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Toward a New Community Resilience Understanding: The Findhorn Ecovillage Case

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Abstract

Community resilience is a recognized, important dimension of ecological communities. However, although the resilience term at an ecosystem level is well developed, it usually does not happen the same at the local and community level. In a world of constant change, a lack of clarity of what resilience is could affect the community development and its strategies to flourish and remain in time. This seems to be even more relevant to ecological communities, which tend to face lots of difficulties to emerge, generally not surviving more than two years after their creation (Forster & Wilhelmus, 2005). Using Findhorn Ecovillage as a case study (Lombardozzi, 2019), this paper reflects on the importance of community resilience, proposing a new definition. It is concluded that at least four dimensions are needed to define a broad and robust community resilience concept: economic, social, ontological, and institutional.

Introduction

We live in a highly globalized world. Although this has created lots of opportunities and benefits, like facilitating communication over long distances, it has also increased vulnerability due to global crises. These phenomena can be seen in climate change, where no country seems to be safe from the negative effects of industrialization. Globalization also increases the probability of making local communities more vulnerable, especially when their economies depend highly on international tourism, as it happens with some ecovillages, such as Findhorn, which hosts around 4,000 guests each year (Meltzer, 2018). But ecovillages are not

necessarily condemned to the waves of global uncertainty. One way to overcome - or at least decrease- the vulnerability of communities is to enhance their resilience.

The importance of community resilience has been appreciated by the members of ecovillages. These ecological communities have been framed as examples of how a 'degrowth world' (one which ends with the pursue of eternal economic growth) would look like (Cattaneo, 2015). Therefore, they are more focused on making a community resilient environment rather than a profit-making structure, as Findhorn Ecovillage explicitly claims (Lombardozzi, 2019). This cultural and axiological difference makes ecological

communities a different field within community studies. It is important then to identify the specific characteristics of community resilience in ecovillages, to avoid the category fallacy, which tends to impose a category developed in a very different culture onto another, as Kirmayer et al. (2009) explain:

“Resilience depends on complex interactions within systems, including physiological and psychological processes within an individual and social, economic and political interaction between individuals and their environment, or between a community and the surrounding ecosystem and the larger society. As a result, resilience can only be understood by considering systems in their ecological and social context” (p. 102).

But before going deeper into the characteristics of resilience in ecological communities, it is important to highlight that meanwhile, the resilience term at an ecosystem level is well developed, it usually does not happen the same at the local and community level (Berkes & Ross, 2013). This lack of development can be understood when the history of the resilience term is exposed. Therefore, it may be important first to discern the different disciplines where this concept is used, and then approach it at its community level.

Resilience: General overview

Resilience is an interdisciplinary concept used in natural and social sciences. Although nowadays is mostly known by the general public in its psychological perspective, which mainly signifies the individual’s ability to thrive under stress and adversity (Kirmayer et al., 2009), Sherrieb et al. (2010) claim that the concept

was originally coined in physics and mathematics. In these fields, resilience refers to the ability of a material or a system to return to its equilibrium after a stressor ‘move from it’. Sometimes resilience also means the time required to return to that state (Bodi & Wiman, 2004 in Norris et al., 2008). This conception was differentiated from resistance, which alludes to the force necessary to move the system from its equilibrium (Norris et al., 2008).

One rupture with the previous concept occurred in ecology when its scholars realized that the ecosystems could express different forms of homeostasis or equilibriums, and therefore, resilience should not mean just coming back to an original ‘pure’ and unique equilibrium, but also to adapt and modify the system to create new equilibriums in response to the external shocks (Kirmayer et al., 2009; Norris et al., 2008).

This conception of resilience is closer to the one that it can be found in social sciences. When psychologically one refers to a resilient individual, we do not tend to understand it as an individual who is necessarily stubborn in a way that nothing extern affects him, but most of the individuals that can thrive, adapting to difficult circumstances. It is important to highlight, as Longstaff (2005 in Norris et al., 2008) points out, that those resilient systems are the ones that are very adaptable. According to this author, the adaptability of a system is enriched when it has diverse resources, resources that, as it will be seen later on, are not only economical.

Sustainable communities and resilience

The Brundtland report in 1987 called the world attention to the urgency of

sustainability. In this report, sustainable development was understood as a “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Although different political trends emerged from the previous report (such as ‘strong’ v/s ‘weak’ sustainability), practically all of them accept that sustainability involves environmental, social, and economic dimensions.

Ecovillages, which are one of the most representative types of sustainable communities, try to be an example of sustainable life (Andreas & Wagner, 2012). They generally mention the previous sustainability dimensions on their purpose, although sometimes the social dimension is mixed with the economic one – or this last one is underestimated, and not explicitly considered (Lombardozi, 2020). However, ecovillages’ structures manifest efforts to strengthen resilience on its economic dimension. In the opinion of Jackson & Svensson (2002), the economic global disintegrates local communities. That is why ecovillages try to develop strategies of ‘localization’, that is to say, to empower local communities rather than foreign multinational commercial players.

The way to enhance localization is diverse and it depends on the community itself, but some common strategies are the seek of energy and food autonomy (directly produce on-site), thus, with lower external energy inputs. One example of this strategy can be seen on Findhorn, where all the electric energy is produced by their wind turbines (Lombardozi, 2019).

As Ludwig (2017) describes in her book *Together Resilient, Building Community*

in the Age of Climate Disruption, ecovillages are aligned with the efforts of reducing the ecological impact (necessary to reduce the dynamics that increase the climate crisis that threatens the resilience of societies). Again, one example of this is Findhorn Ecovillage, which has the lowest registered ecological footprint of the industrial world (Nissen, 2014).

Lastly, one of the main characteristics of ecological communities is their strong social ties, which is a form of social capital, that creates -among other benefits- a strong feeling of ‘belonging’. Furthermore, as Lombardozi (2020) explains, ecovillages are a ‘new type’ of community: an organic community. This means that, differently from ancient communities, sustainable communities tend to organize themselves with ‘organic solidarity’ (a cohesion based on diversity more than in a forced similarity). This kind of solidarity, differently from its opposite (mechanic solidarity), is characterized by flexibility, a very important characteristic of resilience.

Dimensions of resilience: Economic dimension

The concept of resilience is popularly associated with its psychological-individual level. However, societies and communities can also be resilient (Sonn & Fisher, 1998 in Kirmayer et al., 2009). It is important to analyze then, the different dimensions associated with resilient communities, of which the economy is one of the most important. Briguglio et al. (2008) frame economic vulnerability as the exposure that an economy has to external shocks due to its openness to external markets. This economic openness is operationalized as

“the ratio of international trade to GDP” (p. 4). The more open the economy, the more susceptible it to be affected by external shocks. According to the authors, the way to counteract this vulnerability is through economic resilience, which is understood as the policy-induced ability of an economy to withstand or recover from the effects of those exogenous shocks. The way to increase the economic resilience would be enhancing its four main dimensions: good governance (which is based on respect to law and property rights), social cohesion, market efficiency, and macro-economic equilibrium (for example, with low levels of unemployment).

As it can be seen, the previous conceptualization implies the economic terms of vulnerability and resilience in a macroeconomic way. This macro framework could be limiting when analyzing communities, which, as in the case of an ecovillage, express microeconomic dynamics. But when communities are analyzed from a systemic perspective (Lombardozi, 2020), the previous economic resilience dimensions could be extrapolated from a country level to a community one. For example, in the case of ecovillages, the economic openness could be operationalized as the percentage of the community incomes that comes from external buyers (people or companies that buy products or services that are produced or offered within the community). The separation in the analysis of the offer of products, on the one hand, and services on the other could be useful to make clearer the economic openness of a community. For instance, considering the actual context of the COVID-19 virus, when external people can hardly visit communities, it

could be understood that the services offered within the community might make it more vulnerable than the products, due to these last ones are easier to deliver to long distances beyond the community. This framework can be especially important to ecovillages, which economies tend to depend highly on *in situ* tourism, due to the different kinds of spiritual, ecological, or educational workshops they offer (Miller, 2018; Lombardozi, 2019).

According to Briguglio et al. (n.d.), within the economic literature, resilience has been used in three different ways: shock-counteraction (how quickly the economy recovers from a shock), shock-absorption (to withstand or resist the effect of shocks) and to avoid the shocks (which expresses the opposite of economic vulnerability). All these dimensions exemplify a very important idea of resilience: that economies (and communities) are exposed to (external) shocks and that resilience is the capacity of that economy (or community) to cope -in a functional way- with those shocks, in other words, to avoid them, to resist to them (to not be destabilized) or to adapt to them.

The previous responses can be glimpsed -generally in a partial way- throughout all the resilience literature, independent of the discipline implied. It is important to analyze resilience from a systems perspective. This paradigm allows extrapolating concepts from one discipline to another. For example, the economic term shock can be equalized to the stressor concept. Both represent an external input to the system that might disturb or alter it.

One of the weakest dimensions of the resilience of sustainable communities can be their financial dimension. Because, although these communities try to be

relatively self-reliant, at least in their energy and food production, it is also true - as Briguglio et al. (2008) show- that higher GDP per capita is associated with the highest level of resilience. This vulnerability was seen in Findhorn, especially with foreign members which do not belong to the EU and therefore did not receive its financial support (Lombardozi, 2019). However, as it will be seen in the next section, this was counterbalanced by the social dimension of resilience.

Having considered the importance of the economic dimension, it is important to understand that resources are not strictly limited to economic resources. As Norris et al. (2008) define it, resources are “objects, conditions, characteristics, and energies that people value” (p. 131). According to these authors, vulnerability happens when resources are not enough to respond in a resilient way, which means when resources are not robust, redundant, or rapidly mobilized as a response to external shocks, which might produce dysfunctions. This resilient response can depend on other dimensions beyond the economic, which will be explained in the next section.

Social dimension

In the previous section, the importance of the economic dimension of resilience was exposed. However, economic resources are not the only quality that makes a community resilient (Magis, 2010). The responses to shocks depend also on an integrated social network that can face changes. If the economy is well organized but the social structure is not able to mobilize the resources efficiently, the community will lack a robust resilience,

because, as Adger (2000) claims, social resilience is “the ability of communities to withstand external shocks to their social infrastructure” (p. 361).

Hence, social capital is a complement to economic resilience. Especially when it is about communities that, as the ecovillages, try to be self-sufficient (Pickerill, 2016). While economic resilience gives the resources needed to face stressors, social resilience -manifested in social capital- could be understood as the lubricant needed to oil the economic structure. For example, one community could be rich, in terms of having lots of economic resources. But if those resources are not well distributed (for example, if all the communal property is owned just by one member) the economic shocks can destabilize more intensively the social structure, producing conflicts and making members abandon the community. That is why economic resilience considers social cohesion as one of its four dimensions. And it is also the reason why the equitable distribution of income is a crucial factor of social resilience (Norris et al., 2008).

One example of the previous can be seen in Findhorn Ecovillage. This community is considered as one of the most resilient ecovillages in the world, it has remained in time for several decades, and with a considerable number of members (Lombardozi, 2019). The members that work for the community (i.e., not as independent worker or having a business) are paid directly from the resources that the community make with the different activities that they develop within the community. And although the range of jobs done is diverse, from cultivating, cooking, and organizing workshops, their income ratio is 1 to 1.3

(FF, 2018). Therefore, the long life and success of Findhorn can be an example that although ecovillages might not express so high GDP per capita levels, their social structures can enhance its resilience, counterbalancing the financial capital by social capital.

At this point, it is important to highlight that although the concept of resilience has been traditionally understood and framed from the individual perspective, this has been problematic, because sometimes it ignores the social and cultural context and also that “a collection of resilient individuals does not guarantee a resilient community” (Norris et al., 2008, p. 128). Therefore, the community should not be understood as an abstract subproduct of the social interactions of individuals (individualist methodology), which could fall under an ‘atomistic fallacy’ (Kirmayer et al., 2009), but as an entity with the agency (systems perspective), i.e., with Norris et al. (2008) and Keck & Sakdapolrak (2015), framing resilience as a set of capacities from the community; recognizing the fact that community resilience was born from systems theory (Magis, 2010).

However, this perspective does not ignore the agency of the individual, but as an element of the system that the community represents. In the words of Kirmayer et al. (2009): “Resilience of the community itself involves the dynamics of the social response to challenges that threaten to damage or destroy the community. These dynamics may involve adaptations and adjustments of individuals, groups, and organizations with the community (seen as components of the community as a system) as well as interactions of the whole community with its surrounding

environment, including especially other social, economic, and political entities.” (Kirmayer et al., 2009, p. 66).

From this perspective, the social dimension of community resilience is a capacity of the system. It is the ability of the community to create an environment, or social structure that facilitates the robustness of social capital. This resource involves an organic network of relationships, based mainly (but not exclusively) on primary (affective) relationships, that can help community members in moments of adversity. Examples of these dynamics are the social cohesion produced for seeing the rest of the community members as a family (Lombardozi, 2020), or the formal groups within the community that helps each other without money involved, for example, taking care of children when their parents are busy (Lombardozi, 2019).

Ontological dimension

As it was seen in the previous section, according to Norris et al. (2008) the decrease of inequality is a key factor of social resilience. These authors also established that the stability of livelihoods is another key parameter of social resilience — and it is a factor of individual resilience as well (Ungar et al., 2013). Although the stability of livelihoods is related to inequality, this last one is not the only factor of the former. That is why this stability should be considered as a dimension itself.

For example, the stability of livelihoods could be affected by climate disasters. However, as it can be seen in the study of Kirmayer et al. (2009), not all the adversities of communities are produced by sudden impersonal events such as

climatological catastrophes, but also by long social and political factors that are not so discrete and explosive.

The previous reflection is very important to understand the particular characteristics of community resilience. Otherwise, this concept could be confused with other kinds of resilience. For example, psychological resilience implies a response to a disturbance. In other words, the individual must face a problem to express resilience. If the individual avoids that stressor, that may weaken him, and this could be considered as a lack of resilience. On other hand, resilient communities try to limit risks and reduce threats (Magis, 2010). For example, if one economic crisis emerges, an economic resilient response can be to avoid those shocks (Briguglio et al., n.d.). Hence, differently to individual resilience, within community resilience to avoid shocks should not be considered as a lack of resilience. On the contrary, avoiding such shocks can be fairly considered as an adaptation of the system, because as Keck & Sakdapolrak (2015) state, the adaptive capacities of social resilience means the “ability to learn from past experiences and adjust themselves to future challenges” (p. 5); i.e., these adaptive resilient capacities are ‘pro-active’ (ex-ante) (Obrist 2010a, 289) or ‘preventive’ measures (Béné et al. 2012, 31)” (p. 10). As Norris et al. (2008) claim, the reduction of risks increases collective resilience. Risk can be understood as the probability that stressors or shocks impact negatively on the ontological (or economic) security of the community, that is to say, the impacts that may affect the “trust that most of part of the human being have in the continuity of our identity and the continuity of our social and natural

environments of action” (Giddens in Beriain, 1996, p. 26).

Institutional dimension

In the previous section, it was seen how resilience involves the reduction of risk and therefore the enhancement of security. The community can do this not only by adapting or resisting stressors, but also avoiding them, considering they are “aversive circumstances that threaten the well-being or functioning of the individual, organization, neighborhood, community, or society” (Norris et al., 2008, p. 132); and that to keep the same structural function of the system even when reorganizing is a characteristic of social resilience (Folke, 2006).

In the economy section, it was mentioned that social cohesion is a dimension of economic resilience. In that section it was also defined that economic resilience is a *policy-induced* ability to withstand or recover from shocks, which exposes the institutional dimension of resilience. This institutional level can also be glimpsed in the literature about social resilience. For example, Adger (2000) states that “social resilience is institutionally determined, in the sense that institutions permeate all social systems” (p. 354). Similarly, Keck & Sakdapolrak (2015) claim that the transformative capacities of social resilience refer to the “ability to craft sets of institutions that foster individual welfare and sustainable societal robustness towards future crises” (p. 5).

However, at the micro-level, it could be argued that institutional is an unnecessary dimension due to the horizontal and primary kind of relationships of communities (Lombardozzi, 2020) and

therefore, that communities have only *social* capacities to respond to shocks. But this is not strictly true. For example, within Findhorn Ecovillage there is an institution called Findhorn Foundation. All members that belong to it are offered a job within the community. This increases the ontological security of members, that do not have to worry about losing their jobs (Lombardozi, 2019). Therefore, the community can also have institutional capacities to cope with stressors.

Conclusion

The present paper has reflected on the importance of community resilience, as a specific and different type of resilience. Nonetheless, thanks to systems theory, when the community is considered as a system, some similarities with other disciplines can be found. To withstand or adapt to external shocks are common abilities of other kinds of resiliencies. However, community resilience integrates another possible response: to avoid stressors, as a peculiar characteristic which is not a proper response in other kinds of disciplines, as it happens in the case of psychological resilience.

Also, it was highlighted the importance of enhancing economic security, to cope with shocks that might affect the community's functioning. This economic dimension was closely related to institutional responses but also with social support. It is important then, to understand that a resilient community is characterized by a strong social network that can act in times of crisis. These crises involve high levels of risks and uncertainties, which not only may threaten the ecology of the community, that is to say, they are not only

related to climate catastrophes. Any other kind of stressor, like economic shocks or social disintegration, can also affect the trust in the continuity of our social environment of action, negatively affecting the ontological security of the community. Having considered all the previous dimensions, community resilience will be understood as the social and institutional capacities to adapt, resist, or avoid external shocks that threaten the economic and ontological security of community members.

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