

Sparkling societal resilience through bottom up initiatives

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This contribution addresses the 3rd suggested topic for this panel (promising ideas and theories, methodologies, challenges and lessons ...) by discussing our attempts to study “local sparks of resilience” that allowed to “make unheard voices heard”, and relied on “using unused hands”.

The psychosocial impact of COVID-19, undermined the societal resilience. If we want to reinforce the societal resilience, policy will have to sufficiently focus on the base of the social system. Lorenz' (2013) concept of societal resilience as the combined result of the adaptive, coping and participative capacity of a social system offers a useful theoretical framework. From Social-Ecological Systems theory (ex. Berkes, Colding & Folke, 2003), we know a (social) system's resilience is fundamentally linked to the resilience of its lowest system level. For society that means there is an important role for activities and initiatives undertaken at the local level, activating local actors such as local policymakers, local organizations and individual civilians. Without a strong link to the local and operational level, measures imposed by a higher level authority and based on the input from a select elite of experts and organizations, risk being contested or ignored. However well-meant and principally needed, without a “local” reality check, such measures will fall short of what is required.

The challenge is, however, that little is still known about the way this works in practice. Research is therefore needed into how local coping potential and adaptive capacity increases the tolerance for change, and how do they reduce the frustration and fatigue within society from the bottom up. This means identifying the critical success factors strengthening these sparks of resilience, and the conditions needed for these community-level initiatives to be brought up to scale. We want to elaborate on a research project we proposed for cross case analysis focusing on initiatives in 3 domains which were heavily impacted by the psychosocial effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, namely education, culture and care.

Focus on human needs: Understanding good and bad practices in public health crises