Davinder Lamba

Mazingira Institute, Kenya

Community resilience in the 21st century seminar

Organized by Woodrow Wilson Centre for Scholars and Fetzer Institute

Reflection paper by (davinderlamba@gmail.com)

Background
According to the letter of invitation, the seminar to examine "community resilience in the twenty first century" is the first in the series of three to explore, "Revitalizing community within and across boundaries".

The objective of the initiative is "to articulate and to support global conflict transformation and reconciliation in communities throughout the world", by combining scholarship, public policy and social practice. It is a challenging undertaking by Woodrow Wilson Centre and the Fetzer Institute.

The objective of the first seminar is stated as "to examine compelling examples of community resilience worldwide".Five thematic questions have been formulated. They are four "How" questions and a "What" question–pertaining to the role of an individual in community transformation. The emphasis of the seminar it appears is on the practical dynamics of community resilience, at the micro level—referred to as "community". *My general comment regarding the questions is that the intersection of gender and the themes ought to be addressed explicitly from the beginning.*

There are two papers distributed that reflect broadly on these issues and there is an indication of an intent to "set out a framework for our examination of community resilience". The papers are: "Resiliency and healthy communities" by J P Lederach and "Sustainability versus resilience" by J S Gross. The expectation of the seminar is "to produce working knowledge of community resilience, raising critical questions and clarifying areas for further research and exploration".

My reflection paper includes three things: some thoughts sparked by the two papers, my approach to viewing community resilience and a thinking tool–matrix of interactions of systems and their characteristics.

I do fall short of a requirement of the seminar since I do not have a "compelling example" of community resiliency to offer. At least not for the time being. First, a few thoughts sparked by the papers.

Resiliency and healthy community

Lederach in his paper takes a step back in order to explore the ways in which we organize our thinking about the concept of "health" and "community". I consider health as a component of well-being along with safety and comfort. Lederach treats well-being in somewhat similar terms

but in his own way. Well-being is both biological, psychological and social. Its opposite is ill-being (sickness, risk and restlessness).

Well-being is both an end itself (intrinsic value) and a means to other ends (extrinsic value). It is an integral value of human dignity. As a prescriptive concept, human dignity is recognized as the juridical and philosophical basis of human rights.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights specifies well-being as a norm in general terms. "The Declaration recognizes the right to "life, liberty and security of persons" and condemns "torture" as well as "cruel" and "inhuman' treatment or punishment. There is a "right to rest and leisure" and a general right to "social security".(Lasswell, 1971)

Deprivation or non-fulfillment of well-being is a human rights or a legal-moral issue. Gross inequality in the distribution of well-being--local or global--is a social justice and equity issue. It is also the same regarding *wealth* and *power* within and beyond boarders. *"Are such concerns pertinent to community resilience talk?"*

Lederach makes an important point on the category, IDP—internally displaced people. The category, "…metaphorically provides much more than a useful way to count demographic numbers. At one level "internally displaced people" connotes the literal "loss of place, the physical experience of being forced out of their homes and off their land". At another level "beyond words to express it, *displaced* connotes the *lived* experience of feelin*g lost inside*. It is a paradoxical experience".

Displacement with or without violence not only creates forced "human mobility" but also imposes a severe semiotic disturbance, causing the disruption of the meaning structures of

people. Loss of meaning is the flipside of loss of place. I see Lederach's exploration of image and metaphor as a kind of semiotic analysis. A thematic question tabled before the seminar is of semiotic character: "*How do different cultures around the world define successful, healthy communities?"*

In Kenya early this year, the post-election violence displaced around 350,000 people and left over 1,200 dead around the country. The violence ensued after the announcement of the disputed Presidential election results on 30th December 2007 and settled on 28th of February 2008, when the two rival political parties signed a National Accord and Reconciliation Act. It was the outcome of a mediation process overseen by a Panel of Eminent African personalities, headed by Koffi Annan, former UN Secretary General.

IDPs— around 350,000 and over1,200 dead. Rape of women, extra-judicial killings by the police and the army, looting and burning of property, the deployment of militias, are the stark indicators of *social vulnerability* of the Kenyan divisive multi-ethnic State which was at the brink of failure, and of the crisis of Kenyan social order, both public and civic. Ultimately, the Kenyan social crisis is rooted in the concentration of *well-being*, *wealth* and *power*. Without their dispersion, the crisis is likely to persist. What would it take for the Kenyan social system to: recover, reconstruct, reconcile, adapt to the post-election reality, self-organize, learn lessons, impart justice and so on. *Are these kinds of questions relevant for community resilience discourse?*

The National Accord required, among other things, the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry on Post-Election Violence (CIPEV), and a Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC), to address the historical and post-election gross violations of human

rights, among other things from December 1963 to February 2008. CIPEV, referred to as the 'Waki Commission' has recommended the establishment of a tribunal to be known as the 'Special Tribunal for Kenya' set up as a court, to investigate a list containing names and relevant information on suspects. In the event the tribunal is not set up through a statute by a given deadline, then the list and information on the suspects will be forwarded to the Special Prosecutor at the International Criminal Court (ICC). This has become a source of panic within the political class, which considers it a threat to peace and stability.

Sustainability versus resilience

Gross in her paper, asks us to consider a surprising, and for her an unanticipated question. "Can sustainability standup to the pressures exerted by globalization or is it time to jettison the notion and replace it with models in pursuit of resilience?"

Concepts are both descriptive and prescriptive. My minimal understanding of sustainability as a descriptive concept is that it is a 'kind of long-term maintenance of a system by itself'; and of resilience is a 'kind of adaptation of a system to perturbation, by absorption, learning, recovery, self-organization and by continuing to develop'.

I equate sustainability as a prescriptive concept with Sustainable Development (SD), which as a convention is conceptually broken down into three constituent parts: environmental sustainability, social sustainability and economic sustainability. Technical sustainability is not made explicit and manifests as 'green' technology (designed with nature), in contrast to 'dirty' technology (designed against nature), and 'clean' technology (neutral to nature). (Vanderburg. 2000).

SD is institutionalized as a governing norm. SD is "the compromise of liberal environmentalism". (Bernstein. 2000). His use of the term liberal means the favoring of "market-oriented public policy to resolve global and political problems" and a rejection of the perspective of Keynsian economics. A question that Bernstein poses is: why did the idea of sustainable development become institutionalized, while alternatives such as 'ecodevelopment' fell by the wayside? He argues that "ideas that become institutionalized as governing norms must find some 'fitness' with existing international social structure". It is not surprising that sustainable development is not at complete odds with economic globalization.

How can the idea of resilience find some 'fitness' with existing international social structure? This question is somewhat similar to another question tabled before the seminar, *"How can governance structures and policies etc…"?*

Gross in her conclusions, makes the point that "In the North, institutional stasis characterized by an inability to absorb new ideas presents challenges to sustainability. In the South, the lack of institutional stability can prevent successful implementation…" Reinvigorating norm change is a struggle that ought to be undertaken.

Second, I would like to share the approach I adopt to understand real world complexity and to view social phenomena, including community resiliency.

Systemic approach

According to an eminent philosopher of science, "social wholes can be looked upon as indecomposable wholes (holism), as aggregates of autonomous individuals (individualism), or as systems of interrelated individuals (systemetism), (Bunge, 1999, 2004).

My approach to understanding real world complexity is inspired by the systemetist worldview as elaborated by Bunge, 'this is the view that everything is either a system or a component of some system—where a system of course is a complex object whose parts are held together by bonds of one or more kind'. The opposite of the systemic approach is the sectoral approach, which views wholes as aggregates of autonomous entities.

Systemetism includes both individualism or atomism (by taking composition into account) and holism or collectivism (by emphasizing structure and organization). Both individualism and holism as Bunge emphasizes ignore the natural and social environment, as well as the mechanisms that make a system tick.

Concrete systems

Bunge distinguishes five basic types of system: natural, social, technical, semiotic and conceptual. The first four are concrete systems, that is, they are "… a bundle of real things held together by some bonds or forces, behaving as a unit in some respects, and (except for the universe as a whole) embedded in some environment." (Ibid 1999). He cautions that systems are sometimes called "structures", a misnomer because every structure is a property and not a thing, and elucidates that a concrete system may be analyzed into its composition—collection of parts, environment, structure and mechanisms. The four systems intertwine and interact in seamless web (see fig. 1). A synthesis of their self-interactions equals six relationships: natural-social, natural-technical, natural-semiotic, social-technical, social-semiotic and semiotic-technical (see fig. 2).

"Community" is a part of a social system that constitutes its social context—historical and contemporaneous. What kind of approach to adopt: systemic or sectoral (atomistic), to explore "revitalizing community within and across boundaries" and "to articulate and to

support global conflict transformation and reconciliation in communities throughout the world". I think the kind of approach is a key question for the seminar to deliberate.

Third, I would like to introduce a matrix, simply a tool to think about the complex interactions between concrete systems and their characteristics.

Concrete systems and characteristics matrix

The matrix depicts the interactions between the types of concrete systems—natural, social, semiotic and technical and the kinds of characteristics such as: perturbation, equilibrium, resilience, redundancy, vulnerability, sustainability, emergence and so on. (see fig. 3). This is an illustrative and not a complete list. It is also important to understand the self-interactions of the characteristics themselves.

The use of the terms and terminology to describe such characteristics are more common in systems oriented studies than in social studies. Developing a common understanding of the terms would be a challenge. My minimal understanding of the characteristics is as follows:

Perturbation: A kind of unexpected or forced change impacting a system. This can result in a shift to a new state, an immediate return to an old one or a long transient in one or the other. (turbulent and changing times).

Resilience: A kind of adaptation of a system to perturbation, by absorption, learning, recovery, self-organization and by continuing to develop.

Equilibrium: A kind of balance among the interdependent parts of a system.

Redundancy: A kind of diverse coping by a system that maintains its continued functioning, when a part or parts of the system are impacted.

Vulnerability: A kind of propensity of a system to suffer harm from perturbation. Often denoted the antonym of resilience.

Sustainability: A kind of long-term maintenance of a system by itself.

Emergence: A kind of a qualitative novelty appearing in a system.

The knowledge of characteristics themselves and their interactions is equally important, particularly the one-to-many relationship of resilience to the rest of the characteristics (see fig. 4). Here is an analytic insight into social redundancy and social resilience relation.

"In the social sphere, social resilience assumes a certain amount of redundancy. Traditionally, the redundancy was created through family ties. People were cared for by their extended family when in need (e.g. disaster, illness, old age). With the phenomenon of migration to more urban areas, that system of social resilience cannot always provide support. In these situations the creation of redundancy is expected of the central or local government which is supposed to take care of the citizens and residents when they cannot care for themselves". (Sapirstein. pdf)

I hope these reflections will be of use to the seminar.

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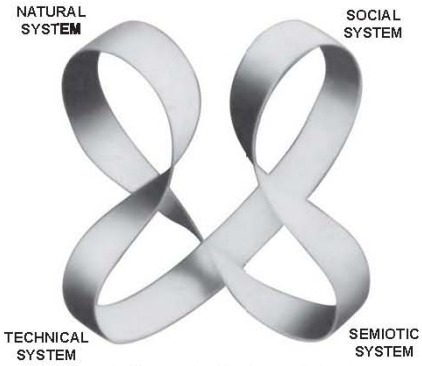

Fig. 1: Concrete Systems Tetrad

Tetrad graphic taken from: McLuhan, M & Powers, B (1989). The Global Village. Oxford University Press.

MINIMAL DESCRIPTION OF SYSTEMS CHARACTERISTICS

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CONCRETE SYSTEMS[1] / SYSTEMS CHARACTERISTICS	NATURAL SYSTEM (Earth-Space)	SOCIAL SYSTEM (Social Culture)	TECHNICAL SYSTEM (Material Culture)	SEMIOTIC SYSTEM (Sign Culture)	
PERTURBATION Kind of unexpected change	Natural Perturbation	Social Perturbation	Technical Perturbation	Semiotic Perturbation	SIGNIFYING ORDER[2] (Network of meaning structures in a culture)
EQUILIBRIUM Kind of balance		Social Equilibrium			
RESILIENCE Kind of adaptation		Social Resilience			
REDUNDANCY Kind of diverse coping		Social Redundancy			
VULNERABILITY Kind of propensity		Social Vulnerability			
SUSTAINABILITY Kind of long-term maintenance		Social Sustainability			
EMERGENCE Kind of qualitative novelty		Social Emergence			

Fig. 2: Concrete Systems and Characteristics Interaction Matrix

1. Concrete Systems concept taken from: Bunge, M (1999). The sociology-philosophy connection. Transaction Publishers.
2. Signifying Order concept taken from: Danesi, M (2002). Understanding media semiotics. Arnold Publishers.

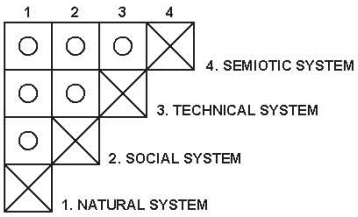

Fig. 3: Concrete Systems Self-interaction Matrix

INTERACTIONS: Natural-Social
Natural-Technical
Natural-Semiotic
Social-Semiotic
Semiotic-Technical

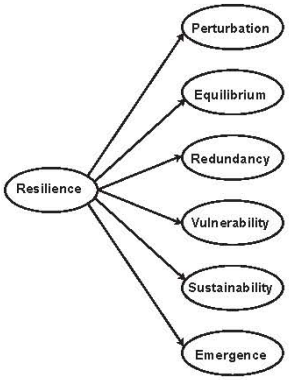

Fig. 4. Resilience and other systems characteristics (one-to-many relation)