

On Resilience in 2021

By Nohelia Fernandez

Rather than seeing everything as a given that does not need to be questioned, systems thinking allows us to think about what is being prescribed, and why it is being prescribed.

One such example that, when first introduced, most if not all people would see as positive, is resilience. Resilience might conjure up the symbolism of fighting, of resistance, of coming out of something stronger and thus not having given in to the opposing forces that were intent on halting you in your path. Resilience seems to be something that would be injudicious not to admire, right? Well, as ever there is more than meets the eye, and perhaps it is those things that we are least suspicious of, and therefore feel a certain desire to protect the most, that we should not avert our analytical and critical lenses. Particularly, this paper will look at how resilience is pushed upon us as a tool of governance that encourages our governance to deal with the structural issues that affect our everyday lives in societies in the Global North, building on David Chandler's work on the topic (Chandler, 2014).

For the past year, we have had to be resilient and draw on resilience to keep our communities moving and to support one another. We have had to be creative and reinvent our lives to live through one of the most difficult and unforeseen circumstances many of us have ever seen unless of course, anybody has lived through war times. The complete unprecedentedness of COVID and its vast impact on everyday life, has meant that governments have called on our resilience to get through these arduous times. However, as much as it is true that perseverance and hard work are required to pull us through most situations, and even more so a difficult and restricted one, without the welfare state or any support from governments, this would not be enough for most people to subsist and survive. This and many other examples highlight just how much resilience only get us so far when it comes to how we can overcome states of deprivation, disempowerment, and desperation.

Over the past month, we have felt the characteristic rollercoaster of life under the patriarchy, with the narrative going something along the lines of: "happy international women's day, let's protect women, women protect yourselves please, do everything you can to stay strong, police are here to protect you, oh actually we will only protect statues and the status quo because that's our real reason for being here", and so on. Of course, the blame is rarely attributed to where it lies with the patriarchy

itself and the idea that men can be absolved of all responsibility when it comes to rape culture and the very real and terrifying implications of their power and influence in our society. Here, resilience is weaponised on women's behalf, but we are told to swallow this pill because this is ultimately how we will get through everyday life under the patriarchy. A remarkably similar narrative is spun under some pseudo-ecofeminist narratives, indicating that women are the most affected by nature's deterioration and climate changes, and culminating in the reductionism that because women are closer to nature, we have some intel as to how we can 'solve' the problems posed by the Climate Crisis. Ecofeminism however has evolved and challenged these notions, concluding that it is not solely *our* responsibility to 'fix' problems that were not necessarily created by women in the first place. To fight against the toxic web of the patriarchy that affects all genders that live under it, albeit in distinct and unhealthy ways, it requires the roots of the problem to be addressed and everyone on board to fight for equality, particularly those that hold the most power, to redress the power dynamics and allow for healthier ones to emerge. The resilience of women has 'saved' us, but this is no excuse for it to be the only method for tackling the problems that arose at our expense. The resilience of people of colour, LGBTQ+ folks, and disabled folks was a necessity to survive, but as Chandler chiefly advocates: why are we not asking why this resilience was needed in the first place? Is it necessary in a society that should protect us, nourishes us, and allows for our thriving as individuals? The short answer is of course: no, it is wholly unnecessary. Resilience is a coping mechanism, but not the solution to the problems we face, as the structural and institutional issues remain.

As Jose Roberto Guevara urges, resilience fundamentally "does not question nor does it challenge the causes of vulnerability", thus encouraging a discourse of perseverance, rather than addressing the root causes of what made people so vulnerable and lead such precarious lives in the first instance. He goes on to add that it is assumed that it "may merely help those who have been made more vulnerable cope and survive the impacts of climate change or any other environmental catastrophe" but does not show any commitment to support those most affected.

Once Upon A Time In Venezuela (2020), filmed early in the last decade over a few years, shows us a tragic example of that if governments and local authorities do not act on local people's urgent calls for infrastructure to combat environmental deterioration that directly impacts their livelihoods, people will continue to leave until that area is left uninhabitable, and thus ultimately becomes uninhabited. The film follows a neighbourhood in Congo Mirador, resemblant of the very towns that came to give

Venezuela its name - derived from the idea that it was 'little Venice', unbeknownst to the colonisers that this was of course a country that is 203% larger than all of Italy combined, let alone Venice. The village is suffering the effects of water stagnation and sediment build-up, leading to a build-up of weeds and plants that remove oxygen from the water and render large areas unusable for wildlife and anyone living there. The essential waterways become more and more difficult to navigate and cut off the village from the other connecting rivers, creating detrimental isolation. The film records the incidence of people moving their homes on boats out of the area before they are left completely uncommunicated and possibly stranded in an area that can no longer support their living there. We cannot keep moving around to more habitable areas as the ultimate resolution for these types of problems. Why is there such an insistence on avoiding the problems posed by Climate Change and direct environmental decimation? It seems clear to me and to many researchers in this field that have been screaming about these issues for decades, that if we do not address the problems head-on, these will build, and we will soon be left with little to no choices as to what we can do about the problems at hand. As a Venezuelan, this country was my home and my family and I had to leave for other reasons, but the Climate Emergency is now intensifying all the problems in the country and adding yet another layer of complication to a country in complete ruins in terms of functionality and habitability. As a country that does not even feature on the Sustainability Index (cite Earth.org), with the highest oil reserves in the world and one of the biggest contributors to Climate Change by way of pollution involved in the oil, gold, and other rare earth mineral industries, Venezuela is a country that is both the victim and perpetrator of Climate Debt and Climate Chaos.

In Bristol, however, Bristolians have witnessed the narrative that Bristol is a 'green city', and the people living here have had almost everything to do with this fact. Our communities have set up mutual aid networks, pioneered in terms of allotments, been the birthplace of multiple environmental organisations, and of course been awarded the UK's first European Green Capital in 2015. There have been more changes implemented at the wider level, such as the biogas buses being introduced over the past few years, more accessible recycling bins around the city centre, more cycle lanes, increased pedestrianisation of the city centre to reduce private vehicles being driven there, but there is probably a larger list of what communities and private enterprises have done than what local governments have done to have earned our city's 'green' reputation. I am also happy to admit that perhaps I'm not well versed in all of the behind the scenes work that has been occurring within the council and in local

government, but if the impacts have not been seen and felt enough by Bristolians, and we have felt and witnessed more changes within communities implementing alternative lifestyles and changes, then it seems to me as if something may be awry. We are also aware that we have been living under a conservative government for over a decade, and that the environment was not their top priority and probably will not be for a party that insists on maintaining the status quo as opposed to pushing for the structural change we so desperately need for our societies to be healthier and survive under Climate Chaos.

As Chandler rightly proposes in his work on resilience, there is an insistence and reluctance to act on problems that affect our communities and environment, because there is an assumption that this work is already being done. Moreover, not only is there a mentality of “well I don’t have to worry about that, I’ll leave someone else to do it”, but there is also a chronic underfunding and challenge to such grassroots work being done and we have been left to fend for ourselves. The fact that organisations like Foodcycle, based all around the UK and having two bases in Bristol, have shown how simple it is to battle both hunger and food waste in our communities and tackle both issues simultaneously, shows that all that is needed is the resources and desire to work together for a common cause. This does not require a lot of money, or even resources because there is a surplus of resources due to the capitalist system that requires surplus to profit. And as we know all too well, the Conservative government will continue to instil in us the idea that debt and the deficit and cutting costs is the way to go. It appears the government and more powerful institutions in Bristol have been able to reap the rewards without sowing enough of the seeds and keeping up with the maintenance of motivating and maintaining avenues for change. It is common to hear about the great things happening in Bristol with regards to climate action and discussions around these issues, but of course, there is only so much that can be done when a structural and institutional change would need to come to gratify and fortify what has been built and pushed for in our city.

Ultimately, what we see in cities like Bristol are what we will be seeing for years to come. As Climate Resilience builds, and Climate Change affects more coastal cities and more places in the Global North, we will see this resilience narrative intensify. This centres on the idea that if other island states in much more difficult situations than ‘us’ can still find ways of solving problems, and if all else fails they can just leave and live elsewhere, then there is no reason why we cannot do the same. However, there is no hiding that this is unfeasible and deeply unjust. We cannot simply be expected to fend for ourselves and keep fighting without any hope for our alternative

methods of running society in more sustainable and healthy ways to become the norm, with structural and financial backing. We have survived despite governments and neoliberal economic guiding principles that have failed us, but this should not be seen as the 'green light' for business to continue as usual and for the hard work to be done on behalf of what should already be there to protect us and the environment. Resilience can indeed be something admirable and even necessary, but we must recall that resilience should not always be resorted to in every circumstance that it emerges. We can thus see how it is highly encouraged that we rely on resilience to subsist and get through any difficult circumstance or structure that negatively impacts our lives, and thus governance as we know it can continue without being directly challenged or improved. There should be more outrage towards protecting those and that which needs protecting, rather than outrage towards the status quo being destabilised which is that which creates inequality and Climate Chaos in the first place, not by accident, but by its design.

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