Resilience... Why, How, and When?

Resilience is inherently neutral. At first sight, the ability to overcome unexpected disruptions and, if possible, to capitalize on them seems something desirable, something that should be sought after. Yet the question remains: Is resilience always desirable at all levels of a social organization? For instance, the response of the local residents to recent forest fires in the Aegean coast of Turkey was not merely a response to a forest fire of unexpected scale, but it was also a fight for survival against fires threatening people's lives and livelihoods for weeks. There is no doubt that the resilience demonstrated by these people should be applauded. On the other hand, a retrospective approach would call for a more sober view. We must keep in mind that no social system exists in a vacuum. Accordingly, we need to think whether the resilience sought by a local community in the face of a survival threat comes at the cost of its individuals, and what it implies for the larger social system, such as relevant organizations at the national level. In this particular case, achieving community-level resilience exposed local residents to immense stress which emanated from the necessity to compensate the inadequate response by the national actors. Admitted by the highest political authority at the national level, the required national capacity was not ready for a situation of such scale. Do we really desire a world where a community must build resilience against such disruptions, while the larger encompassing social organization is not fulfilling its purpose-for-being to prevent and manage them in the first place?

Let us take a step back and clarify what kind of resilience we are talking about. Resilience appears in many disciplines. Ecology researchers take a systems approach and define the resilience of an ecosystem through its tipping points. For example, lakes and seas – such as the Marmara Sea – can restore their original healthy states until an external factor such as pollution pushes it over "the tipping point" into an unhealthy state. Such tipping points are crucial for effective policies to succeed, and, currently, are being extensively documented by the Resilience Alliance in environmental context. Resilience considered in social systems, however, follows a different perspective compared to non-social, natural or technological systems. At the psychological level, "growth mindset" – the tendency to see growth opportunity in difficult experiences – is treated almost synonymously with resilience. From an organizational perspective, Roland Kupers suggests in his book "Turbulence" – a summary of the learnings of a group of corporations such as Shell, Siemens, DuPont, IBM, and many others during their attempts to implement resilience – that the ability to grow and improve through disruptions belongs to complex adaptive systems where communities being one of them. What is central in this perspective is the ability of a system, whether human or any social organization, to *self-organize*. This leads to a form of resilience that allows people not only to absorb and recover but also improve themselves in the aftermath of a disruption.

The ability to self-organize allows systems to repurpose their activities, reconfigure their internal structures, and reallocate their resources, developing novel responses without the necessity of external guidance. What we observed during this summer's forest fires at the Aegean coast was an example of self-organized resilience by local communities. We heard doctors offering burn treatment for free in Marmaris, reconfiguring economic transactions through their own initiatives. We saw people using their own private boats to save others in danger at the bays of Bodrum, repurposing their ownership of a boat that was originally not acquired with this intention. Manavgat experienced a resource allocation problem, not only having too much of some resources and not enough of others but also the necessity of setting up locations to coordinate their distribution. Each of these unusual activities arose from the ability of the individuals to reconfigure their actions and expectations, improvising in their ways of contributing to their communities. As such, the local communities took it on themselves to tackle the crisis with a large self-organization component. It is at this point where

I encourage you to think about whether we should applaud the demonstration of self-organized resilience by a self-reliant community in the absence of an adequate national response which could have circumvented its otherwise avoidable costly consequences?

Wherever we observe self-organized resilience, it is often the case that the larger social organization that is tasked with the protection and support for its people has not fulfilled its expected function. Conversely, when resilience is taken to an extreme level of self-reliance, it may be that the larger social organization will suffer and end up getting weakened. Any level of the society, from individuals to a nation, can achieve resilience. Whether it is desirable depends on who ends up taking it on themselves and how much, as resilience is inherently neutral. After decades of turbulence, many nations and international organizations – such as NATO, EU, UK, USA – all include now resilience in their policies and reports, signalling the approach of a future with resilience in the spotlight. However, for the sake of a desirable future, we should be alert and mindful of about a widespread and hasty pursuit of resilience that makes it difficult to identify and fully appreciate its consequences and implications. Yes, we may pursue resilience... But why, how and, when matters.