 90% of people living below \$1.90 a day and 75% below \$1 a day. 1% of all the wealth is owned by 50% of the people... There's nothing romantic about scraping a living off half a hectare of land, and being set upon every month by hungry local government officials etc. It's a broken system. It's about extraction. It's the global north extracting resources from the global south. Resilience in that context is just perpetuating poverty and misery.'

There was a sense that in broken systems ravaged by inequalities and poverty, oppression, racism and extraction, people didn't want a resilience which implies enduring that system and adapting to it. They wanted to exercise their agency to change the system:

'They don't want to be one of 70% who live in poverty in Zambia. They want to get out of the system and experience something very different. I don't think it (resilience) is something that flies for them, they want to develop their own agenda.'

However, context alone - environmental or human - is not sufficient to determine the potential of resilience. A grassroots organization working with communities to cope with deforestation in rural Indonesia 'where the soil is horrible for agriculture and poverty is rampant', resilience once again is 'not about being political'. It is just 'how do I survive?'

Some of the other factors and the tensions in the practice and understanding of the term resilience are discussed below.

However, it worth noting the words of another participant about the dilemma of separating the contexts in which resilience can be a tool for change or not when she said 'I don't know how you break those things apart because everything is essentially interconnected.'

RESILIENCE AND AGENCY

One tension that emerged in the propositions set out by Eva and Halima was about the relationship between agency and resilience.

For Eva, agency is an intrinsic element of building resilience to push for political change and shift power:

‘On the point of agency- as a fund, Greengrants Fund’s philosophy is exactly that that sort of systems change that I’ve talked about happens from grassroots movements. We have an analysis of movement-building, how movements affect social change, and how they build power, and those are the people who are experiencing this, not from the outside, but very much in their lives... that’s actually shifting power.’

For Halima and others, resilience, in certain contexts ‘which are controlled externally from the communities being labelled resilient’ begins to undermine agency:

‘Agency requires that the systems and structures that compel us to be resilient over and over again, whether considered individually or collectively, are dismantled and replaced by space for our voice and power to make a change. So I think there’s a link between them, but they’re not the same thing. And we really need to have a further discussion about how they relate and what feeds into what.’

Space for imagination

The connection between relationship and agency also resonated with a peacebuilder from Northern Ireland, who understood resilience as a requirement for the first phase of community development but did not think that resilience alone was sufficient to achieve ‘just transitions’.

‘Resilience doesn’t have for me that element of a struggle for imagination, which is where I think just transition is actually based.’

However, this throws open the question of where the space for imagination comes from and whether resilience is necessary for imagination to take root. Eva concedes, ‘I accept the point that resilience in itself is not a value, it’s not the same as being sustainable or just’. But she argues, ‘I do however think that people want to live in resilient systems, they don’t want unstable vulnerable lives; if you’re only ever in survival mode you don’t have the capacity to imagine that world, and that’s exactly my point.’

Resistance: the long battle

Linked to the relationship between agency and resilience is also the notion of resistance. In a context where oppressive systems are resilient and they ‘always

bounce back, they always reproduce themselves', wondered one participant, 'what is the antidote, is it resistance? Or is it increased resilience?'. She expressed her personal exhaustion with both 'as a person of colour' evoking a quote attributed to American writer/director Zandashé Brown:

'I dream of never being called resilient ever again in my life, I'm exhausted by strength, I want support, I want softness, I want ease, I want to be amongst kin, not patted on the back for how well I take a hit or how many.'

For Eva, the answer is resilience.

'In my work we support so much resistance to existing systems, and many any of the movement actors we work with would really rather spend more of their energy on creating the new, the positive, the life that they want, rather than what they're pushing back against. So they want to change those resilient, dominant oppressive systems because they also cannot continue to shoulder that individual resilience that is needed, and that is often, predominantly shouldered by black and brown people, by women, by young people... those who are already most marginalised. And I completely understand the fatigue around this idea. But, can we build a system where we don't need resilience? I also don't think so because I think the intersecting crises that we face, and will face more and more of, they need that people have resilience, that collective resilience, and I think that resilience needs to become a central value of our work, because even if we successfully shape systems to become more just, more people-focused, the climate crisis is here, it will force us to continue to respond.'

The idea of resilience as a necessary condition for resistance resonates with others as well. A participant from a civil society support organization working in eastern and central Europe noted.

'For us resilience... is very much connected to the political situation that is happening, and to oppressive governments.'

She described a situation where civil society organizations as well as individuals focused on issues of gender, environment and rule of law are harassed by the government. However civil society responds with resilience:

'First of all, we see in central and eastern Europe, massive people's movements which are very rapid and they're usually based on resistance to something. We have amazing atmosphere, amazing energy, hundreds of thousands of people on the street'.

'But then', she notes, 'it doesn't last long.' So while resilience by itself is not enough, as Eva admits, 'maybe resilience is a launch pad.'

THE COLLECTIVE VS THE INDIVIDUAL

An important dimension to the debate about resilience is whether we are talking about individual or collective resilience, and whether those two can be separated.

Eva is clear that when she talks about resilience as a development tool for transformation, she is not talking about individual resilience. ‘Keep beating me down, but I’ll stand up because I am resilient.’ She is emphatic:

‘that’s not what I am talking about. What I am positing is that we need to think about resilience in a much more collective way, which reflects the reality of communities that are experiencing crises, and in my work we talk a lot about the climate crisis but we’ve also seen it with the Covid pandemic. ...if we think about resilience as a more collective concept, then that opens up radical possibilities to use resilience building as a practice, as a tool to achieve long term systemic aims.’

Many other participants stress the notion of the collective – connection, solidarity and networks as key elements to transformation to just systems. Speaking of the fatigue of resistance faced by movements and civil society actors in Eastern and Central Europe, the contributor (mentioned above) noted the necessity of connections and networks in community. Others, too, stress the importance of networks, both horizontal and vertical. One participant remarked that working on the ground with communities on multiple challenges of survival means that they need horizontal local connections. ‘We can’t do everything, we’ve got to find other organizations that work on water, or health, or AIDS, or whatever.’ And to start influencing the system, he stresses the need for vertical connections, such as those being built by the #shiftthepower movement.

‘The shift the power movement is about that (vertical) connectivity. It’s about finding ways to connect those rooted local organisations, where all they can do is work with local people, and that’s what they should do, but they need to then connect to those who are themselves rooted but are working at a higher level, at the national level, and in turn working with allies who can begin to address the broken system.’

For Eva, the notion of collective resilience already encompasses the importance of connections and networks. For Halima, however, even when applied collectively, resilience as a development tool in unjust systems is still about adapting and surviving:

‘Resilience itself means different things to different people, but in my context, resilience is about individual and collective survival and adaptation. There’s a

big difference between community resilience as an element of a broader set of interventions, and community resilience as a core goal of interventions.'

For still others, resilience flows from the individual to the collective, as in the organization working in South East Asia (noted above) that works on both coping at the individual level and championing groups of individuals as a community so they can support each other. However, the interlocutor wondered whether it doesn't flow both ways:

'How might collective practice, how might workplace practice or community practice actually, in terms of its collective caring and building of resilience, flow to build the resilience of the individual?'

LANGUAGE: WHAT WE MEAN

Another important consideration in understanding resilience is the theory of meaning used by philosophers of language. Halima's arguments highlighted the need to distinguish between the denotation of the word and its connotation:

'We have to separate the aspirational and what we want it to mean, versus what people understand it to be, and the almost knee-jerk reaction that many people on the African continent feel when they hear the word resilience. It's about being dampened down, it's about asking us to be patient again, it's about asking us to once again put our desires for a just society on hold, so that the system can continue to right itself, through some kind of long process - it's exhausting, and there are significant trade-offs involved. So I think we really need to delve deeper into the aspirational and the actual.'

A participant from Zimbabwe, working in the domains of democracy, governance, equitable development and African philanthropy, questioned whether the language of resilience was appropriate in certain contexts:

'I really do struggle with the language of resilience, especially in Zimbabwe where... the term is used so pervasively but in way that almost excuses or distracts from the social justice questions that make the survival necessary. And in our case, especially in Zimbabwe, it really is the case of survival and coping.'

Another participant commented:

'I feel that resilience is a development industry term that we're trying to co-opt and I'm not sure it's going to work.'

Confirming her reluctance, the participant from Zimbabwe lamented that significant 'resilience funds in the development sector are often designed as survival coping funds but not supporting actions that challenge and transform structures that systemically exclude the most vulnerable.'

Eva's call on the other hand is that 'we own this term, we repurpose it, we use it in ways that speaks to the lived experience of the communities that we all work with'. Eva breaks down resilience into specific elements that are necessary to reach transformation. '...strong local leadership, strong community networks, a sense of dignity and common identity, a diversity of livelihood options, the fulfillment of rights... those are just some of what we would also often call local assets, that we see as really important to build resilience.'

An organizational leader working with local communities in Mozambique invoked another term to describe these elements: 'localization'.

'It's about finding ways to connect those rooted local organisations, where all they can do is work with local people, and that's what they should do, but they need to then connect to those who are themselves rooted but are working at a higher level, at the national level, and in turn working with allies who can begin to address the broken system, because absolutely I agree with Halima that resilience in the context of the gross, gross injustice that's going on in Mozambique right now, is meaningless...localisation for me is about those connections at local level, strengthening people's opportunities, capabilities etc., but then using that as the base to build a wider movement of change, and that I think is where we connect with the political.'

Observing the wide divergence of uses, the interlocutor wondered whether resilience is the right word for what we mean.

'I suppose looking at it in the 2000s when resilience came into the development space, part of it was this notion of creating communities that were pre-victims, so it would stop them being victims by making them resilient, and then we could leave them with their responsibility to be resilient, and we wouldn't have to change the system. And I think I'm struggling with whether resilience is the right word. Whether it's the kind of word we all mean, when what we are looking for is transformation.'

CONCLUSION

In a time of unprecedented challenges – the pandemic, escalation of conflicts and violence, political polarization, growing tribalism and nationalism, long delayed racial reckoning in parts of the world, exacerbation of gender inequities, rising poverty, gaping inequality, and the imminent climate catastrophe - how much of what development calls resilience is really resilience? And how much is simply survival, endurance and making the best of what we have? What are the conditions under which resilience heralds transformation?

We can see that resilience can be a bad thing and yet it is a necessary condition to survive, and even to resist that which does not serve us. As the dialogue participants have noted above, it can even be a 'launch pad' that helps us emerge from crisis and start to move towards a world where we thrive. However, resilience applied in its most common understanding i.e. endurance and adaptation, is not simply an insufficient condition for transformation, it can get in the way. As Neal Lawson of Compass, UK argues, it 'is a tactical response, not a strategy' and while he agrees that resilience 'can give people that sense of agency and purpose' (the launch pad), he questions 'how do you move from that to a much more strategic, transformative politics'?⁵

The unpacking of resilience as experienced by civil society actors, working in varied geographies, kinds of organization and thematic areas, helps us to understand the necessary nuances for us to achieve the transitions to ways of thinking, being and doing that uphold justice, peace and equity. To achieve this we need development and philanthropic models where we have space for imagination, where we can organize and build connections, where solidarity is the foundation of our relationships and our frameworks enable our agency. While these values are central to Eva's view of resilience, the concept does not automatically and universally encompass them and without them, it is empty and can become a lame excuse for perpetuating archaic systems and oppressive forces.

⁵ Milner, A. (2021) 'The limits of resilience'. PSJP. Available at: <http://www.psjp.org/the-limits-of-resilience/>

APPENDIX

Opening remarks by Eva Rehse

Thank you so much for the invitation to dive a bit deeper into resilience. This is something that I've been thinking about a lot. What I'm about to say may sound quite different from your understanding of what resilience means, and I want to invite us today to imagine how we could use the concept of resilience and truly explore its transformative power.

The one point I want you to take away from what I'm saying, is that for me, in my analysis, resilience is an inherently political concept. So if we build resilience, we build enabling conditions for social, economic and political change, that really reflects peoples' desire for equitable, sustainable, just lives. And I say that because too often we understand resilience quite narrowly as being about individual strength. Our ability to bounce back after a crisis or a shock, so: 'keep beating me down, but I'll stand up because I am resilient'. That's not what I am talking about. What I am positing is that we need to think about resilience in a much more collective way, which reflects the reality of communities that are experiencing crises, and in my work, we talk a lot about the climate crisis but we've also seen it with the Covid pandemic. So if we do that, if we think about resilience as a more collective concept, then that opens up radical possibilities to use resilience building as a practice, as a tool to achieve long term systemic aims.

The organization that I work for - Global Greengrants Fund - has an overall goal of supporting social and environmental justice movements, to shift social political economic systems from the ones that we're in that are vulnerable, unsustainable and unjust, to ones that are resilient, sustainable and equitable. And what I'm stipulating is that in order to do that and to achieve these big-picture shifts, we need to tackle the systemic crises we face by building resilience.

So, what do I mean when I say resilience? I've already said what I don't mean. For us, through our practical work as a participatory grantmaker, supporting communities, supporting grassroots movements through activist advisors that are part of these communities, we've been doing that for three decades, and we're really starting to understand what collective resilience encompasses. For example: strong local leadership, strong community networks, a sense of dignity and common identity, a diversity of livelihood options, the fulfilment of rights... those are just some of what we would also often call local assets, that we see as really important to build resilience.

So if these are in place, then we've got a stage set for people to have the ability and the space to organize, to articulate larger visions for social change, to step outside of

their immediate needs and the survival mode to start developing a world they want to live in.

I'm not saying that that's already happening everywhere, but what I'm saying is that resilience as a concept has this transformative power. So just to give you a concrete example: we've supported for a number of years women farmers across different African countries to meet their immediate livelihood challenges through solutions that they develop themselves. And so what we've seen over time is that their resilience to climate impact for example increases, they start using the spaces where they get together to talk about land rights - land rights advocacy, patriarchal systems, dominant and economic food systems - and they start to develop the solutions to tackle those. And there are many examples of this.

Because we also need to change to actually build resilience, we also need to change the systems in which people live and engage. So, you know if you think about common ownership of land, land resources, locally-produced renewable energy, local economies... these are all really important elements that need to be in place for people to successfully feel resilient.

In closing, for me resilience is not just the capacity to endure, but it's more the capacity to live a life that allows us the space to push for political change over the long-term, in this chaotic world that constantly presents new challenges. So for that to happen, I'm saying we need to redefine, repurpose and own the concept of resilience, and make it relevant to people's lives and aspirations. So what world do we want? What do we need to have in place for this world to emerge? It might just be the resilience to imagine.

Opening remarks by Halima Mahomed⁶

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today.

Two weeks ago, South African scientists announced the discovery of the new Omicron virus. In the immediate aftermath - without evidence of origins, and contrary to science - the instinctive travel shutdowns first instituted by global north countries reflected deep-seated colonial and racist attitudes in action. Despite many having infection rates far higher than South Africa's, and some who we now know already had the variant, the exclusion and discrimination still persisting despite Omicron's presence in over 60 countries globally has had a significant impact on South Africa, severely hitting a pandemic-decimated economy, and further damaging the already precarious livelihoods of its people, particularly those bearing the brunt of living in one of the most unequal societies in this world.

⁶ This contribution is part of a longer forthcoming piece on philanthropic narratives and agency by Halima Mahomed under the auspices of the TrustAfrica Philanthropy Fellowship.

As a people, we are often called resilient. We continue to cope and to adapt, despite the continuing ravages of colonial and apartheid structures, and an elite governing system not rooted in our interests. The pandemic highlighted that it was ordinary people looking after and supporting each other that formed the backbone of responses to survive Covid-19. It was not the state, or the global system, instead we were each other's safety nets, and therein lies our ability to weather the storm. The solidarity and mutuality within our social systems. But eventually even that was not enough. We have not come back stronger. Many have fallen victim. The chronic stresses have really taken a severe toll.

As a country, we like to think we are an important part of the international community, a regional force, power-broker, peacemaker; we think our voice counts, and that we are resilient to the shocks and horrors, because we are now a democratic nation, and we finally have a legitimate seat at the global tables, and that these help us to grow and shift the levers of power.

But as the pandemic response generally and the Omicron reaction has shown, our resilience to this pandemic as a people and as a country, is not enough in the face of a global system that seeks to 'other' us. A system where vaccine-hoarding, patent protections, profit and access to resources determine what kind of boat we can weather this Covid storm in. As these and other factors turn the storm into successive tidal waves, resilient boats that can ride the waves better each day are, alone, not enough. We have to prevent the tidal waves as well.

In a world that's globally connected, where the global and local systems of power entrench the status quo each day, and even more so in this pandemic, our ability to be resilient and withstand and even challenge the status quo will be severely constrained until and unless the systems that demand resilience as a response are transformed.

This is not an either/or question. Resilience is important, but the impact of our resilience is inherently limited by the deep-rooted structures and systems that determine the parameters of just how far we can go. In the context of this pandemic, our resilience as a people and as a country is inextricably connected to and limited by the nature of the oppressive and inequitable systems of power, both at local and the global.

Resilience itself is not a bad thing, but context really matters, and I want to offer a few points for consideration. Resilience can be of great value, but the system is broken, and when we focus primarily on the resilience of those bearing the brunt of unjust systems, we end up normalising that system, and placing the responsibility for survival, adaptation and growth on them. All the while in a system that continues to limit the extent of both.

Resilience is a relative term, and therein lies its danger. It can be easily neutralized. Terms like dignity and compassion have an automatic value base. Resilience is determined by who dominates the system that is said to be resilient and the power dynamics within it. And so having resilient systems can actually reinforce the status quo, rather than transform it. The dominant systems of the day are incredibly resilient, and that's a crucial problem.

Resilience itself means different things to different people, but in my context, resilience is about individual and collective survival and adaptation. There's a big difference between community resilience as an element of a broader set of interventions, and community resilience as a core goal of interventions. That's not to say that resilience can't be political or transformative, but in practice it's often not seen that way, and while it can be a form of power, it can also be used by those in power as a form of oppression, in furthering inequality, and we need to guard against this.

Resilience reflects not just survival but also evolution, but the evolution is incremental, and transformative leaps are often curtailed by external parameters of power. So there's a real danger of romanticizing our ability to thrive in difficult circumstances, and in emphasizing this to reinforce the negative trade-offs that come along with our needing to be resilient.

I believe fundamentally that change needs to be directed by those experiencing injustice. Resilience in and of itself does not automatically shape the external change, but it does shape our internal response to change.

Resilience can be about moving forward despite vulnerability, and even address aspects of vulnerability, but it does not remove the interconnected set of vulnerabilities we face. We assume resilience implies strength, but how much do we also consider resilience as erosion? And we have to ask, is resilience exacerbating fragility?

And finally, resilience and agency are not the same, and I think we need to be clear about what we're talking about with those two terms. Thank you.

About Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace (PSJP): PSJP is a network for social change. Its purpose is to support the development and adoption of ideas about what makes a good society, to connect and strengthen the agents of this work and contribute to the infrastructure that supports progressive social change. PSJP is hosted by Global Dialogue, registered as a charity (1122052) and a limited company (05775827) in England and Wales.

About Impact Trust: Impact Trust is a registered charity in England and Wales (Reg 1167011) and public benefit organisation in South Africa (PBO 930038303). Born out of the GreaterGood South Africa/ GreaterCapital groups work leading social investment transformation in post-Apartheid South Africa, we were established in 2011 to identify and respond to gaps in policy and practice and to coordinate collaborative action to navigate the route to more sustainable development at institutional, community and government level.

About TrustAfrica: TrustAfrica is a Pan African foundation that seeks to strengthen African initiatives that address the most difficult challenges confronting the continent. We currently focus on three critical areas: securing the conditions for democracy; fostering African enterprise and achieving broadly shared prosperity, and cultivating African resources for democracy and development.

About Global Greengrants Fund (GGF): GGF is a participatory environmental fund that supports grassroots action on a global scale. GGF is a 501 (c) (3) non-profit in the USA, and GGF UK is a charity registered in England and Wales. Together, the sister funds give grants and accompaniment to grassroots environmental initiatives through a network of advisors. Since 1993, GGF has provided over 16,000 grants, over \$130 million in 168 countries.

Published by PSJP, Impact Trust, TrustAfrica and Global Greengrants Fund

August 2022



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