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Resilient communities? Experiences of risk and resilience in a time of austerity

Abstract

The recent floods in the UK underlined the importance of community resilience, however we know little about the extent to which people are prepared for different emergencies and often their resilience (or lack of) is only revealed post-event. This paper draws on empirical evidence from a case study of Swansea, South Wales, which explored everyday experiences and understandings of resilience and risk, and considers how the broader context of austerity shapes community resilience to disasters and crisis. It suggests that austerity measures function to undermine and dismantle collective institutions of social protection, and to limit the capacity of different government departments to tackle key risks, as well as contributing to the proliferation of risks in people's everyday lives. In this sense, austerity can be seen to undermine resilience whilst also contributing to increasing vulnerability. At the same time, participants' accounts outline some of the difficulties faced in engaging the public in thinking about and preparing for different kinds of risk. It is suggested that there is a need to address these engagement issues as well as to acknowledge the relationship between community resilience and broader questions of social, economic and environmental security.

1. Introduction

The recent severe flooding which affected areas across the UK has intensified interest in the resilience of local communities, in the sense of their ability to "resist, absorb, accommodate *to and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner"* whilst preserving *"essential basic structures and functions*" (UNISDR 2007: 4). But often the resilience (or otherwise) of communities is only revealed post hoc, and we know little about what factors shape the distribution of resilience, or to what extent people are aware of or prepared for different kinds of risk. The UK government's community resilience agenda focuses primarily on geographical communities (i.e. neighbourhoods) as the "most obvious *choice and…primary beneficiary"* of this aspect of emergency planning policy (NSFC 2011: 12), which involves encouraging the public to develop their capacity to "help themselves in *an emergency"* (Cabinet Office 2011: 4) and to "*[take] responsibility for their own…* recovery" (Cabinet Office 2011: 7). As such, it forms part of a broader shifting of responsibilities to local levels and attempts to encourage individual and collective self-sufficiency amongst the public. However, so far there is a lack of evidence about the extent to which this resilience agenda has been taken up — or indeed noticed — by the public, or how it is shaped by the broader context of austerity. The effect of welfare cuts and state retrenchment has been to push the everyday lives of many into chronic crisis, involving routine reliance on emergency measures such as food banks (Lambie-Mumford 2013) and payday loans (Rowlingson et al. 2016). At the same time, cuts to public spending and government departments have led to numerous plans and projects to manage or mitigate risks – such as flood defences - being postponed or cancelled. Questions are raised about how cumulative experiences of different kinds of crisis and insecurity, alongside the dismantling of collective institutions of social security, might affect resilience at community levels. How

do people prioritise what risks to engage with or prepare for, and how do increased levels of vulnerability affect people's capacity and inclination to develop their resilience? What interrelationships exist between different kinds of social, economic and physical risk, and what are the implications of these relationships?

This paper explores these issues using evidence from case study research which explored experiences and perceptions of risk and resilience in Swansea, South Wales. It outlines the issues and problems local residents and stakeholders felt were most pressing, the strategies they had for dealing with or preparing for them, and their sense of what might facilitate or undermine their resilience in the face of different kinds of threat. Participants' accounts suggest that experiences of chronic crisis – particularly those relating to social and economic risks – tend to focus people on survival in the present rather than on preparing for future challenges. Furthermore, the variability of people's understanding and awareness of risks and their impact, and of appropriate responses, is demonstrated. The paper suggests that the current political programme of austerity plays a significant role in helping to catalyse and intensify downward social and economic trajectories, whilst leaving little to support people to tackle and prepare for the range of risks they face. As such, it is suggested that in UK emergency planning policy, resilience functions primarily as an "aspirational rhetorical *device"* (Leitch & Bohensky 2014: 14), and the paper concludes that developing resilience to disasters and emergencies is unlikely to be successful without a broader commitment to collective social, economic and environmental security.

2. **Policy background**

Community resilience is frequently framed within the context of emergency planning and preparation across areas such as international development and poverty reduction, and in multilateral initiatives for disaster reduction. Most countries' emergency planning strategies

refer to resilience, and there are a number of multilateral initiatives and agreements which address resilience to disasters and emergencies (e.g. see UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015 and the Yokohama Strategy 1994). Within the UK, the development of the community resilience agenda can be located amongst a number of shifts in policy approaches to emergencies, disasters and security threats over recent decades. Driving these policy developments have been a number of different factors, including attempts to reduce public spending, changes in the types of threat facing the UK, and broader reconfigurations of the roles of citizens, state, and other agencies and organisations. During the late twentieth century, the role of citizens in matters of national security changed from the collectivised, participatory approaches epitomised by the Civil Defence Corps (disbanded in 1968), to a focus on individual, household level 'containment' as seen in the Protect and Survive campaign of the 1980s (Stafford 2012). The Labour government introduced new legislative frameworks for emergencies during the 2000s, following a range of disasters occurring from the mid-1990s onwards, including terrorist attacks, severe weather, outbreaks of Foot and Mouth disease, and flu pandemics. This legislation involved new definitions of emergencies and the various duties of different bodies to prevent and respond to them, and brought together all forms of military and non-military emergencies under the Civil Contingencies Act (2004). These different aspects of emergency planning are framed within the broader concept of Integrated Emergency Management (IEM), a "*holistic approach*" which emphasises the outcomes or consequences of emergencies rather than their causes (Cabinet Office 2013).

Whilst overall responsibility for prevention and management of risks has remained with the government, responsibility for civil protection is devolved and diffused throughout networks of partner organisations. For example, the Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has overall responsibility for flood risks and supplies funding for flood-

related projects through grants to the Environment Agency and local authorities, whilst other organisations directly involved in flood management include highway authorities, water companies, regional flood and coastal committees, and the Department for Communities and Local Government. New bodies like the National Pandemic Flu Service have been set up to deal with particular kinds of emergency. Local authorities, NHS bodies, and emergency services are now *"subject to the full set of civil protection duties"* (Cabinet Office 2013), and along with Local Resilience Forums play a central role in disseminating information and raising awareness. The localisation of emergency planning is to some extent based on the idea that "*emergencies are…inherently local…[and] occur in a particular place and point in time*" (Schafer et al. 2008). However, community resilience also links into broader trends towards the local as a site of distributed governance, in which localities and citizens are increasingly looked to for solutions to social problems (Coaffee 2013). As will be discussed, there is a limited engagement with how local patterns of risk and resilience are shaped by factors operating at different spatial scales and at different levels of governance, and are distributed unequally across different groups and different places.

No dedicated funding is made available for the community resilience programme, which focuses primarily on sharing information, advice and good practice. The government's main role in promoting community resilience is to "remove the barriers to [public] engagement" (Cabinet Office 2011), and to provide information about risks through the regularly updated National Risk Register (NRR). The most recent register was produced in 2015, when it was updated to include new risks including 'poor quality air events'. The register outlines risks in two categories of natural hazards (including human diseases, flooding, wildfires, and severe weather) and major accidents (industrial accidents, electricity failures, transport, disruptive industrial action, unconventional terrorism, and cyber security). Notably, the NRR excludes social and economic risks whilst in other registers these are included, for example Finland's

risk register includes "*serious disturbance in the functioning of the economy*" and events which might affect people's income security (Crisis & Risk Network 2008: 12). Similarly, the World Economic Forum's Global Risk Report (2016) includes – and ranks highly – risks including fiscal crisis, structurally high unemployment/ underemployment, and failure of major financial institutions, alongside physical and security risks. As will be discussed, the omission of different kinds of risk from the NRR helps to obscure the interrelationship between different risks as well as, perhaps, to reflect government priorities for action. The government also provides online case studies of community resilience activities as a means of sharing existing good practice. These include advice on setting up emergency action groups, flood committees, neighbourhood snow clearing policies and volunteer emergency warden programmes.

The responsibilities of citizens are outlined in the National Strategic Framework on Community Resilience (Cabinet Office 2011). It is hoped that the public will inform themselves about risks and take appropriate action to prepare for them, with resilient communities understood as those who are able to "adapt their everyday skills and use them in extraordinary circumstances" (Cabinet Office, 2011: 15). There is also, however, seen to be a need to work with people "to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to become better prepared for, more resilient to, and better placed to recover from emergencies" (Cabinet Office, 2015). There is some acknowledgement of how resilience might vary according to characteristics such as "health [and] financial stability" (Cabinet Office 2011: 11), as well as to the places where people live. It is also acknowledged that certain forms of crisis, such as climate change and extreme weather, might "disproportionately affect the most *vulnerable…such as older people, low income groups and those with multiple health problems*" (HM Government, 2013: 50). The suggested solution is to target particular kinds of support at vulnerable groups, and to gather information from relevant organisations about

who is vulnerable and where they are located. This kind of 'special treatment' of vulnerable groups can be seen to "detract attention from the structural forces that disadvantage people" as well as to illustrate that those not classed as vulnerable are seen as autonomous, 'capable' individuals, able to take on the responsibility of increasing their self-sufficiency (Brown, 2015: 64; Harrison 2013).

Of course, the drive to enhance community resilience (as part of a broader emergency planning approach) has unfolded against a background of austerity politics which influence community resilience at a number of different levels (Harrison 2013). There have been large cuts in spending to government departments and local authorities, involving the loss of 631,000 public sector jobs – largely outside of London – since 2010 (SPERI 2015: 2). The largest departmental spending cuts have been made to the DEFRA budget, leading to a significant decrease in funding for issues like "wildlife conservation, air quality and water *pollution"* (Howard 2015), and the dropping/postponement of some major planned flood defence projects (National Audit Office 2014). For example, this includes the repeated postponement since 2011 of a flood defence improvement project in Kendal, Cumbria, a town badly affected by the storms of 2015 (Carringon & Khomami 2015). The resilience of local authorities is seen to be undermined by funding cuts (Hastings et al. 2013), with the recent floods bringing their financial struggles into sharp focus as well as placing extra demands on their limited funds (Vize 2014). Notably, local recovery efforts were helped in Leeds by IsraAID, an Israeli humanitarian aid organisation.

Third sector organisations, which "play an important role" in civil protection through supporting statutory agencies (Cabinet Office 2013b), have also been affected by austerity measures, albeit unevenly across different geographical locations and different types of organisation. Again, reductions in income and funding are perhaps the most pressing issues, although it has been suggested that the third sector is facing more "broadly a foundational

crisis around its very role and purpose" (Dayson & Wells 2013: 97). As with local authorities, the third sector is described as "a sector whose resilience is being severely tested" (Jones et al. 2015). At individual and household levels, welfare reforms have had widespread effects, including rising levels of debt, increasing use of food banks, fuel poverty, and deterioration in health (Northern Housing Consortium 2015; Trussell Trust 2016). The welfare cuts have fallen disproportionately on particular groups, including disabled people, ethnic minorities and women (UNISON 2014).

Hence austerity contributes to the dismantling and 'residualisation' of collective institutions of social protection, and places increasing pressure on organisations that play important roles in community resilience. At the same time, it contributes to the increase in the volume and intensity of stresses and crises that people must deal with in their everyday lives, reducing the availability of safety nets and limiting the access of certain groups to key resources. The following section explores how these effects are felt in people's everyday lives, and how they negotiate and experience the risks they face within the context of austerity.

3. Background to the research

3.1   About the research

The fieldwork on which this paper is based was carried out in Swansea, South Wales, over a twelve month period from May 2013 – May 2014. Using a case study approach, this small-scale project explored the concept of resilience with participants by talking to them about their understanding and experiences of resilience, and about the potential risks that faced them and others living in the local area, currently and in the future. We also spoke to professionals working in relevant fields, such as in emergency planning roles. Over a twelve month fieldwork period, we used different methods to engage with local people including:

- Interviews with 12 local stakeholders[1] (including representatives of local public, private and third sector organisations; local faith leaders; local officials; and local elected representatives; people involved in emergency planning);

- Ethnographic activities (a total of fifteen visits) at different local events and locations, primarily those relating to consultation events for a proposed renewable energy development. The ethnographic research included short interviews with local people, of which two were followed up as in-depth interviews;

- Four focus groups, including one with a Carers Transition group (a group of parent carers of disabled children facilitated by the local carers centre), and three with people working for the local authority in Swansea

Details of how the sources of data are indicated in this paper are provided in Appendix 1.

3.2   The case study area

Located on the South West coast of Wales, Swansea is Wales' second largest city with an estimated population of 240,300 (City and County of Swansea website 2015). 18 of Swansea's 148 Lower Super Output Areas are in the most deprived 10% in Wales, although several are amongst the least deprived (Welsh Government 2015). Inequalities between different areas are highlighted by the 12 year life expectancy and 23 year healthy life expectancy difference between men living in the most and least deprived areas of Swansea (UK Healthy Cities Network 2016), although these differences are less pronounced for women. 92% of the population of Swansea is from a White British background, which is slightly lower than Wales as a whole (93%), but much higher than in England (83%). The second most populous ethnic group in Swansea is "White Other" at 2% (City and County of Swansea website 2015).

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[1] Most of the stakeholders involved were also local residents

The local area has a strong industrial history, largely focused around primary industries including metal, petrochemical and coal production, but has experienced industrial decline over many years. Once known for its derelict and polluted landscape, left as a legacy of departed local industries (Barr 1969), the local area was much improved through intensive efforts made under the auspices of the Lower Swansea Valley project[2]. Many local beaches have since been awarded Blue Flags, and the wider area is popular with tourists, whilst local residents spoke of their enjoyment of outdoor activities like fishing, cycling, walking, swimming and surfing. Some industry remains, including the steelworks in nearby Port Talbot which continues to be a major source of local employment. However, the numbers of people employed there fell from over 15,000 in the late 1960s to just over 3,000 by 2011 (Parry 2011: 300), whilst at the time of writing, the future of the steelworks is in question (BBC News online 2016). From the 1970s onwards, service sector growth in South Wales was concentrated in Swansea which saw an increase in employment in areas including finance, leisure, retail, health and education (Charles et al. 2008). A large majority of people in Swansea currently work in the service sector and relatively high numbers work in public sector jobs, whilst major local employers include Amazon, Virgin Media, 3MUK, Unilever and BT. Since 2008, the employment rate has been below the Welsh average, and Swansea residents also have below average gross disposable income per head and below average full-time wages (Welsh Government 2014). The local authority has over recent years had to absorb large cuts to its funding, with £50 million saved since 2013 and a further £36 million of savings to be made in 2016-17, placing a further 640 jobs at risk (South Wales Evening Post 2015).

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[2] The Lower Swansea Valley project was established in 1961, and involved partnership working amongst the (then) University College of Swansea, the Ministry of Housing, the Local Government and the Swansea Borough Council in surveying and reclaiming the land.

4. Risk

The current local risk register covers Swansea, Neath and Port Talbot. In terms of industrial accidents, the register mentions several local COMAH[3] sites, and 23 Major Accident Hazard pipelines, and suggests "there are many smaller sites which could have a significant impact within our community", although it is also mentioned that "Neath, Port Talbot and Swansea are not considered to be more at risk than any other parts of the country" (Joint Resilience Unit 2015: 8). Other risks mentioned include transport (covering rail, road, sea and air accidents and events); flooding (including coastal, river and surface); severe weather; and fuel shortages. These industrial risks mentioned in the local register were only referred to by participants who were employed in emergency planning related roles. However, they suggested that members of the public who lived near to COMAH sites tended to be aware of the risks, which were well-publicised amongst affected communities. Threats such as potential terrorist attacks or disease pandemics were also mentioned very rarely, whilst environmental risks such as extreme weather or climate change were referred to more frequently, although not everyone was sure about how these issues would affect people living locally. Those with greater levels of knowledge referred to the impact of changes in the sea level on the local area, and how changes in weather patterns might affect local tourism. Several people suggested that flooding was not particularly relevant to the locality, although this was contradicted by emergency planning professionals and the local risk register. Our focus group participants frequently mentioned concerns about their individual futures, particularly in relation to their health. Two people mentioned that they worried about "dying alone" or being unable to access care in their old age (FGb). A local Methodist minister suggested that health concerns tended to be universal as "poor health is probably, *realistically, the thing which nobbles most people*" (SH6). Whilst health concerns are

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[3] Control of Major Accident Hazards

perhaps understandable, the ways in which they were expressed tended to highlight people's concerns about the availability of systems of care and support. In particular, the Carers Transition group talked about their concerns for their children's future in terms of access to services.

There was some debate within one of the focus groups about the relative importance of 'social' or 'physical' risks. One participant, who worked with low-income families suggested that people were most concerned about "not having enough money, or being viewed in a particular way, as opposed to some big tidal wave comi*ng in*" (FGb6). However another participant (FGb5), who worked in emergency planning, stated that physical risks were more pressing than social risks, which he felt were being overemphasised amongst the group. There was a noticeable struggle between these two perspectives in terms of the relative emphasis placed on different kinds of risk. Ultimately, these two participants agreed that "*risk is very subjective*", and to some extent "*a question of perception*". Overall, however, there tended to be an emphasis on the social and economic problems which faced people living locally. Many participants spoke about the negative impact of welfare reforms, in particular benefits sanctions imposed on claimants, and cuts to public services. There was also frequent reference made to the fact that the area, whilst including several well-off neighbourhoods, was characterised by pockets of significant poverty. As one local resident put it, "people in Swansea are skint" (LR1). Numerous references were made to the empty shops in the centre of town in which "the only new shops are pawnbrokers" (SH8), and a local Fair Credit coalition reported to us their fears that disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Swansea were being targeted by high-interest lenders. Participants reported that there had been a significant rise in the use of food banks locally, with the biggest rise being amongst those experiencing in-work poverty.

The predominance of service sector work in Swansea, usually characterised by low pay and precarious conditions, was seen as problematic:

*We need to have jobs that have got a living wage…and not zero hour contracts, or part-*time, *or "You can come today, but perhaps I won't want you tomorrow". Those are the jobs that* are out there for people with low skills. Or even skilled people sometimes! (FGb9)

Concerns were also expressed about the security of people's employment in other sectors, which was underlined by the fact that at the time of the research many of the research participants employed by the local authority were facing possible redundancy:

"*At the moment it's about who's in and who's out…*but for the younger members amongst us *who aren't approaching retirement, it's* also about how is this going to continue from now on? Is it a career or a*m I going to be looking for something else?"* (FGb10)

Others spoke about their fears that there might be future job losses at the steelworks in Port Talbot, which since has become a much more pressing reality.

The decline of traditional industries locally was seen to have had widespread social, as well as economic, effects, with work having historically played an important role in providing a shared sense of identity and a commonality of experience amongst local people. One participant noted that industry-related identities often lingered within certain neighbourhoods, whilst "*if they have a newer industry they don't refer to that"* (SH3), and others mentioned that it was frequently necessary for people to move away to find better or more appropriate work. This was seen to have a negative effect on the stability and cohesion of the local population. A strong sense of community and associated traditions of mutual aid was seen as a key asset of many local neighbourhoods which people felt needed to be protected against the destabilising effects of economic and demographic change. Primarily, concerns tended to

focus on the social, cultural, physical and economic effects resulting from the influx of large numbers of students into locations near to universities, usually referred to as 'studentification'.

It was frequently suggested that the public lacked awareness and understanding of key risks. For example, the local minister suggested that his parishioners tended to misunderstand the impact of climate change, whilst a local port official suggested that people lacked knowledge of current affairs and *"world events"* (SH10) and were less aware than they might be of potential risks. Awareness was sometimes related to familiarity, for example participants suggested that they might prioritise or be more concerned about risks they have already experienced:

If somebody said "Come and learn about floods" I'd probably be like, "Well, why would I?" I wouldn't really relate to that, because no flooding's happened to me, so it's not really real, do you know what I mean? (FGb10)

However, the prioritising of risks was also seen to reflect "the needs of the actual individual at that time" (FGb11), meaning that addressing an existing crisis, for example a lack of money to buy food, would be understood as more pressing than preparing for potential future scenarios. Or, as another person put it, *"to be fair, some people are just about surviving"* (FGb8). The idea that there are only so many issues to which people can devote their time and energy was echoed by the parent carers, one of whom stated that they had "much closer *things to worry about"* (FGd4) than potential crises such as terrorism or climate change. Similarly, one local resident suggested that climate change was too distant to be of relevance to them, saying *"You tend to think, 'Ah, fuck it, I'll be dead anyway' (LR2)"*.

In discussions of how risks were distributed across different groups and different areas it was frequently emphasised by participants that Swansea is "a very unequal city" (SH2), meaning

that the extent to which local people were affected by many of the risks discussed varied considerably, both within and between different communities. Many of the participants felt that poorer people were generally more exposed to a greater range of risks, whilst the Carers Transition group drew attention to the specific difficulties associated with experiences of disability and of caring roles. Physical risks were more likely than social risks to be understood as shared amongst and to some extent particular to geographical communities, for example on the basis of proximity to industrial sites or areas liable to flooding. However, it was also suggested that physical risks have "different impacts on different people and different communities within communities if that makes sense" (FGb2). Furthermore, it was seen to be difficult to delineate boundaries in terms of where the impact of crises might be felt, and it was suggested that crises within one community often had effects in other communities, for example one participant referred to a large fire which had "affected lots of villages for a long time afterwards" (FGb7). Emergency planning professionals agreed that there was potential for incidents at industrial sites to affect a broad geographical area, and that damage to key infrastructure in particular locations would also have effects across the area. The interdependence of different communities was also highlighted by the idea that crises in one location can lead to those affected requiring access to support or services in other areas.

5. Resilience

A fairly high proportion of participants had not come across the term 'community resilience' before. For those who were not familiar with the concept of resilience, a broad definition was provided which explained community resilience as the capacity of social groups to bounce back from disaster, but also to adapt to or anticipate change. For those who were familiar with the term, community resilience was often understood to refer to an internal capacity of communities "*to overcome adversities*", or to survive "to continue, to go on, no matter what

actually happens" (SH1). Others suggested it might be understood "in terms of the ability of *communities to react positively to change and to adapt"* (SH6). However, in one of the local authority focus groups, there was also discussion of how resilience might refer to external factors, such as "the way society treats different *individuals or community groups"* (FGb8) with one person specifically referring to the government's treatment of young people. Participants who worked in emergency planning roles tended to speak about resilience in terms of "*the geographic and demographic interactions of the community"* (FGb2), reflecting the kind of socio-ecological systems discourse of resilience commonly found in the physical sciences. Several people also problematized the operationalisation of the concept of community in defining community resilience. It was suggested that there was "no single *definition"* (FGa2) that could be used, and that communities might be delineated along numerous different lines including through administrative categories like political wards; geographical boundaries or shared place; or shared exposure to risk.

Very few of the people we spoke to had made preparations for particular emergencies, although some spoke about minor preparations they had made, such as ensuring that they had easy access to torches and candles for power cuts, and people tended to agree that it was sensible to put an emergency plan in place. Only one participant had made more extensive preparations, and she seemed to feel a little embarrassed about her concern:

You're looking at someone who has a shoebox full of masks under the stairs! (laughs) And gloves…for avian flu. I mean, I do think it's excessive, but I did it because it was a small price to sleep at night. And I was worried about avian flu, and I thought "What would I be worried about, what do I have control over? I'll make sure I have the equipment and tools there ready for the sake of £10 and a shoebox under the stairs, that's job done and I can move on" (FGa1).

Making these preparations seemed to have assuaged her anxiety, although she stated that "in *reality I know it would do very little*". The difficulty of making generic preparations for emergencies was also highlighted due to the fact that what might enhance resilience to one risk might undermine resilience to another. For example, one person stated that:

I live on top of a hill, so when it's raining it doesn't bother me. But when it's snowing, I'm completely stuck! (FGb2).

Hence, not only did people find it difficult to know how prepared they should be, but also they were conscious of the fact that it was difficult to choose what kinds of preparation to make.

In terms of the resources which were understood to constitute community resilience, cohesion and 'community spirit' were most commonly mentioned. These were in turn seen to be positively contributed to by a level of stability in the local population, along with a "shared *sense of purpose"* and "*investment in your local area"* (SH6). One stakeholder spoke of how traditions of mutual support tended to have emerged out of necessity in certain neighbourhoods, due to a sense of abandonment and longitudinal experiences of hardship:

It comes from a culture of people having to look after their own. To a certain extent, that *spirit still continues…*It can happen anywhere, but particularly amongst those with experiences of difficulty in the past (SH3).

However, a distinction was made between resilience and people's ability to 'survive' or 'get by', with the latter understood to potentially entail downward trajectories rather than the maintaining of acceptable standards.

Although locally available sources of informal support were seen as important, one participant pointed out that having family and friends locally might undermine resilience in certain situations:

Because if all your family and friends are in a very small area *and there's an issue in that small area, you've put all your eggs in one basket to some extent. If you've got relationships* and family that are spread out, that are in a variety of circumstances and geographical *areas, then you've got more to draw on, haven't you?* (FGa1).

Technology, such as mobile phones and social networks like Facebook, was identified by several participants as an important resource for facilitating access to help from friends and family when it was needed, for example one participant stated that "If I was in London or *something and I missed the last train home, I'd just put "I'm stuck in London" on Facebook and I'd be able to sort out staying at someone's home*" (FGa3). For some, this kind of quick and easy access to support made them less concerned about making contingency plans or preparing for potential problems, as well as mitigating for a lack of informal support networks in their immediate locality. But also there was discussion in two of the focus groups about spontaneous and informal collective activities that went on during times of minor crisis such as heavy snowfall or other severe weather:

People jump out their cars and start to push…and people stand and talk. And people will check on elderly neighbours to make *sure they're OK* (FGa2).

Interestingly, it was mentioned fairly frequently that such activities took place regardless of the strength of connections between neighbours. One participant suggested that, "where I live a lot of the time people get on and do th*eir own thing, but when there's a need for* support or an accident, people pull together and feel the responsibility to do that (SH10).

Hence the implication is that – in the case study area at least – the provision of informal support does not always require a basis of meaningful or extensive interactions with others.

Several participants suggested that resilience has important material dimensions, for example relating to "*the security of knowing you're not in debt, and not worrying about bills*" (SH6). Others thought that it was related to people's level of education, meaning that they might feel able to demand what they needed in terms of services, support or other issues. In fact, participants' accounts often suggested that they felt a sense of powerlessness in terms of their ability to address the risks they were most concerned about, supporting the idea that the capacity to influence decisions was potentially an important dimension of resilience. For example, in the Carers Transition focus group, the members talked about the difficulties of battling with organisations and the local authority to try to ensure their child's needs were met. One in particular suggested they often felt *"worn out"* by these battles, whilst there was a clear sense that organisations and institutions could be unresponsive:

"Lots of people have the strength, the ability and the desire to do things. But you have to *fight to get heard. It's not about a lack of desire or ability*" (FGd4).

In one of the local authority focus groups, it was also suggested that there was a lack of trust of organisations associated with local and national government, and one participant stated that "*people feel let down by things like the job centres, like the benefits agencies*" (FGb10). It was generally felt that a lack of trust could cause difficulties for local authorities in particular to work effectively to tackle problems or support local resilience.

Several participants felt that local and central government had important roles to play in addressing risks and supporting local resilience. For some people, this related to a need to raise awareness and disseminate information more widely, with one person drawing reference to the Japanese model of emergency preparedness. Another participant talked about how,

during recent storms involving hurricane force winds, she had been surprised by the lack of information and guidance provided by the local council, and compared this situation with her experiences of living in Hong Kong, where there was "*a clear strategy for what to do*" (FGa2) in part because of the more regular occurrence of such events. Again the implication here is that preparations and plans are often made retroactively rather than proactively, by governments and local authorities, as well as by households.

But participants felt that the government's role in developing resilience at local levels should also include responsibilities to address social problems and economic decline within particular cities or regions, for example through vocational training or promoting fairer credit options such as Credit Unions.   There was a strong feeling that local and central government should be less 'paternalistic', and pay more attention to the needs and opinions of citizens, with the Carers Transition group in particular feeling that there was a need for participatory processes to be made more meaningful through, for example, providing more information to participants about issues and options, and greater clarity about how the input of citizens would be acted upon.   It was felt that corporations should also play a role in community resilience, for example there was discussion of how companies should be required to "put something back*"* into local communities beyond what was already required through planning gain or Corporate Social Responsibility. There were suggestions that this might usefully include money, training people for jobs, or the provision of better jobs, although participants also suggested that "it*'*s not just about throwing money *at communities"* and that "you have *to have a plan for how that's going to be used to benefit communities"* (FGb10). Again, this was seen to require understanding of and engagement with the needs and preferences of local people.

6. Discussion

Community resilience as an agenda is about bringing potential emergencies into people's everyday lives, actions and thought processes, and requires widespread public engagement, although it is by no means clear that this is happening. In this project, impacts and experiences of ongoing social and economic stresses dominated people's accounts of living in the local area, and there was evidence of a lack of awareness of key physical risks, as well as limited time and energy to engage with them. The finitude of the time, energy and resources that people have to allocate to different forms of stress and crisis was emphasised by many of the participants, and it is clear that people must necessarily prioritise certain problems above others. Hence, an increasingly pervasive sense and experience of insecurity and anxiety does not appear to have been particularly successful in helping people develop the 'art of living dangerously' (Evans & Reid 2014). Rather, it would seem that the proliferation of different challenges facing people in their everyday lives can act to limit people's capacity or inclination to engage with potential futures, with the dismantling and shrinking of collective institutions of welfare and social protection "piling up problems for the future" (NEF 2013: 5).

The prioritisation of physical and security risks in the government's emergency planning agenda does not seem to reflect the everyday priorities of the participants, whilst it also functions to obscure the interrelationships between different types of risk. Within the UK's emergency planning agenda, disasters and emergencies are treated as largely distinct from other aspects of policy, particularly welfare, despite the fairly widely accepted link between social protection and community resilience (Shaw et al. 2009; Deen 2015). Previous research has shown that emergencies tend to catalyse or intensify downward social and economic trajectories (Cutter et al. 2008; Cutter et al. 2014) and that the poorest groups tend to recover more slowly from disasters (Béné 2013; Deen 2015), whilst a lack of resilience has been

identified as a key dimension of the longitudinal experience of vulnerability (Emmel &

Hughes 2010). These ideas challenge the notion that resilience "like a muscle which, when

exercised, builds both strength and flexibility" (Wilding, 2011: 27), and supports the idea that

coping strategies can undermine resilience in the long term (Harrison 2013; Sen 1983). They

also emphasise that vulnerability, rather than being simply a 'technical category', is a

dynamic characteristic shaped by structural forces (Brown 2015), which can be exacerbated

by or addressed through policy measures. Hence the role of exogenous factors operating at

different levels of analysis in shaping community resilience in particular contexts needs to be

better understood and more widely acknowledged.

There is much to suggest that policy reform could support local resilience (Fankhauser et al.,

2013; Hillier & Castillo, 2013), and that developing resilience requires a greater coherence of

policy across different departments. However, more commonly, policy decisions taken in

one government department have undermined or worked against apparent efforts to develop

resilience in another. Furthermore, resilience policy and practice has often overemphasised

the autonomy and agency of citizens (Dagdeviren et al. 2016), and has focused on the

utilisation of existing resources rather than considering how resources might be more

equitably or usefully distributed. Community resilience activities at local levels suffer from a

lack of funding, which arguably limits the scope of what can be achieved as well as

potentially reinforcing a lack of resilience amongst the poorest groups who have fewer

material or financial resources to draw on in developing emergency plans. In Japan, grants

are provided to communities to support resilience activities, whilst the government also helps

to institutionalise informal community activities to ensure their sustainability (Shaw et al.

2016). In the UK, in contrast, there is almost a sense that the aspirational goal of resilience

can act as a justification for removing or limiting help from the state, in that by definition

resilience is understood to denote self-sufficiency and independence from formal sources of support.

The evidence from this research supports the idea that knowledge and interpretation of risk tends to be heavily mediated and subjective, shaped by past experiences as well as by cultural frameworks (Wilkinson in Mythen & Walklate 2006). The social, economic and historical context of the case study area can be seen to have shaped modes and patterns of resilience, as well as giving rise to particular configurations of risk. In particular, the relationship between industry, community and local identity was highlighted, particularly in terms of how these factors influenced local modes of resilience and traditions of mutual aid which had developed over time. In many places, changing patterns of work, residency and social engagement associated with broader processes of social and economic change have had wide-ranging impacts on people's everyday lives. In particular, there has been some degree of social fragmentation at neighbourhood levels, and a geographical decentring of social engagement and informal mechanisms of support in many cases (Wright 2015). These processes of change have the potential to disrupt collective mechanisms of resilience, although there is also evidence in this research that people are prepared to pull together regardless of the strength of existing ties. It is likely, however, that these kinds of spontaneous collaborative actions depend on "whether you think your neighbours or fellow citizens are a greater threat than the havoc wrought by a disaster or a greater good than the property in houses and *stores around you.*" (Solnit 2009: 58). Furthermore, as participants suggested, there are limitations to the usefulness of support networks which are solely focused on a particular geographical area. However, it is also likely that certain groups – particularly older and poorer people – remain more reliant on locally centred networks (Forrest & Kearns 2001). Whilst technology facilitates interaction across distances, of course help cannot always be provided remotely.

Evidence from this project also suggested that people's capacity and willingness to engage with risk is often somewhat limited. Participants' accounts of their engagement with risk demonstrate the difficulty of engaging people in thinking about phenomena which are in some sense "*both real and unreal*" (Beck 1992: 33). We might also suggest that engaging with risk can challenge people's sense of ontological security by requiring them to acknowledge "*the inevitability of their mortality*" (Van Marle & Maruna 2010: 9). However, as Mellor suggests:

It is not at all clear that most people go about their daily lives with any great sense of their ontological frailty (Mellor 2004: 53)

In fact, it has been suggested that some people prioritise ontological security over physical security (Harries 2008), preferring to remain in a sense 'blissfully ignorant'. Hence, a number of questions are raised about how to successfully engage the public in emergency preparation, and to what extent people are willing to think about, or capable of, preparing for crisis or change. In the US, the concept of the 'zombie apocalypse' has been used by the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to engage the public in emergency preparation. Public information campaigns using zombie imagery has encouraged the public to "Get a *kit, make a plan, and be informed*", based on the notion that survival skills are largely transferable meaning that, *"[i]f you're ready for a zombie apocalypse, then you're ready for any emergency"* (CDC 2011). Originally conceived as "tongue in cheek *campaign"*, the CDC claims it has been an effective means of engaging 'new audiences'. However, for Giroux (2010), the zombie apocalypse narrative encourages an individualised, zero-sum approach to emergencies, and reflects a broader dissent against ideas of social welfare. Indeed, this particular narrative seems to link into survivalist and 'prepper' style activities, rather than to collaborative, social modes of resilience, and clearly there needs to be consideration of how different narratives of resilience might give rise to different kinds of

response. However it is approached, though, it seems clear that public awareness of and engagement with risk is a key dimension of both individual and collective resilience, and it is likely that more needs to be done to raise awareness and to facilitate understanding of the different risks people face.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the context of austerity has contributed to a pervasive sense and experience of chronic crisis which diminishes people's capacity or inclination to plan for potential future emergencies. It has drawn attention towards some of the difficulties in engaging the public with risk and on the limitations that people face in developing appropriate individual or collective responses to potential emergencies. There is a tendency in the UK's community resilience agenda to overlook the bigger picture of how community resilience is shaped at different levels of analysis, or how risks are distributed amongst different groups living in different places, and there is a lack of meaningful support for communities wishing to develop emergency plans and procedures. This paper suggests that, in order to develop greater community resilience to emergencies, it will be necessary for localised activities to be properly resourced and for there to be a commitment from government, corporations and others to address social, economic and environmental risks on a broader level. In these ways, resilience can be built at all levels, rather than being a way of devolving further responsibility to tackle social problems to local levels.   Furthermore, there is a need to improve public engagement with risks and their potential solutions, whilst remaining mindful of the ways in which different discourses of risk and resilience might influence the ways in which people choose to make preparations.

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Appendix 1

The following abbreviations have been used in this paper to indicate the source of the data cited, and where relevant are followed by numbers to indicate different individuals:

FGa	Local Authority Focus Group 1
FGb	Local Authority Focus Group 2
FGc	Local Authority Focus Group 3
FGd	Carers Transition Focus Group
SH	Stakeholder Interview
LR	Local Resident Interview
EFN	Ethnographic Fieldnotes