

## **Engineering Societal Resilience: A Crisis Management Perspective**

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We tend to recognize and discuss resilience by its absence. The Katrina disaster, for instance, exposed the lack of resilience of New Orleans, its citizens, its political-administrative elites, and the wider disaster management system designed to mitigate such destructive events. This disaster, by implication, suggests what societal resilience would look like. If a society (city, region or country) is to recover quickly from a catastrophic event (the most basic definition of resilience), it needs to have in place dynamic capacity to perform the following tasks:

- Provide basic tasks (health care, food and shelter, search and rescue, law and order)
- Restore critical infrastructures (power, roads, schools, hospitals, stores, gas stations) quickly
- Facilitate self-help (by providing TARPS, basic equipment, gas etc)
- Organize support from “the outside”

A resilient society takes up these tasks quickly and effectively and performs them as best as possible given the circumstances at hand. This dynamic capacity is not a matter of coincidence. It is the resultant of two types of factors. The first type pertains to what may be termed “societal quality.” This rather opaque variable includes all those factors that propel a town or region up the “best places to live” rankings (think of the vibrancy of local and regional governmental agencies, NGOs,

media, the quality of schools, income levels etc). This variable is relevant but beyond short-term manipulation.

The second factor, crisis management capacity, is amenable to design and short-term improvement efforts. This variable includes such factors as:

- Emergency officials that are trained to improvise
- Communication that works
- Excellent relations with network partners
- Leadership that prioritizes and facilitates local improvisation
- Effective media communications
- Functioning command and coordination structures and processes

Using these two broad categories, we can construe metrics that can measure the resilient capacity of a given society. It will allow us to recognize, in hindsight, resilient societies that were simply overwhelmed by the scope of the disaster and separate them from “lucky” systems that came away with a near miss. It allows us to focus on questions of design (what can we do, or not, to make a society more resilient?). And it forces us to think through the costs of resilience (also taking into account the normative implications of resilience).