

## **SPECIAL SECTION**

### **Guest editorial introduction:**

### **Critical reflections on governance and ‘resilience’ in small island contexts**

*Aideen M. Foley*

*Department of Geography*

*Birkbeck, University of London, United Kingdom*

[a.foley@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:a.foley@bbk.ac.uk)

and

*Stefano Moncada*

*Islands and Small States Institute*

*University of Malta, Malta*

[stefano.moncada@um.edu.mt](mailto:stefano.moncada@um.edu.mt)

**ABSTRACT:** Climate policy documents and national plans of small island states and subnational jurisdictions frequently reference the need for ‘resilience’. Yet, definitions of ‘resilience’ vary across disciplines, and depend on one’s cultural lens. Furthermore, climatic trends and events are often not the only challenges facing island communities; they occur alongside political, economic, social, and cultural change and events, giving rise to context-specific and interlinked vulnerabilities, which in turn require tailored and thoughtful solutions. This special section seeks to reflect on what the concept of ‘resilience’ means in island contexts, how it is deployed, and the dynamics of governance and decision making for ‘resilience’. Drawing on the papers in this special section, we suggest that there are several points of ‘creative tension’ in resilience discourse. Identifying the gaps between ‘resilience’ as currently conceptualised, and what could be, helps us move towards more equitable and just resilience.

**Keywords:** climate change, COVID-19, economy, resilience, small island states, sustainability

© 2021 – Islands and Small States Institute, University of Malta, Malta.

---

## **Introduction**

Countless times, we have read (and sometimes written) articles that opened by stating the climate change challenges facing small islands, and the need to build resilience to these changes. But it is becoming clear that ‘resilience’, like so much terminology before it, means different things in different contexts, and is not a panacea for the challenges (both climate and non-climate in nature) facing small island communities.

When compared to larger states, the tendency of many islands is to be excessively exposed to external shocks, over which they have little control (Briguglio, 1995), requiring islands to develop a prompt capacity for renewal, re-organisation and development (Folke, 2006; Briguglio et al., 2009). This is particularly true for economic shocks, such as contractions in the world’s trade flows, an excessive fluctuation of international prices, or limitations in the movement of people and goods. Islands are often at the receiving end of these negative events, with limited room for manoeuvring, unless a prior work focused on strengthening institutions and improving governance led to the ability of absorbing, and recovery from such shocks.

Some islands economies and societies have managed to withstand some of the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by making use of financial buffer mechanisms and participatory policy interventions, made possible by previous long-sighted attempts at consolidating public finances and building a cohesive and participatory social fabric (Cooke et al., 2021, in this special section). This highlights the potential of ‘policy-induced changes’ (Briguglio et al., 2009) in helping to foster long-lasting resilience, possibly tapping into people’s ‘resourcefulness’ (Baldacchino & Bertram, 2009) to pivot and respond to the unforeseen.

Climate change is another kind of shock, which may be felt as a range of gradual changes like sea level rise punctuated by extreme events like storm surges (Martin et al., 2018; Storlazzi et al., 2018), requiring responses on a range of spatial and temporal scales. Again, small islands, and especially Small Island Developing States (SIDS), are seen as disproportionately vulnerable to these hazards. Though far from homogeneous (Nurse et al., 2001) small island states tend to have a high concentration of people and assets in coastal zones, which, coupled with the aforementioned characteristics of small island economies and the reliance of many (but not all) small islands on climate-sensitive sectors like tourism, agriculture and fisheries, leaves small islands more exposed and more sensitive to climate hazard, with less adaptive capacity when compared to larger states (Thomas et al., 2020).

Kelman et al. (2016, p. S131) define ‘building resilience’ as: “The choices and processes of ensuring that society can deal with hazards and hazard drivers” while taking care not to conflate this with a ‘return to normal’ or ‘bouncing back’. These terms have been critiqued for implying the existence of some static state that communities should preserve, and may be used to endorse reversion to the status quo rather than reflection on the conditions that led to vulnerability to begin with. Resilience can also be associated to actions involving an added transformative component, with the intention of altering processes and convert structural elements (Pahl-Wostl, 2009), increasing quality of life in a given environment (Gallopín, 2006), to improve standards of living and livelihoods (Dodman et al., 2009), and to prepare and respond for a change (Lemos et al., 2013).

Building on the work of the Arctic Council, the IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C (2018, p. 557) defined resilience as:

The capacity of social, economic and environmental systems to cope with a hazardous event or trend or disturbance, responding or reorganizing in ways that maintain their essential function, identity and structure while also maintaining the capacity for adaptation, learning and transformation.

Aspects of this definition mimic the use of the term in psychology, where ‘resilience’ emerged in the 1970s as a term to describe individuals who, despite suffering trauma, function well in daily life (Luthar et al., 2015). But the term has come under criticism in that field, too, amid concerns that resilience has become the expected response to trauma, a form of ‘victim-blaming’, which diverts attention and resource from interventions that might prevent trauma from occurring in the first place (Masten & Obradović, 2006).

Similar critiques apply to the concept of climate resilience. An emphasis on resilience to climate hazards may be used to shift responsibility for dealing with them away from governments and onto individuals (Head, 2020). Learning to live with challenging weather is sometimes an integral part of community identity, as Butts and Adams (2020) found in the Outer Hebrides, but this can prevent communities from recognising the extent of the challenges

to come (Bowden et al., 2019). Resilient identities may also be called upon by political actors in a way that downplays risk by normalising it, negating the possibility that some climate risks can and should be reduced (Rickards et al., 2017). A focus on resilience can translate into reduced motivation to mitigate climate change (Ogunbode et al., 2019). For small island states and subnational jurisdictions, many of which have contributed minimally to the greenhouse gas emissions that cause climate change yet disproportionately bear the effect, 'resilience', then, is potentially a double-edged sword. Confronting these inequalities, the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) made effective use of moral framing when campaigning for the Paris Agreement to include an ambitious +1.5°C target (de Águeda Corneloup & Mol, 2014).

Resilience is also often based on the assumption that 'communities' will act in a unified way, overlooking individuals' agency (McDonnell, 2020). This may be especially counterproductive in small island contexts. 'Smallness' is sometimes assumed to close the gap between politicians and those they represent, and Cooke et al's paper on the Cook Islands' efforts to consult widely on their Economic Development Plan, including in remote areas, in this special section offers an example of this. But 'smallness' can also amplify conflict between local communities and national government over climate, environmental and sustainability challenges, risking an increase in inter- and intra-island conflict (Veenendaal, 2020).

Sustainable island futures will not be shaped by climate change alone, but also by economic, social, cultural, technological, political and environmental dynamics. This obliges a holistic view of what resilience could mean for small island states and subnational jurisdictions, and what tools or conditions are needed, across a raft of sectors and systems, to support this.

In November 2020, an online conference 'Researching resilience in islands' was organised by the NERC-funded SUNRISE (Situating UNderstanding of Resilience in Island Societies and Environments) project, a network of researchers interested in the experiences of island communities dealing with climate and sustainability issues and the complexities of what it means to 'build resilience' in these communities. This special section follows from that event. It seeks to shine a critical light on 'resilience' in island contexts, and the dynamics of governance and decision making for 'resilience'.

### **Contents of the Special Section**

Walshe & Foley (2021) reflect on what history can teach us about the long-term drivers of vulnerability and resilience in small island states and sub-national jurisdictions. Applying a decolonising lens, they trace the historical origins of problematic 'tropes' about small island units, and consider how historical sources and approaches can be applied in culturally sensitive ways to track long-term influences on vulnerability. Small island jurisdictions may lack the lengthy, quantitative datasets about climate impacts that are often valued in decision-making fora. So, the authors call on us to challenge assumptions about what data can be, and consider how to include not only historical archives but indigenous knowledge, binary knowledge, and more, in all levels of climate and environmental governance.

Kelman (2021) ponders the perils of formulating policy around terms that means different things to different stakeholders. Drawing on examples relating to waste, water, energy and climate change, he charts how the language of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) creates sustainability paradoxes in small states and territories. 'Resilience' is one of many identified buzz-words which jostle for decision-makers' attention and detract from the work to be done on the ground to realise communities' own visions of their desired futures. Kelman's

critique is not limited to small *island* states, highlighting a potential for learning that emerges by focusing on the parallels between small island states and other small jurisdictions.

Tandrayen-Ragoobur & Fauzel (2021) examine the complex linkages between climate change, environmental degradation, governance and economic growth across 19 SIDS. They find that climate change and environmental degradation deter economic growth, and that governance has a positive and significant impact on economic growth across the selected SIDS. The findings also confirm a bidirectional causal link between economic growth and governance and suggest that increasing growth leads to higher levels of pollution. They argue that policies, programmes, legal instruments, reforms and institutional interventions need to be designed in a holistic and coordinated manner among and within various institutions across SIDS, to improve governance and strengthen resilience. Like Kelman, they highlight the paradoxes of the sustainability agenda as currently expressed, where economic growth may enable the realisation of some SDGs (e.g. addressing poverty), while thwarting efforts on goals linked to promoting environmental health, unless a different route that moves away from growth and focuses on a new development paradigm is agreed upon.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also offered insights into what it means to be resilient or build resilience in islands. The economic shock is being seen on some islands as an opportunity for transformation, a stimulus for doing things differently. Cooke, Hayes, & Moncada (2021) highlight how smallness, often conceptualised as a barrier to resilience, comes with greater flexibility and adaptability which, in fact, promote economic resilience. But the Cook Islands' resilience to the pandemic was over a decade in the making, with substantial reforms in areas like public finance, business regulation, infrastructure, social protection and environmental management laying vital foundations that enabled the Cook Islands to respond effectively to the social and economic effects of the pandemic. The Cook Islands experiences suggest that a long-term and holistic approach to building resilience can bring dividends, without necessarily focusing on a specific anticipated hazard. This is potentially reassuring news for decision-makers concerned about the uncertainty attached with future climate change projections.

### **Resilience: More than just jargon**

For 'resilience' to become more than jargon we need to step back and, as Kelman suggests, reflect on the work to be done and if/how the concept of resilience can support that work. Drawing on the papers in this special section, we suggest several points of 'creative tension' in resilience discourse. These apply to all communities, and being mindful of these issues seems essential if the 'resilience' concept is to support equitable and sustainable futures:

- Being 'resilient' does not undo harm. Just resilience must involve minimising the climate impacts that vulnerable communities are compelled to be resilient to through climate mitigation, as well as acknowledging legacies and on-going processes of social and economic vulnerability related to past traumas.
- Though some definitions of resilience reference transformation, coping and maintaining continue to be foregrounded in the concept. Just resilience must involve supporting communities to not just cope with climate change and other exogenous shocks, but thrive irrespective of them, according to their own visions.
- A holistic approach is key. Resilience may be better framed as an emergent property of communities, rather than a thing that we 'build' in response to known or anticipated

stressors. Further research is required to look at all the possible factors that can nurture resilience, contextualise it in place and map its successful interventions.

### **Acknowledgments and Disclaimer**

This special section was catalysed by an online conference organised by Birkbeck College, University of London and the University of Malta, November 2020, as part of the SUNRISE project. (Recording of event at: <https://arcg.is/1y0vOz>.) The authors thank speakers and participants, and acknowledge funding from the Natural Environment Research Council [Grant No. NE/T004517/1] in support of the event.

### **References**

- Baldacchino, G., & Bertram, G. (2009). The beak of the finch: Insights into the economic development of small economies. *The Round Table*, 98(401), 141-160.
- Briguglio, L. (1995). Small island developing states and their economic vulnerabilities. *World Development*, 23(9), 1615-1632.
- Briguglio, L., Cordina, G., Farrugia, N. & Vella, S. (2009). Economic vulnerability and resilience: Concepts and measurements. *Oxford Development Studies*, 37(3), 229-247.
- Bowden, V., Nyberg, D. & Wright, C. (2019). Planning for the past: Local temporality and the construction of denial in climate change adaptation. *Global Environmental Change*, 57, 101939.
- Butts, D. & Adams, H. (2020). Weather Contracts: Capturing a sense of weather for place-based adaptation to climate change. *Global Environmental Change*, 63, p.102052.
- Cooke, N., Hayes, I., & Moncada, S. (2021). Resilience building to COVID-19 in the Pacific: The case of the Cook Islands. *Small States & Territories*, 4(2), 259-278.
- de Águeda Corneloup, I. & Mol, A.P. (2014). Small island developing states and international climate change negotiations: The power of moral "leadership". *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics*, 14(3), 281-297.
- Dodman, D., Ayers, J., & Huq, S. (2009). Building resilience. In Worldwatch Institute (Ed.) *State of the world 2009: Into a warming world* (pp. 151-168). New York: W.W. Norton.
- Folke, C. (2006). Resilience: The emergence of a perspective for social-ecological systems analyses. *Global Environmental Change*, 16(3), 253-267.
- Gallopín, G. C. (2006). Linkages between vulnerability, resilience and adaptive capacity. *Global Environmental Change*, 16(3), 293-303.
- Head, L. (2020). Comment: Community resilience, natural hazards and climate change. *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift-Norwegian Journal of Geography*, 74(3), 134-137.
- IPCC (2018). Annex I: Glossary [Matthews, J.B.R. (Ed.)]. In V. Masson-Delmotte., P. Zhai, H.-O. Pörtner ... & T. Waterfield (Eds.) *Global warming of 1.5°C*. IPCC special report on impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways (pp. 541-562). Retrieved from <https://ipcc.ch/>
- Kelman, I. (2021). Words without meaning? Examining sustainable development terminology through small states and territories. *Small States & Territories*, 4(2), 231-244.
- Kelman, I., Gaillard, J. C., Lewis, J., & Mercer, J. (2016). Learning from the history of disaster vulnerability and resilience research and practice for climate change. *Natural Hazards*, 82(1), 129-143.
- Lemos, M. C., Agrawal, A., Eaking, H., Nelson, D. R., Engle, N. L., & Johns, O. (2013). Building adaptive capacity to climate change in less developed countries. In G. Asrar & J. Hurrell (Eds.), *Climate science for serving society* (pp. 437-457). Dordrecht: Springer.

- Luthar, S. S., Crossman, E. J., & Small, P. J. (2015). Resilience and adversity. In R.M. Lerner (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology and developmental science* (7th edn.) (pp. 247-286). Hoboken NJ: Wiley.
- Martin, P., Nunn, P., Leon, J., & Tindale, N. (2018). Responding to multiple climate-linked stressors in a remote island context: The case of Yadua Island, Fiji. *Climate Risk Management*, 21(1), 7-15.
- Masten, A. S. & Obradović, J. (2006). Competence and resilience in development. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1094(1), 13-27.
- Matthews, N. (2020). The rise of resilience in a new era. *Traumatology*, 26(3), 248-252.
- McDonnell, S. (2020). Other dark sides of resilience: Politics and power in community-based efforts to strengthen resilience. *Anthropological Forum*, 30(1-2), 55-72.
- Nurse, L. A., Sem, G., Hay, J. E., Suarez, A. G., Wong, P. P., Briguglio, L., & Ragoonaden, S. (2001). Small island states. *Climate Change 2001: Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability* (pp. 843-875). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ogunbode, C.A., Böhm, G., Capstick, S. B., Demski, C., Spence, A. & Tausch, N. (2019). The resilience paradox: Flooding experience, coping and climate change mitigation intentions. *Climate Policy*, 19(6), 703-715.
- Pahl-Wostl, C. (2009). A conceptual framework for analysing adaptive capacity and multi-level learning processes in resource governance regimes. *Global Environmental Change*, 19(3), 354-365.
- Storlazzi, C.D., Gingerich, S., van Dongeren, A., ... & McCall, R. (2018). Most atolls will be uninhabitable by the mid-21st century because of sea-level rise exacerbating wave-driven flooding. *Science Advances*, 4(4), 1-9.
- Tandrayen-Ragoobur, V., & Fauzel, S. (2021). Climate change, governance and economic growth: The case of small island developing states. *Small States & Territories*, 4(2), 245-258.
- Thomas, A., Baptiste, A., Martyr-Koller, R., Pringle, P., & Rhiney, K. (2020). Climate change and small island developing states. *Annual Review of Environment & Resources*, 45(1), 1-27.
- Veenendaal, W. (2020). Islands of democracy. *Area*, 52(1), 30-37.
- Walshe, R., & Foley, A. M. (2021). Learning from the archives of island jurisdictions: Why and how island history should inform disaster risk reduction and climate action. *Small States & Territories*, 4(2), 205-230.