

Recognising that **never say**

Have you noticed how often the word 'resilience' crops up these days in media reports and politicians' speeches? It's used in connection with all kinds of adversity such as natural disasters (for example, the recent floods in Cumbria), with the need to counter extremist ideas and in relation to the impact of the credit crunch on employment and public services.

The term resilience describes a capacity to respond to and recover from disruption. In engineering, it refers to the ways in which a material or system can adapt to distortion or damage. In a similar vein, the term is used to identify an individual's psychological capacity to cope with stress, such as redundancy, bereavement or dashed expectations.

Climate change, international terrorism and worldwide recession are focusing minds on the importance of preparing ourselves to withstand impending threats to global wellbeing and security. Community resilience is seen as a collective, local level dimension of this; sometimes also associated with ideas of 'community spirit', solidarity and self-help. It represents a useful vehicle for mobilising the resources and mutual commitment of community members to supplement the efforts of state agencies in a time of cuts, conflict and catastrophes.

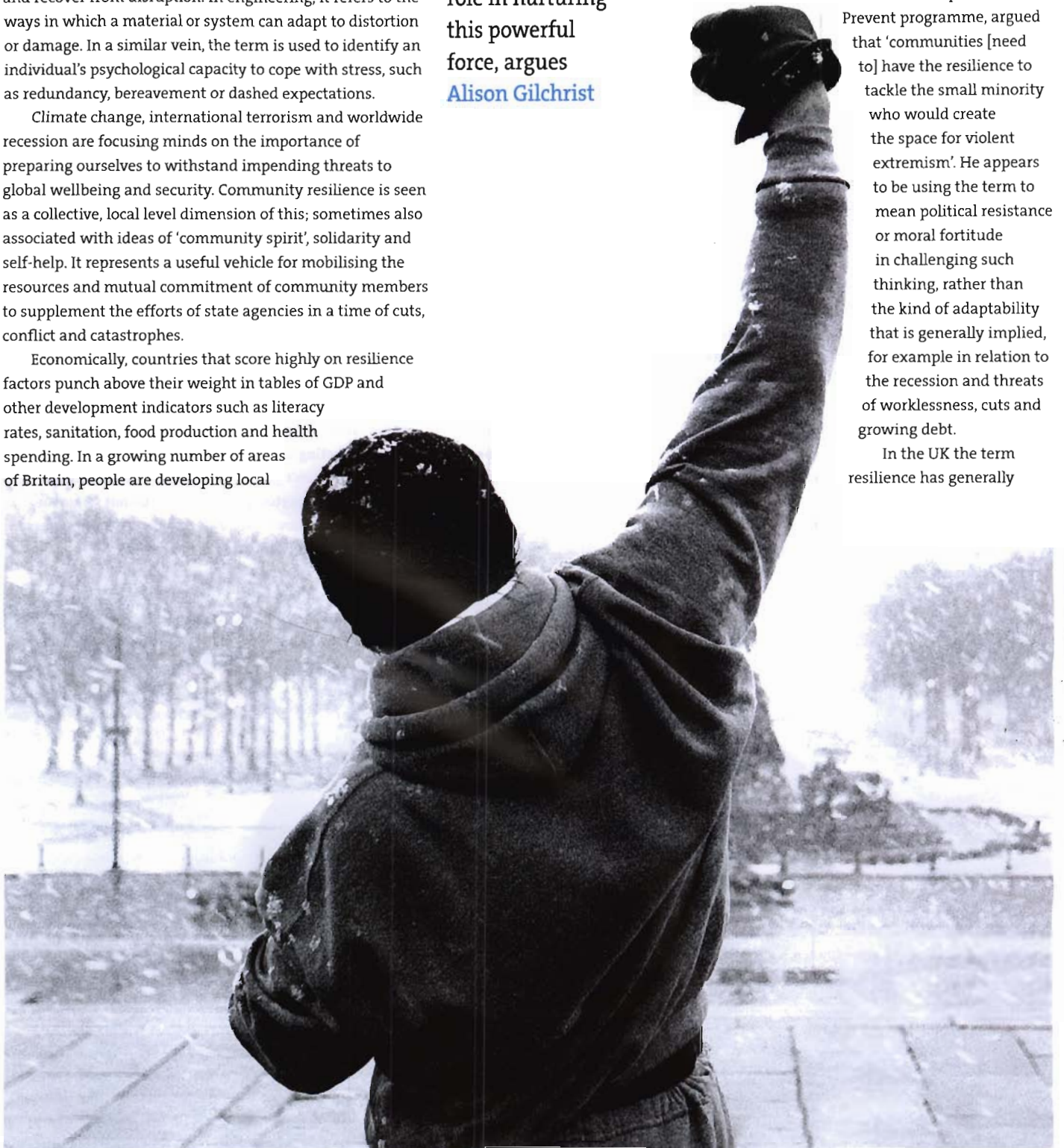
Economically, countries that score highly on resilience factors punch above their weight in tables of GDP and other development indicators such as literacy rates, sanitation, food production and health spending. In a growing number of areas of Britain, people are developing local

Community resilience comes from within – but local authorities can still play a vital role in nurturing this powerful force, argues Alison Gilchrist

schemes and strategies for self-reliance and sustainable living. A network of Transition Towns has sprung up in response to the twin crises of peak oil and climate change and aims to adapt the local economy and community life so as to reduce people's carbon footprint and increase the level of local exchanges and trade.

Advocates of this approach talk of building resilience, as does John Denham, secretary of state for communities, who in a recent speech on the Prevent programme, argued that 'communities [need to] have the resilience to tackle the small minority who would create the space for violent extremism'. He appears to be using the term to mean political resistance or moral fortitude in challenging such thinking, rather than the kind of adaptability that is generally implied, for example in relation to the recession and threats of worklessness, cuts and growing debt.

In the UK the term resilience has generally



die attitude

been confined to the emergency services, but elsewhere authorities have been working to define, develop and assess community resilience to ensure that populations and places can respond swiftly and effectively to potential dangers. In New Zealand, Australia and the United States, frameworks have been developed to define the characteristics of community resilience, which are used to assess and improve levels of resilience in the face of drought, bush fire, hurricanes and volcanic eruptions. Disaster relief agencies have devised models to reduce the risk and impact of disasters in developing countries. These all emphasise the importance of community involvement, social capital and partnership working in relation to both preparation and response.

Communities are complex, diverse and dynamic but mostly pull together in the face of hazards or threats to their wellbeing. They need to be respected, supported and understood as co-producers of their own resilience. It is not something that can be taught or delivered by external experts. Evidence from the aftermath of recent calamities suggests that informal local networks are more effective in the short term than official agencies in bringing immediate and appropriate aid where it is needed. In Sri Lanka, people talk of a second tsunami of well-meant and generously given help delivered by international non-governmental organisations, which swamped the efforts of the indigenous voluntary and community groups and often resulted in misguided services undermining local initiative.

Resilience can be seen as a combination of psychological mindset and practical capability, enabling communities to innovate, adapt and reorganise in order to survive and recover. Broadly speaking, communities that are 'well-connected' and have a strong sense of 'collective efficacy' are more likely to resist or overcome misfortune. Research from around the world shows that resilient communities tend to be confident and creative. They have both the capacity and motivation for collective organising, with resources and leadership located throughout social and inter-organisational networks. There are traditions and infrastructure for involving people in decision-making and a sense of common purpose.

Communities increase their own resilience if they are prepared to see a crisis as an opportunity to do things differently, and are accustomed to helping themselves using their own resourcefulness and by reaching out for external help and advice. Good communication systems are a major advantage, including old style 'grapevines' as well as websites. Experience of collective organising is crucial, especially where many community members have gained skills and confidence for leadership and can galvanise others to take action. The key to resilience is in the distribution of social capital across communities, so that when specific linkages are removed or damaged, there are plenty more connections available. In New Cross Gate, southeast London, the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) Connected Communities programme is working with the New Cross Gate Trust to develop a social capital strategy aimed at strengthening

local social networks and creating a more resilient and empowered community. This strategy will draw upon an empirical understanding of local social networks to identify projects through which valuable community connections can be made, strengthened and extended.

In resilient communities, activities foster community pride and mutual altruism, with individuals feeling attached to their community and therefore willing to work together when times are difficult. Attitudes are generally positive and optimistic, with community members encouraged to look forwards and outwards rather than dwelling on past troubles and internal divisions. Resilient communities are opportunistic and proactive about tackling problems. There is a vibrant and diverse community sector, with groups and organisations open to new ideas and willing to cooperate with a range of partners. People are willing to take risks, learn from experience and engage in collective action.

For local authorities, resilience offers a way of managing change while combining work on capacity building, cohesion, community empowerment, leadership, economic development and global warming. In Wiltshire, the new unitary council is developing a 'resilient communities outcomes framework' that takes forward their policies on sustainable development. It identifies the key characteristics of a resilient community: 'self-reliant, active

and resourceful'. The vision covers a wide range of aspirations, including flexible employment, green spaces, transport hubs, physical exercise, respite care, biodiversity, educational attainment, culture and leisure facilities, neighbourliness, trust and community participation. Local partnership bodies are being established with the aims of 'assisting people and communities to become more active and confident in voicing and addressing their own needs and ambitions'. The objectives include better coordination of services, strengthening third sector capacity, reducing inequalities and building social capital by increasing community participation.

Community development contributes to resilience by working with communities to enhance networks, create spaces for interaction, tackle barriers and inequalities, and support cross-sector partnerships. To do this in ways that are sustainable and strategic, it needs proper recognition and secure investment in well-managed teams, with ongoing training.

In essence, community resilience is about social and organisational connectedness that builds trust, hope and cohesion so that people are able to take risks, share resources and pursue common goals. 'Resilience' is at risk of being smeared into the policy rhetoric of 'big society, small state'. Instead, we need to learn from examples abroad and reinforce the vital role that public authorities play in working with communities to develop and use resilience as a strategy for empowerment and survival.

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FIND OUT MORE

Alison Gilchrist is an independent community development consultant and a fellow of the RSA, for which she is working on the Connected Communities programme. Her latest book, *The Well-connected Community* (2nd edition), was reviewed in the January edition of *New Start*.

Need fresh ideas for your area? **Neil McInroy, Gaynor Anthony and Kate Dempster** explain why it's time to get out of the office for some fun and games

GAMES WITHOUT FRONTIERS

Can we have a process which stimulates creative thinking and generates new ideas for city development? From this question in mid-2006, the British Council with the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (Cles) and Urbis began investigating and developing the **Future City Game**. From a rigorous period of piloting, which took the joint development team to Oslo, Bogota, Manchester and Glasgow, the fully formed game has now been played and has assisted development by generating creative ideas in over 100 locations across Russia and northern Europe. It has recently been played in Blackburn, with Cles acting as 'games masters'.

While a 'game', it is serious! Indeed the Homes and Communities Agency Academy has recently approved the

game under their place-making recognition scheme. The gaming element is reflected in the quest for a winning idea. Thus the game is very different to many workshop-type experiences. Competing for a winning idea creates a purposeful dynamic. As a result, teams made up of various public, community, voluntary and private representatives need to work effectively together and they quickly develop into working groups where institutional, professional and individual roles and barriers break down. Covering three stages (visioning, testing and presenting) with ten steps, the game balances creative 'free thinking' with rigour and discipline. Furthermore, the testing stage involves interaction with real 'experts', local residents and interest groups.

The winning idea is developed throughout the three stages of the game and is also voted on using the seven game criteria (fun, innovative and futuristic, meets local challenges, meets global challenges, sustainable, relevant to the community, feasible and achievable). In creating ideas which straddle the social, economic, cultural and environmental problems of our age, the criteria are designed to be contradictory and difficult to reconcile, thus forcing creative and imaginative thinking.

For Cles, interest in the game stemmed from a sense that the traditional disciplines and policymaking surrounding corporate planning, regeneration, land use planning and economic development, in some cases, get bogged down in the immediacies of the present. As a result future thinking, new ideas and future resilience of place is sometimes overlooked. Furthermore, the British Council and Cles are now committed to using the game as part of



It's a game that broadens horizons, as **Ken Barnsley** explains

Back in early 2009, when the full complexities of comprehensive area assessment were unknown and Total Place was unheard of, let alone a website, Blackburn with Darwen Strategic Partnership was looking at the next stage of development for the place.

The partnership has always been committed to innovative ways of working together, delivery of services to communities and strategic thinking. The outcome from that winter meeting was to agree to develop a vision for 2030 as the high level strategy to lead the development of future plans.

Soon after, the partnership approved an ambitious programme of research,

engagement and consultation to involve residents, neighbourhoods, businesses and partners in the development of Vision 2030, running from May 2009 though to the launch next month. The partnership was clear the vision should present a realistic future, fundamentally based on the totality of thoughts, feelings, associations and expectations of local communities, but with clear future goals.

Right from the outset, Mike Murray, a local industrialist and chair of the partnership, was enthusiastic about including innovative methods and approaches to encourage creative thinking about how communities

and business saw Blackburn with Darwen in 20 years' time. The partnership was so often working on short-term plans, looking at performance indicators for the previous year or setting targets for next year, so the capacity for visionary civic leadership was often masked by weight of regulation.

The process of developing Vision 2030 involved residents from across each of the borough's five neighbourhood areas, workshops for key themes such as children and young people, economic regeneration and community safety. As part of the process, the top-level partnership demonstrated commitment to innovative thinking and



Left and above: participants play the Future City Game at the 'More nature, less architecture' event which took place in Moscow during December

sustainable community planning, corporate visioning and corporate policy within local authorities and local strategic partnerships.

To date the game has been played across local authority administrations, city, neighbourhood and site scales and has developed a range of innovative ideas, including some that have unlocked seemingly intractable issues around community cohesion, use of derelict buildings and dealing with future demographic, economic and environmental change. A supportive network of players, games masters and host cities has developed. This includes links between Blackburn and Pilsen in Czech Republic and London with Kaunas in Lithuania.

From the Blackburn with Darwen experience, Cles and the British Council are now seeking to speed up the rollout of the game with a number of local authorities and local strategic partnerships in the UK. In particular, in these challenging times, we seek to use the game to assist with ongoing strategic visioning and the development of signature ideas, which can increase the resilience of place.

Playing the Future City Game

- ◆ The game can run over one or two days
- ◆ It has three distinct phases and ten steps (see figure)
- ◆ There are up to 30 players in up to five teams
- ◆ The game generates up to 50 ideas in total, with up to five thought through ideas
- ◆ The ideas can be a project, behaviour, action or policy
- ◆ Teams compete on the basis of coming up with a single winning idea
- ◆ Teams contain a mix of public, private, community and voluntary representatives
- ◆ The group work develops creative thinking



FIND OUT MORE

Neil McNroy is chief executive of the Centre for Local Economic Strategies, Gaynor Anthony is UK project manager of the British Council's Creative Cities programme and Kate Dempster is the instigator of the Future City Game at the British Council and adviser to the Creative Cities programme. Future City Game, <http://snurl.com/u4vr9>
Watch a podcast of the Blackburn with Darwen game at <http://snurl.com/u4vrh>

taking risks. The Future City Game was just one of the examples of this thinking.

The game was held at Ewood Park in December over two days, with members of the local strategic partnership as players. It worked really well, encouraging creative thinking about the future in the context of global and local change to generate detailed ideas for development into transformational projects. Games master Neil McNroy from the Centre for Local Economic Strategies was instrumental in creating an atmosphere where the players could jump out of their senior professional and organisational roles to develop groundbreaking and innovative

ideas. These ideas were then put through a rigorous, though rapid, testing process with professional advice to teams mixed up with five separate presentations to expert panels of schoolchildren, business, neighbourhood board, residents and the interfaith forum.

Each team ended up with an idea that could be developed further as an exemplar project for inclusion in Vision 2030, which goes to the conference on 12 February for testing with everyone involved in the research, engagement and consultation. From the launch in March, Vision 2030 will lead the development of the sustainable communities strategy and the next local area agreement.

The winning idea from the game was called Electra, which envisages the widespread availability of electric cars for commuters and families. The scheme and the other ideas from the game will help inform the Vision.

As Mike Murray says: 'Not every aspect of the ideas that came up in the Future City Game will be able to be included in the Vision but the logic and principles behind them will definitely help shape the future of Blackburn with Darwen... sometimes you have to dream of the impossible to reach the attainable.'

◆ Ken Barnsley is head of corporate research at Blackburn with Darwen Council.