Patterns in the Clouds: A Framework for Engaging with Resilience Thinking

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Researchers and practitioners who look to resilience thinking as a promising approach to societies’ most pressing problems are immediately faced with a significant challenge. We have inherited a disciplinary, reductionist intellectual tradition which leaves us poorly equipped to deal with the convergence in thinking and practice that resilience represents. Almost any sustainability challenge can legitimately draw on theory and practice from a range of otherwise divergent disciplines (e.g. management science, social science, history, philosophy, planning and ecology). Practically, this means that researchers and practitioners engaging with a project from a resilience perspective are often quickly swept beyond their area of expertise, and comfort. Researchers and practitioners are then placed in a bind. There is a strong incentive to look to resilience as a viable approach to challenging questions or problems, but an equal or stronger disincentive involved in having to revise their philosophical assumptions, theoretical paradigms, and methods. This is exacerbated by the wide range of disciplines involved (including their associated terminology), the lack of consensus on what resilience is, and the lack of consensus on how to incorporate it into practice.

In face of this challenge in our work, we have articulated a framework to help us make sense of the wide range of relevant philosophies, theories and tools. The framework rests on a fundamental shift in the research enterprise. Instead of exploring all of the implications or management possibilities of a particular theory using accepted disciplinary tools in a given context, the enterprise becomes one of using whatever intellectual tools are to hand to address a particular challenge. To do this, we focus on clusters of ideas to emphasise similarities, as opposed to distinctions, between the ideas. As new ideas are encountered, they can be incorporated into the clusters which in turn can be adjusted to fit the changing dynamics of the system of interest. For the purposes of our research we have identified three clusters of ideas around philosophy, theory and practice respectively. The first cluster, ‘pragmatism’ is a grouping of philosophies or world views. It is the idea that the value of a theory, approach or action is judged by its application in a given context by a given social group. Both the context and the group are dynamic. It provides a justification for action and a standard for evaluation. For the second cluster, we use the term ‘complexity’ to represent ideas that centre on an understanding of the world as an unpredictable and changing place. The third cluster of ‘learning by doing’ comprises tools and considerations for action. In an uncertain and changing world prescriptive approaches are of limited value. Consequently it is best to observe, plan, act and reflect simultaneously. Although this exercise sounds theoretical, our concern is to provide a framework that contributes practically to training and implementation. We illustrate these ideas with examples from our research in coastal zone management of Caribbean small island developing states.