



Developing a resilience framework to assess rural community-led initiatives

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Abstract – This paper outlines the development of a conceptual framework to assess resilience in the context of community-led initiatives in rural areas. Community resilience is constructed as a method with which to analyse capacity-building for community and individual scales. Through research into community-led broadband initiatives the framework identifies key stages in the organisation process and feedback loops that inform community actions. The analysis is based on primary data, as well as on past research and models of resilience. Areas for capacity-building are identified through which community practitioners can trace the creation and enhancement of resilience characteristics. This paper concludes with a discussion of future work, and the applicability of the framework across a broader spectrum of initiatives for identifying resilience.

INTRODUCTION

The research aims to develop a resilience framework by examining the role that community led initiatives, specifically community-led superfast broadband initiatives, may play in enhancing rural community resilience.

Community resilience can be viewed as both a reactive and proactive process, addressing how communities adapt and thrive during times of disruption, as well as developing new trajectories for the future. Wilson (2012) investigates the impacts of globalisation on resilience, and determines that scalar interactions need to be balanced to maximise resilience. The local scale is investigated here in community organisation development, which may be crisis driven, or on-going. The question thus becomes: How do we identify “resilience” in communities and why does it really matter?

Drawing specifically from the superfast broadband adoption debate, this paper demonstrates the potential for resilience to act as a framework for analysing rural communities’ adaptivity, flexibility and development processes. It will add to our understanding of resilience in the community context, and specifically the influence of community-led groups on resilience during every-day change.

RESILIENCE AS A CONSTRUCT

Resilience as a social concept is consistently in flux and highly dependent on the discipline, authorship and audience. Ecologically, resilience refers to the development of ecosystems and their ability to absorb changes and maintain structure in times of disturbance (Holling, 1973). Successful social resilience correlates with a community’s ability to with-

stand shocks due to external factors (Davidson, 2010). The complexity of the term, coupled with the wide range of uses, poses challenges to researchers attempting to use it as a framework or tool for community-based research; however its increasing presence in policy encourages its use. An holistic approach identifies the most applicable resilience definition in relation to community-based organisations: “Community resilience is the existence, development, and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise. Members of resilient communities intentionally develop personal and collective capacity that they engage to respond to and influence change, to sustain and renew the community, and to develop new trajectories for the communities’ future” (Magis, 2010, p. 402). This research aims to use a conceptual framework, developed through desk and field based research, to apply this understanding of resilience in practice.

METHODS

This paper develops a framework that contextualises resilience capacity-building in relation to community organisations. Two community-led broadband organisations in Britain served as case studies to build this framework: Broadband for the Rural North (B4RN), and Broadband for Glencaple and Lowther (B4GAL). The identification of resilience as a process dictated that any research must follow a longitudinal approach to capture resilience capacity-building at various time scales. It is also a consistently iterative process, so including feedback loops are important for recognising the forwards and backwards process, inherent to the community’s own processes.

Drawing from existing resilience debate (e.g. Cote and Nightingale, 2012; Wilson, 2012), the framework encompassed three concepts: past resilience models in keeping with analysing community led broadband or community led infrastructure development; diffusion of innovation concepts; and evidence-based research into community-led broadband initiatives through the case studies.

RESILIENCE FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY

INITIATIVES

The following figure depicts the cycle of resilience capacity-building through community initiatives. This has been built through research into community-led broadband initiatives and a desk study of community organisations, resilience, and diffusion of innovations.

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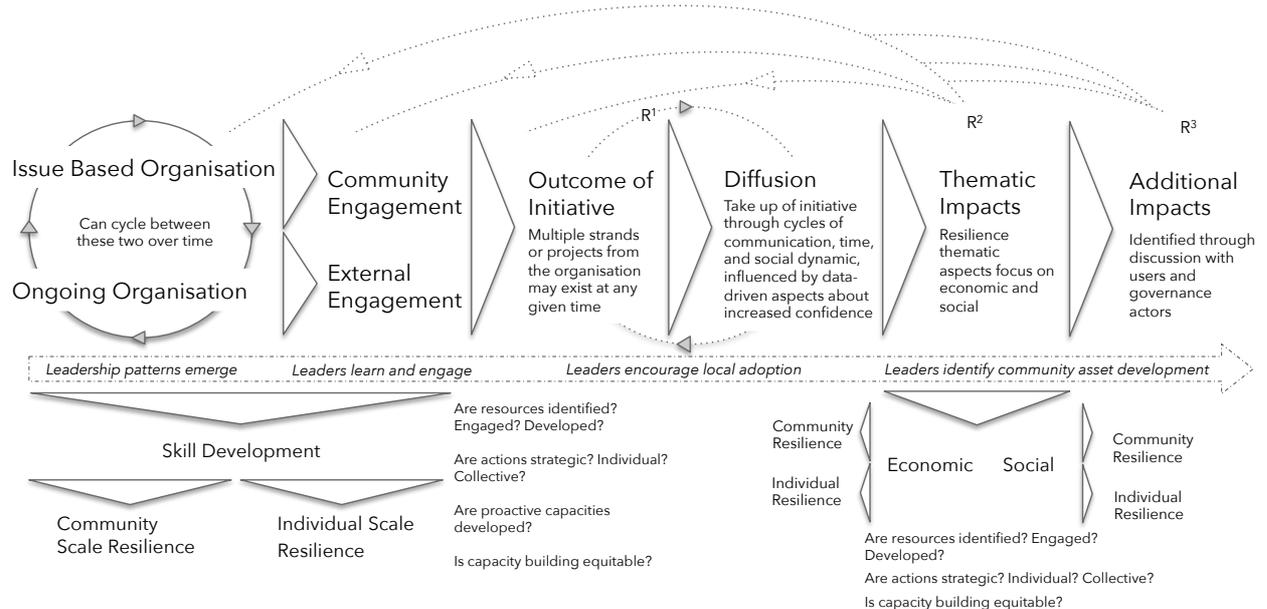


Fig. 1 Community Initiatives and Identification of Resilience. 'R' refers to return feedback loops where R^1 is the influence of diffusion practices with the development of new outcomes. R^2 and R^3 are the influence of thematic (social and economic) and additional impacts on the development of new initiatives, outcomes and diffusion tactics

The organisation of community-led initiatives is broadly incentivised by either a specific issue, or crisis, or formed in an ongoing process to respond to multiple directives. This was reinforced in data collected in interviews in both case studies of the research when discussing community initiative organisation past and present. Communities then identify their outcomes through community and external engagement, reflecting a participatory democratic process. Both the formation of a group and the development of outcomes are potential resilience building exercises on two scales, individual and community. Diffusion of community outcomes, defined as ideas, products, or practices new to the individual, follow principles set out by Rogers and Shoemaker (1971). However, diffusion is also influenced by increased confidence in the outcome since it was created by the community itself.

Past research has identified resilience as a multi-dimensional concept with thematic aspects of social and economic resilience at individual and community scales (Skerratt and Steiner, 2013). Wilson (2012) proposes resilience as deriving from the interaction of social, economic and environmental capital. Thus following these principles, this model identifies thematic impacts derived at the two scales.

Further, leadership plays a strong role in the proliferation of community organisations and their ability to develop resilience characteristics within the community. Leadership and empowerment are identified as pivotal in community resilience (Skerratt and Steiner 2013). Thus it is vital to acknowledge the role of key actors within these organisations throughout each phase.

CONCLUSION

This paper depicts one framework for understanding the relationship between community-led organisations and resilience capacity-building. Continuing

work with the existing case studies will further validate the framework and identify additional areas for capacity-building. Further application across a range of organisation types will ensure transferability.

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