

Building city-region resilience in Africa: lessons from practice

This think piece was produced as an output from a mini-workshop held at the **Resilience for Development: Assessment Methods and Transformation Practices** colloquium, May 2017. The mini workshop was convened by Jess Kavonic (ICLEI Africa), Alice McClure (CSAG), Gina Ziervogel (ACDI/CSAG), Coleen Vogel (Global Change Institute, University of the Witwatersrand) and Roy Bouwer (ACDI/Global Risk Governance Programme).



Session Overview

Current resilience discourse (within a complexity framework) emphasises the dynamic and emergent nature of systems such as African cities. There is general agreement among most academics within the resilience field that approaches to building resilience should account for complexity, which may necessitate shifts in the way we have historically implemented initiatives for resilience. However, actioning these ideas and incentives in the real world is challenging. During this session, representatives from initiatives that utilise innovative steps to understand and build resilience in African cities presented key thoughts and guidance based on their experiences. Following these presentations, participants broke away into groups to reflect on their own experiences while implementing this type of work, particularly on barriers and enablers related to building resilience in African cities. Each breakaway group then shared key reflections with the broader group. The presentations and group work set the scene for an interactive plenary discussion on the factors that have contributed to building or hindering success of initiatives that aim to build resilience in African cities.

This thought piece collates the ideas that were shared during the session, with a view of contributing to guidance on resilience for practitioners working in African cities.

Lessons emerging from resilience work in African cities

Future Resilience for African CiTies and Lands (FRACTAL): implementing resilience as an approach

Presented by Alice McClure (Academic co-ordinator - FRACTAL)

The [FRACTAL project](#), implemented in nine cities in southern Africa, aims to co-produce relevant and significant climate knowledge for decision making at the city-region scale, thereby contributing to resilient development pathways in these cities. Acknowledging the complexity of the issue at hand (climate-related challenges in African cities), a resilience framework, nested in a complex systems thinking approach, is being used to undertake FRACTAL work. A blanket definition for a resilience indicator/goal has not been set across the cities; instead, the team is thinking about what resilience means in each context. Furthermore, city learning processes (social learning events) are being implemented to home in on the “burning issues” within the city system. This interactive city learning approach bounds the focus of the project within the much broader, complex system and provides a mechanism for ongoing transdisciplinary engagement.

Within the bounds of these burning issues, the various parts of the system are being explored through a number of approaches such as participatory mapping with city stakeholders. Important questions that drive the engagements and research include *inter alia* what are the different parts of the sub-system (burning issue)? Who are the key players affecting this space? How do we account for all the important elements that might shape resilience? What world views, values and perceptions shape the development of city-regions, and resilience thereof? The current process of co-producing knowledge in each city is fairly emergent and dependant on the context, as well as the different types of knowledge that are being brought together during the process. Considering the emergent nature of this approach, the co-production process is designed to enable flexibility and encourages accountability and humility of all involved.

Hands-on experience from working in African cities to build resilience

Presented by Jess Kavonic (ICLEI)

The [ICLEI Africa Secretariat](#) is based in Cape Town, South Africa and collaborates closely with the global ICLEI network and other regional offices around the world to share tools, materials, strategies and good practices, which are specifically designed and implemented at the local level. After working in African cities for some time, this organisation has learned a number of important lessons, which are summarised below.

- In each city, there are a number of ongoing initiatives that have similar objectives to ICLEI Africa and can therefore provide valuable information and knowledge. To avoid duplication and improve synergy among aligned initiatives, coordination and information-sharing should be improved through accessible platforms.
- The complexity of city systems requires a deep understanding and scaling approach, which takes time and effort. Effort should also be concentrated on building mutual respect and trust; forming partnerships through a transdisciplinary approach. Instead of creating new roles and/or responsibilities within the cities, existing institutions and decision making processes should be engaged in resilience-building processes. These transdisciplinary processes require flexibility and understanding of the limitations/restraints within which institutions are mandated to work. Practitioners working in this field should take a realistic, proactive approach to planning and action.
- Informality is part of the African city-region system. This informality contributes to both the resilience and vulnerability of these city systems and should therefore be embraced and integrated into resilience building initiatives.

The role of social networks in urban climate risk governance

Presented by Roy Bouwer ([ACDI/Global Risk Governance Programme](#))

Strong social networks in city-systems provide opportunities to overcome challenges

related to complex problems and uncertainty. Initiatives to build resilience should therefore focus on understanding these networks and support further strengthening. Linking to ideas of multiple knowledge holders and improved communication, strong social ties between government departments and other organisations facilitate coordination across departments, thereby contributing to building resilience. Without these ties, departments are more likely to implement sectoral responses in “silos”, which inhibits resilience building. Collaboration across departments and organisations also enables open communication and flexibility, which supports an adaptive management approach when responding to risk.

Challenges that cannot be ignored when working in the resilience field: experiences from Johannesburg, South Africa

Presented by Coleen Vogel ([Global Change Institute](#), University of Witwatersrand)

There is a lot of buzz around building resilience and novel approaches for doing so. However, such approaches that have been well documented in theory and seem to provide necessary, innovative solutions are difficult to implement in African cities. As a community, we talk a strong game but still have a lot to learn when it comes to effective co-implementation. A few of the challenges and opportunities that are being experienced in Johannesburg are described below (grouped into five categories that each begin with “P”), along with the questions that these challenges raise.

- **Perimeter:** we need to engage across and between ‘boundaries’. We need to understand and work within the governance arrangements, as well as the broader perimeter of actors that are wider than the City officials (e.g. civic society etc.). It is necessary to understand certain ‘formal’ governance arrangements but how do we account for the informality; ‘informal’ relations in terms of the influence of other actors?
- **Process:** complexity and systems thinking provides a good theoretical perspective for academics but it is difficult to translate this into action, particularly within already complex systems where simplicity is key for action.
- **Practical:** We need to think about how to action theoretical concepts. When doing

this, the language used is very important. What do different terms mean to different groups of people?

- Personal: Linking to the idea of actioning concepts, initiatives that are supported or introduced by external organisations need to be relevant within the context of the targeted city. We need to understand the issues of concern on the ground, so that actors can identify with them and enact their own agency in these spaces.
- Paradigm: the various knowledge types involved in processes for building resilience (including tacit knowledge) should be acknowledged. How do we account for all these knowledge types? Can we (or should we) try and understand them all?

Group work & plenary discussion: experiences from around the room

After the introductory session described above, participants broke away into small groups to discuss factors that have contributed to the success of the initiatives in which they are/have been involved, or the barriers that limit activities. Points from these breakaway discussions are presented in Appendix 1. Groups were then requested to present three to five guidelines for building resilience in African cities based on their experiences. The main points from these breakaway group discussions were then presented back to the broader group to spark a plenary conversation, and are summarised in the section below: *Guidance for practitioners working on resilience in African cities*.

Much of the plenary discussion focused on informality as part of the African landscape, and the particular opportunities and risks that this informality introduces in the process of building resilience. When working in African cities, one needs to remain flexible and cognisant of the context including all informal characteristics. Creativity and innovation were acknowledged as important characteristics of the resilience-building process in African cities. In particular, it was suggested that the arts could play an important role in expressing or inspiring innovative ideas. In general, there was an emphasis on reflecting more on what we've learned and how we learn in the resilience field; and whether these mechanisms are appropriate for an African city context?

Another important message that came out of the plenary discussion was the necessity to acknowledge different experiences, perspectives and values in the resilience-building process, as well as the power that various stakeholders hold. For example, representatives from [Association for Water and Rural Development](#) (AWARD), shared experiences from working with technical people in the field, which is of vital importance. However, strong relationships should be established with political players to facilitate sustained action. It is also important to acknowledge the priorities of various people involved in the process; it is difficult to motivate people to take action related to climate change when basic services are not being met.

The barriers related to building resilience in African cities that were identified during the breakaway and plenary discussions include *inter alia*:

- Limited access to resources (financial, capacity to undertake relevant activities or implement adaptive approaches etc.).
- Lack of trust between partners involved in an initiative.
- Limited engagements during the initiative, which decreases opportunities for building trust and understanding.
- Conflict resulting from different perceptions and values (to an extent that this conflict hinders initiatives).

Guidance for practitioners working on resilience in African cities

The session surfaced important lessons that have been learned through resilience-building initiatives in African cities. These lessons have been distilled into some core ideas and questions below, which will hopefully guide similar initiatives. Since the session was focused on African cities, these ideas are appropriate for this particular context, but the authors hope that the lessons might contribute to resilience thinking at a broader scale.

- Think about **scale**: what are the connections? What scales are involved?
- **Context** is key. Past, present and future are all of equal importance for context.
- Keep things simple on the ground, while acknowledging the complexity of the

targeted system.

- Embrace **informality** and be flexible.
- Embrace **creativity and innovation**.
- Build **networks, relationships** and **trust**.
- Value **diverse perspectives**, surface them and do not always try and reach consensus
- Take time to **understand different beliefs, values and types of knowledge**.
- Take time to understand the **formal and informal aspects of governance**, including social networks, which play an important role in building resilience.
- Encourage **adaptive and reflexive policies** and action (rather than prescriptive adaptive capabilities).
- Support **transformative thinking and learning**.
- Encourage **empowerment** of actors who will remain in targeted areas/systems (training, learning etc.).

Interesting statements and food for thought

“Fostering social networks within and between governance departments (at the council level) is crucial for building resilience”

“Cities resilience is inextricably linked with the broader landscape in which it is nested”

“If a city is resilient it does not necessarily mean that this is the way it should be”

“You cannot become resilient without putting your feet in the fire”

Additional session information

- Attendees: Primarily academics and scholars with a few practitioners (and a few organisations working across Africa and other parts of the world e.g. CSIR, INR, Chemonics)
- Key statistics: Approximately 30 participants made the session a great platform for learning and sharing ideas

Appendix 1: Group brainstorming: and feedback session

Groups broke away to chat about the factors that had contributed to the success of the initiatives in which they are involved, or the barriers that limited activities. The main points from these breakaway discussions are presented below.

Group 1

- Create cross-scale places for building relationships
- Work within context – keep simple and easily understood – resilience for whom and what
- Creativity and innovation – social learning processes, include arts in processes

Group 2

- Work with entrenched power dynamics
- Importance of brokers who can bring together different interests: need to be politically agile, work intelligent, work across scales, appreciate approaches
- Build networks of brokers and intermediaries to ensure they can persist and allow for disruptive innovation
- How does a network of brokers manage disruptive behavior?

Group 3

- Participation at multiple levels with right stakeholders
- Good governance
- Being mindful of political aspects
- Framing and commonalities (make relevant and aligned)
- Transformative thinking and learning
- Empowering communities and ensuring awareness of project goals
- Importance of traditional knowledge
- Education and training

Group 4

- Recognise particulars of informality
- Support regenerative approaches: how they link to the vision of the city and what

services should look like

- Adaptive and flexible policy: principled rather than prescriptive