Reflections

Community resilience: a useful concept for declining Icelandic communities?

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In recent years, resilience has become an increasing focal point of community studies, in particular for settlements in the peripheral north, which face severe socio-economic and demographic challenges. Not all researchers and practitioners were equally excited about the transfer of this concept – deeply rooted in ecology – to the social sciences. Unsurprisingly there is a growing literature that engages critically with community resilience. This reflection takes up some of the main criticism and projects it onto Iceland; a country that can serve as magnifier in the exploration of community resilience for a variety of reasons. The main aim of this reflection is to keep the discussion going about theoretical and analytical insufficiencies within the field of community resilience. Shortcomings of existing definitions, the role of politics and agency as well as the determination of equilibria and the question of an endpoint to resilience are the essential strands of argumentation.

Keywords: Iceland, regional development, community resilience, shrinkage

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Introduction

Over a decade ago resilience has appeared as promising concept for community studies. However, the transfer from ecological perspectives over to the social sciences still proves to be challenging. Non-surprisingly there is a growing literature that engages critically with it (Wilson 2017; Dornelles *et al*. 2020). In this reflection, the critique on community resilience will be applied to the Icelandic context. A country that has very specific challenges in terms of community development and that can be considered as an excellent laboratory for approaches from the social sciences given its comparatively undiversified economy, uneven population distribution and limited internal markets.

This reflection is a response to the statement of Berkes and Ross (2013, 6), who contended that "Resilience literature at the level of ecosystems is well developed, but the same cannot be said for the local and community level." It deems appropriate to investigate what happened since. Five main

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strings of argumentation will be applied after a brief review of current developments in Iceland, namely: definition problems, elaborations of neoliberalism and agency, the determination of equilibria and the question of an endpoint to resilience.

The current situation of regional development in Iceland

Some of the latest reports from Nordregio on population development should be raising concern for Icelandic policy makers, especially with regards to old age dependency ratios and working age population in rural and remote areas (Gassen & Heleniak 2019). In 2019 Iceland counted some 159 localities, of which 57 count less than 500 inhabitants and 82 below 2,000 (Statistics Iceland 2019). Many villages have experienced severe population decline, show an imbalanced gender distribution and face the challenge of further outmigration. The situation in many places would look even more problematic without the ever-growing influx of migrant workers. Many of whom working in professions no longer sought by (former) locals. In addition, since around 1950 Iceland has experienced several waves of municipality amalgamations, with numbers going down from 229 in 1950 to 72 in 2020 (Samband Íslenskra Sveitarfélaga n.d.). The processes of amalgamations were frequently contested and the results of financial pressures and changing local responsibilities.

Much of the challenging population and socio-economic development can be related to the privatization of fishing rights and the (following) centralization process. Many former fishing villages had to strive for new opportunities and faced a struggle for scarce financial resources and other governmental support. For many fishing villages, the loss of access to the main livelihood was a transformational shock (rapid and sudden changes due to political process) more than a structural change (slow and gradual changes) or slow burn (Hastings *et al*. 2016; Kokorsch 2018). Hence, adjustments happened with varying success and still many places struggle to attract both, new people to the villages and truly sustainable ideas for socio-economic development. Nonetheless, in many regions of Iceland the fisheries are still one of the most important, if not the most important, industries.

While most European and Nordic countries developed endogenous strategies for rural development in the early 1990s, the same cannot be said about Iceland. And still it seems that Iceland needs to realize that the answer to spatial disparities and uneven regional development requires novel tools and concepts instead of top-down approaches that far too often have resulted in large scale heavy industries (Benediktsson 2014). One example stands out though. In 2012 the Fragile Communities project was launched by the Icelandic Regional Development Institute. This project has been following a classic bottom-up approach, building on local-empowerment and the realization of local ideas. The success of the project varies between the participating communities and the underlying objectives. So far 13 communities have taken part in this project with ten being traditional fishing villages.

A new threat is adding stress to small and remote communities in Iceland: the so called fourth industrial revolution. A recent report by the government of Iceland and its Committee on the Fourth Industrial Revolution estimates that some 73% of jobs in the sector of agriculture and fisheries are likely to be replaced due to automation with 44% jobs in the rural communities being at high risk and another 44% being at moderate risk (Þorsteinsson *et al*. 2019). While we might observe another misuse of the very term revolution – since a revolution is usually meant to bring about improvement – surprisingly enough, most strategic plans and other policy documents in Iceland highlight the positive aspects of it. This neglects that many communities will experience another transformational shock. Especially the combination of low work force in the STEM (16% and thus by far the lowest share in the Nordic countries) and an overreliance on fisheries, heavy industries and tourism should raise concern (Þorsteinsson *et al*. 2019).

This very short and incomplete summary of current challenges alone is enough to justify an analysis of resilience in Iceland. And indeed, this has been done in previous years with the following definition: "Community resilience is the ability of a community to cope and adjust to stresses caused by social, political, and environmental change and to engage community resources to overcome adversity and take advantage of opportunities in response to change" (Amundsen 2012; cf. Kokorsch & Benediktsson 2018). However, the critical voices regarding this very concept seem to get more prominent and thus it is time to revisit resilience in Iceland.

Community resilience: critical voices

Even though we might have found a suitable, yet very context specific definition, there are many vague or even circular definitions that sometimes relate to other equally fuzzy concepts such as sustainability. The following quote summarizes it quite well: "Qualities of resilience are evident in the notion of adaptive capacity, which is generally used to analyse how a system does, or does not, respond to endogenous and exogenous changes [...]" (Wilson 2012, 1220). One can simply argue that resilience is not needed, when it is indeed equated with adaptive capacity.

If resilience is based on other concepts, is it then even adding more value? In many cases adaptative capacity, transformation and/or or adjustment are more precise (Scott 2013; Cretney 2014; Robinson & Carson 2016). Temporal aspects feed into this as one can see in the differentiation between resilience as trait or process (Robinson & Carson 2016). Resilience has its strength for analysing sudden events and shocks, such as natural disasters, but it has weaknesses for assessing slow processes such as structural changes (Wilson 2012).

Looking into processes, in some cases resilience translates into reluctance; reluctance to change existing orders and approaches. This almost matches the definition of perverse resilience, that is "[...] resilience within a system that is undesirable to the extent that it is socially unjust, inconsistent with ecosystem health or threatens overall system viability" (Phelan *et al*. 2013, 204). This is in line with the differentiation between non-critical versus critical theory and non-conflict versus conflict theory within the resilience discourse (Biermann *et al*. 2015; Olsson *et al*. 2015). Community resilience can and should never be apolitical and it requires a critical evaluation of the political framework. Otherwise, injustice and inequality will be manifested (Biermann *et al*. 2015). Agency of locals is another essential component of the political dimension. According to Scott (2013, 605): "While resilience offers a potential re-framing of rural development, its adoption within policy discourses should also be treated with caution. This is particularly the case when the rhetoric of resilience is translated to a social context with overtones of self-reliance". The political level has too often been neglected in its role as possible stressor for regional and community development. Resilience can be used as countermeasure against the adverse effects of neoliberal politics (Hornborg 2013; Biermann *et al*. 2015). The question is then: how exactly can it be used? And there we get back to the starting point, reconsidering some other more established concepts as more applicable.

Berkes and Ross (2013) bring in aspects of general and specific resilience, eventually calling for an integrated approach. According to them, the study of community resilience requires "[...] various principles of complexity, such as feedbacks, nonlinearity, unpredictability, and scale" [especially since] "[...] communities are more than the sum of their individuals, households, and groups, are not necessarily cohesive, and comprise dynamic combinations of actors and groupings with multiple interests and shifting alliances" (Berkes & Ross 2013, 15). The discussion of non-linearity, unpredictability and scale bring about another aspect that is frequently addressed in (community) resilience: equilibrium. We do not even have to go back far in time for discussing this point. Looking at post-pandemic lifestyles in the Nordic countries, we can consider this somewhat resilient: bouncing back into a dubious back-to-normal situation with high speed of recovery. But is that really resilient? Back to "normal" where normal was everything but sustainable? Not only this example raises concerns whether it is even always desirable to be resilient.

Nonetheless, most resilience literature seems to agree on two forms of resilience when discussing temporality and status. Resilience as in bouncing back is problematic for resource dependent communities. It might lead back into times of resource exploitation, monotonous local economic structures, and questionable working conditions. And who is about to set the standards for an equilibrium (cf. Scott 2013, 600)? What is the baseline and how can we deal with fluctuations, for example in terms of demographics? Bouncing back would bring us into a status that particularly requires resilience and is thus contrary to this very concept. Bouncing forward, as in evolutionary resilience sounds promising at first sight. However, it is usually blind towards exit-strategies, or it does not question whether the adjustments to a new system, that might not be desirable, is something to aim for. Bouncing forward is typically based on a naive belief in exponential growth and progress, even in times of austerity. Resilience as in being prepared for transformation requires

the political and economic sphere, which in most cases is exactly the stressor that makes resilience necessary (cf. Scott 2013). In other terms: how should the cause be the cure? Lock-ins and path dependency, which are in many cases the result of the economic and political setting make it even more difficult (Scott 2013; Kokorsch & Benediktsson 2018).

And yet – no matter in which direction we bounce – the question on how to deal with non-resilient places remains unaddressed and unanswered in most publications. The lack of an endpoint might even be the most important one for rejecting resilience approaches in community development. Three reasons can be given for neglecting this discussion. First, the context of Nordic welfare states in which debates around endpoints to community development seem to be contrary to this philosophy. Second, positive end goals seem to be the core of community resilience. Third, a clear antonym for resilience has not been defined. Is it fragility, is it vulnerability? Having a clear response to that, might also answer the question how to exactly deal with places qualifying for the end of the scale. The answer to this is clearly stated in the ecological understanding of resilience. And indeed, in a truly evolutionary approach, we would allow for some form of extinction and in particular welfare states should be able to respond to it.

Resilience and Icelandic community development

Reconsidering the definition of Amundsen (2012) that was applied to the Icelandic case before, it provides almost everything that is needed for a descriptive approach to community resilience. Taking a closer look at the individual aspects reveal some challenges though (Fig. 1). Considering resilience as reluctance to changes of existing orders and approaches, Iceland is indeed a very resilient system (Kristinsson 2018). Unfortunately, however, it qualifies also for the definition of perverse resilience, since economic growth and head-counts are the main tools for measuring successful community development accepting threats to the overall system viability.

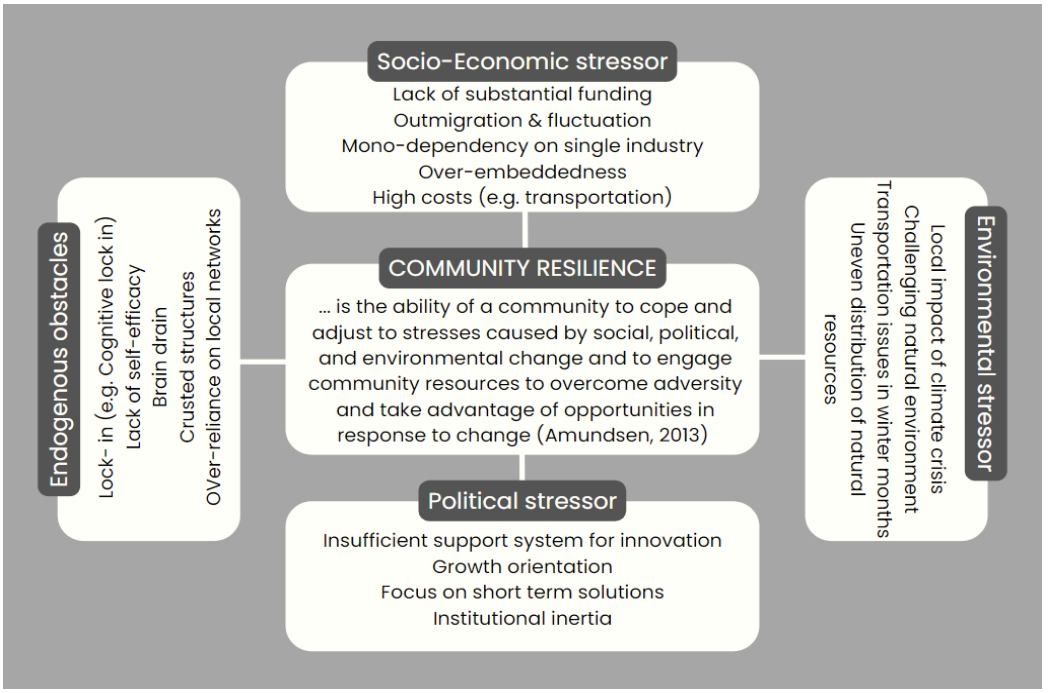

Fig. 1. Community Resilience in the context of different external stressors and local obstacles in Iceland.

Especially when developing new endogenous strategies, the results of out-migration, lacking funds and decreasing agency can be seen. Remaining inhabitants of the fragile communities in Iceland, or similarly affected communities without this label, are confronted with the responsibility to stop an accelerating downward spiral. Celebrating the rediscovery of endogenous strategies with an overemphasis on individual responsibility and adaptability is neoliberalism in disguise – or a perverted epitome of community resilience (Joseph 2013). Talking about national politics, one can detect a strange version of an adaptive cycle within the resilience context. The cycle starts with a socio-economic weakening and draining, continuing with decreased agency, then offering some form of rehabilitation temporarily with the aim of local empowerment and capacity building. That is schizophrenic resilience.

The first communities finished the Fragile Communities project. What are they labelled now and how to continue from here? Hardly any former or still fragile community is doing significantly better in terms of population or socio-economic development. Hardly any is present in funded projects on a scale that matters or makes a difference. We can see that while the projects target essential aspects of resilience, namely agency, self-efficacy, empowerment, optimism, and self-esteem (Berkes & Ross 2013, 17) other crucial elements are not addressed. In particular, the financial support and very narrow timeframe, in combination with lock-ins of sorts do not allow for long-term resilience.

Apart from this very nuanced program, reviewing innovation and community development policies in Iceland show further shortcomings. They are neither sufficient for a bouncing back, due to an undesired state and the impossible definition of an equilibrium, nor for bouncing forward, due to the overarching growth-oriented end-goals. Hardly any national or local policy maker would vote for the second option given the following choice: (a) either a village of 1,000 people working in fisheries, or (b) having 500 inhabitants in a place that try to make a decent living without an overreliance on extractive fisheries; a community with innovate workforce that tries and fails and constantly discovers new pathways. And this – very simplified and exaggerated example – leads to the normative dimension of community resilience, and possibly the normative setting of many development policies in general.

Conclusion

Getting back to the initial statement from Berkes and Ross (2013), who questioned that resilience literature is well developed at the local and community level, I would argue – at least for Iceland – that there are good reasons why their concerns are still justified. There are yet too many unanswered questions before one can apply a truly holistic process and future oriented community resilience approach. Until then other terms, such as persistence and robustness, or concepts such as adaptive capacity, community capacity and transition theory still seem to be more practical or should be further developed (Yamamoto 2011; Wilson 2012; Cretney 2014; Robinson & Carson 2016). Terms that could easily do without resilience but not vice versa. In other terms, community researchers are well equipped with descriptive concepts, and for a normative concept, it is not well developed enough. Especially transition theory seems to be more suitable since it "[...] emphasises interactions and scale-independence geographically and temporally; the ability to look both backwards and forwards along pathways; an emphasis on power relations; the bounded nature of transitional opportunities; and the overlapping nature of processes of change" (Robinson & Carson 2016, 118).

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