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Abstract

Resilience is increasingly recognised as a critical determinant of sustainability and mission effectiveness in the non-profit sector. Conceptualised across multiple levels—individual, team, organisational, and systemic—resilience encompasses both psychological adaptability and structural capacity to sustain operations under uncertainty. This article synthesises theoretical frameworks from positive psychology, systems theory, socio-ecological research, and organisational studies to provide a multi-dimensional view of resilience. It argues for distinguishing resilience from related concepts such as recovery, endurance, and resistance, which, if conflated, may lead to inadequate interventions. The article also engages with political and ethical critiques, highlighting the risk of resilience being co-opted into neoliberal discourses of self-responsibilisation while overlooking structural inequities. Cross-cultural perspectives reveal further complexity: whereas Western frameworks often privilege individual traits, Global South traditions emphasise collective and community-oriented resilience strategies. By integrating psychological, structural, systemic, and cultural dimensions, the article advances a nuanced understanding of resilience in non-profits, underscoring its strategic relevance for organisations navigating volatile funding environments, political restrictions, and social crises.

Keywords

resilience; NGOs; adaptive capacity; organisational sustainability; cross-cultural perspectives; systems theory

1. Introduction

Resilience has emerged as a central concept in contemporary debates on organisational sustainability and human adaptability. While traditionally associated with individual coping and recovery, resilience is now recognised as a multi-level construct that spans individuals, teams, organisations, and systemic networks. For non-profits, which frequently operate in resource-constrained, politically contested, and high-stakes contexts, resilience is not optional but fundamental to mission survival. Understanding its diverse dimensions is

essential for both scholars and practitioners designing interventions that move beyond survival to adaptive learning and transformation.

2. Multi-Level Dimensions of Resilience

2.1 Individual Resilience

At the personal level, resilience involves the capacity to withstand stress and trauma while maintaining effective functioning. Traits such as optimism, self-efficacy, and emotional regulation contribute to sustained performance even under adversity (Luthar et al., 2000).

2.2 Team Resilience

Team resilience highlights the importance of collective coping strategies, distributed leadership, and mutual support mechanisms. Teams that cultivate shared responsibility are better able to sustain performance during crises.

2.3 Organisational Resilience

Organisational resilience refers to the ability of institutions to anticipate, absorb, and adapt to shocks while continuing to fulfil their mission. This includes governance flexibility, adaptive capacity, and resource mobilisation (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011).

2.4 Systemic Resilience

At the societal level, resilience emerges through networks, community capacities, and policy frameworks. NGOs are embedded within these broader systems, meaning their resilience is shaped by inter-organisational collaboration and socio-political conditions.

3. Theoretical Frameworks

Different academic traditions contribute to understanding resilience:

- **Positive psychology** emphasises individual strengths such as self-efficacy, optimism, and coping (Masten, 2001).
- **Systems theory** situates resilience within interdependent organisational and ecological systems, focusing on adaptive interactions (Holling, 1973).
- **Adaptive capacity** highlights learning, innovation, and transformation in the face of disruptions (Folke, 2016).
- **Ecological resilience** underscores non-linear adaptation, thresholds, and feedback loops essential to sustainability.

These frameworks collectively suggest that resilience is not a static trait but an emergent, adaptive capacity across levels.

4. Distinguishing Resilience from Related Concepts

Confusion between resilience and adjacent terms can obscure appropriate interventions. Recovery involves returning to a prior state after disruption, while endurance implies persistence under stress without necessarily learning or adapting. Resistance denotes the ability to withstand disruption but may reinforce rigid structures that hinder adaptation. In contrast, resilience encompasses both recovery and transformation, positioning NGOs to adapt to evolving challenges.

5. Political, Ethical, and Cultural Dimensions

5.1 Political and Ethical Critiques

Scholars caution that resilience discourse can reinforce neoliberal logics, shifting responsibility for adaptation onto individuals and organisations while masking structural inequities (Joseph, 2013). For NGOs, this raises the risk of prioritising internal coping at the expense of addressing systemic injustices.

5.2 Cross-Cultural Perspectives

Resilience is conceptualised differently across cultural contexts. In Western frameworks, it is often treated as an individualistic trait, whereas in Global South contexts, resilience is more relational, rooted in collective agency, community networks, and cultural adaptation (Ungar, 2011). Effective interventions must therefore be culturally responsive, respecting local traditions and collective practices.

6. Case Illustrations

NGOs working in disaster-prone regions of South Asia illustrate how systemic resilience is strengthened through community networks, participatory governance, and culturally embedded practices. Conversely, organisations in the Global North often prioritise staff training, psychological support, and risk management frameworks. These contrasting approaches highlight the importance of aligning resilience strategies with context-specific needs.

7. Discussion

Resilience in NGOs is not reducible to individual coping or organisational structures but emerges from the interaction of psychological, collective, institutional, and systemic factors. While the discourse risks co-optation into managerial or neoliberal frameworks, it also holds potential as a tool of empowerment if embedded in participatory and justice-oriented practices. Bridging theoretical insights with culturally sensitive applications remains a key challenge for researchers and practitioners alike.

8. Conclusion

Resilience in the non-profit sector is a multidimensional construct that integrates individual, team, organisational, and systemic levels. Its theoretical grounding spans psychology, systems theory, and socio-ecological studies, while normative critiques and cross-cultural perspectives highlight both risks and opportunities in its application. For NGOs, resilience is best understood as an adaptive, strategic capacity that sustains operations under uncertainty while fostering transformation. Developing interventions that combine psychological support, organisational flexibility, and community empowerment offers the most promising pathway to ensuring sustainable mission impact.

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