

Cooperative resilience – a joined-up way of thinking



Resilience is a valuable capability to possess. Resilient people and resilient organisations prosper, adapt and evolve. When times are tough, they weather the storm, demonstrating flexibility like a tree in strong winds.

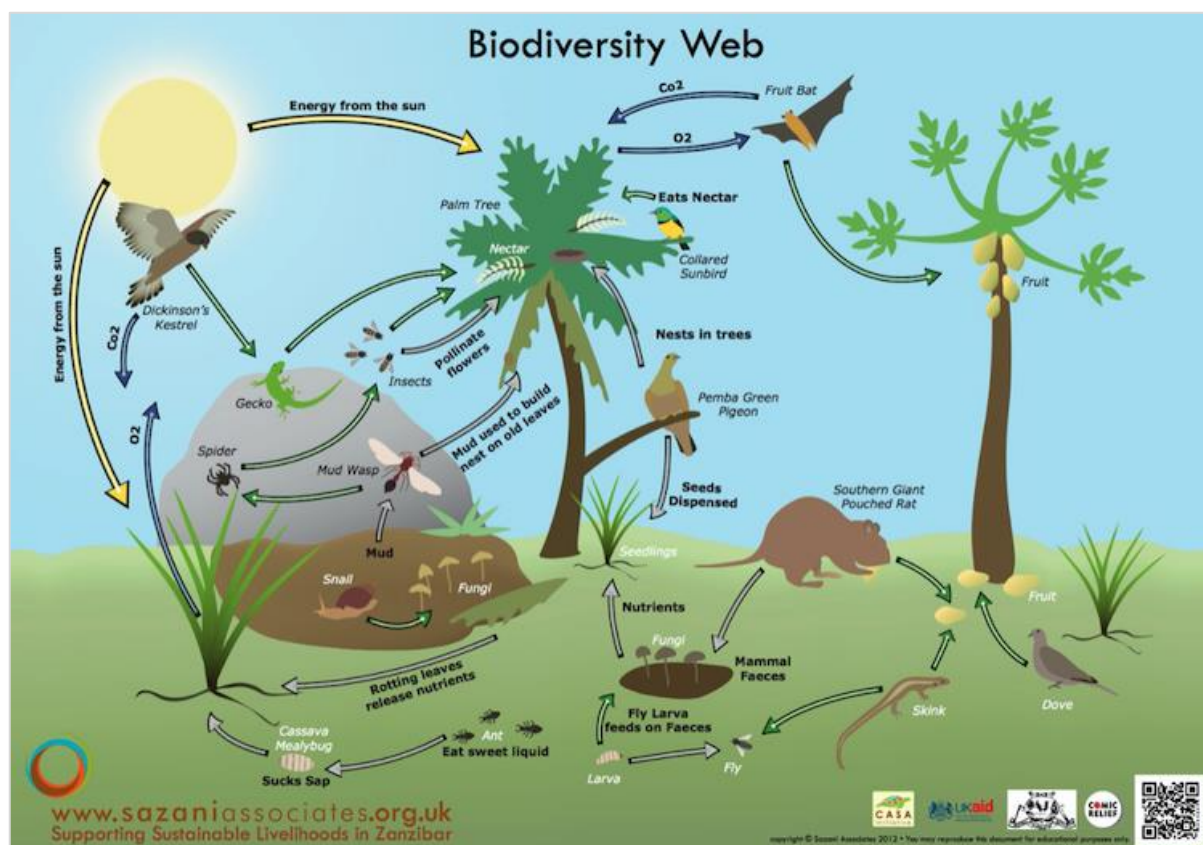
This paper asks the following question: as organisations navigate their way through the impacts and continued challenges arising from COVID-19, are they looking beyond their own resilience, and working with others to ensure strong cooperative and purposeful resilience across their eco-system and their wider environment?

Organisational resilience is described by the ISO in their standard [20300:2018](#) (Security and Resilience – Vocabulary) as the ability of an organisation – large or small, public or private – to absorb and adapt in a changing environment. I would add “anticipate” as well. Practices for Business Continuity Management (BCM), Crisis Management and Emergency Management are typically used in implementing such capabilities. As described in [this paper](#), [this discussion piece on projects](#), and [this piece](#), it is clearly beneficial for an organisation to have a good state of resilience. It is also important that its eco-system partners and collaborators across the value chain demonstrate good resilience. Combining excellence in our own resilience with eco-system resilience and how it fits into our overall environment is the crux of *cooperative resilience*, which is a state of resilience that a network of organisations achieves when it is sustainable and purposeful to society.

When organisations across the public and private sectors have a strategy for “cooperative resilience” with their eco-system in the overall environment they are part of, they can flex and adapt together to demonstrate flexibility and purpose.

Nature shows us the value of cooperative resilience...

Consider a parallel with the biodiversity in nature. Organisms exist in complex environments in which they are linked with each other to co-exist and thrive. Remove one part of their eco-system or place it in danger, and all others are impacted. This concept applies to the ecosystems of our human-made organisations.



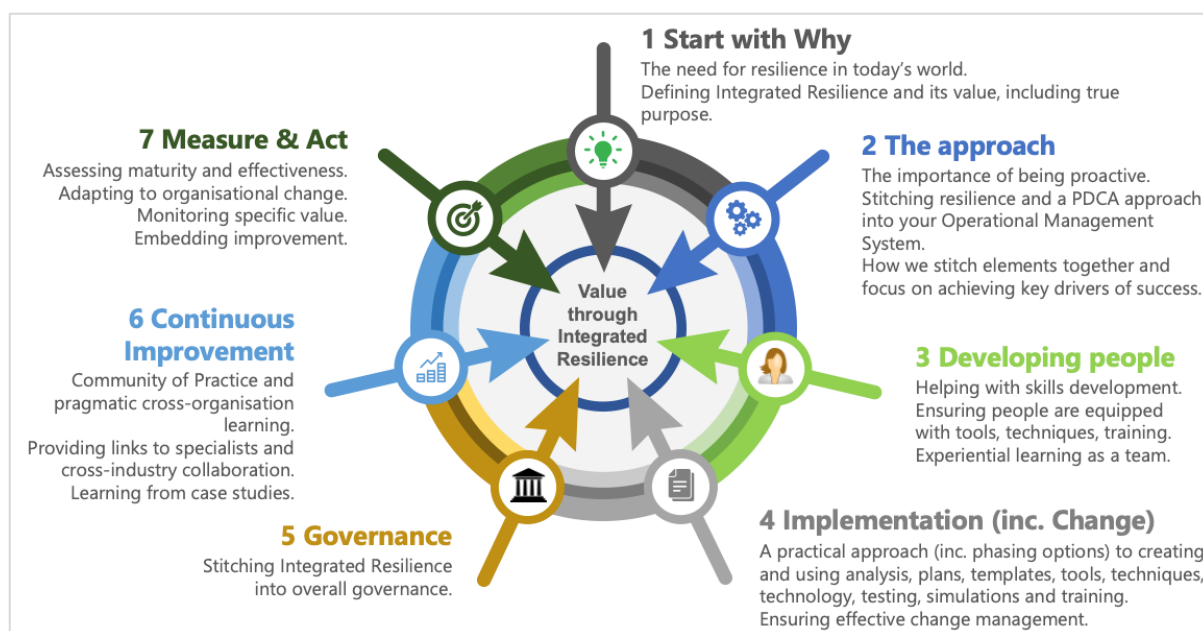
An example of a "biodiversity web"
Source: [Sazani Associates](http://www.sazaniassociates.org.uk)

We are as strong as our collective whole

The resilience built into the linkages that organisations have with each other in their eco-systems and value chains is fundamental to cooperative resilience. An individual entity, business or location – be it a café, a retail centre, a hospital, a factory, a mine site, a construction site, a port, an airport or any other – needs resilient linkages within its network of collaborators to thrive. And it scales: the same is true of an organisation that has many sites, or indeed a city. If the networks and arteries that it has are not resilient, or critical weaknesses are not being addressed, problems can and will occur. A contribution to society is a key aspect of cooperative resilience. Organisations should be responsible and purposeful in everything that they do – including demonstrating resilience to help society and the overall environment.

To achieve cooperative resilience takes constant effort. Here are three points for organisations to consider as they work with their eco-system of customers, suppliers and the communities they serve in a constantly changing environment.

1. Ensure your organisation has good foundations for cooperative resilience



Seven elements of a good culture of organisational resilience

Organisations that demonstrate a good culture and a good state of resilience have the right structure in place and people who look ahead and plan, anticipate, adapt, and respond effectively to change and events (good and bad). In such a culture there is an innate appreciation for the velocity at which change, and events, can occur, or are already occurring, and the impacts they can have on people, societies, wellbeing and the broader environment. This culture is a solid base on which to build cooperative resilience with others. If we do not have “our own house in order”, we are ill-equipped to work with others to achieve a broader state of resilience.

Although anticipating, avoiding and responding to negative events and situations are clearly a major focus of resilience, it also means responding to positive change and events. The pace of change has been accelerating for some time, through advances in new technology, digitisation and data analytics, broader appreciation about the importance of sustainability and the complexity of our environments, and the need to ensure that eco-systems and value chains need to be “resiliently agile” to respond to change and withstand shocks and unforeseen events.

A practical framework for purposeful resilience must be scaled to suit the size and context of your organisation, and stitched into how it functions. Various ISO standards exist in the “22300 family” to help, including ISO 22301, 22300, 22313, 22316 plus ISO/TS (Technical Standards) 22317, 22318 and 22330 plus related standards such as ISO/IEC 27001 and ISO 31000.

Various tools and techniques used for risk management, resilience, strategy and general management can be applied to understanding and achieving good resilience. A few examples of such tools and techniques are described below.

1. Scenario Analysis

Scenario analysis is a useful technique to help understand our resilience. It adds most value when it is carried out regularly for a constant exploration of ideas, not as a one-off or occasional exercise. By regularly looking at a range of scenarios that could put our resilience under pressure (and not dismissing those that you may think of as ‘outliers’) in an unbiased way in which we properly immerse ourselves in the scenarios (ideally in team workshop / brainstorming sessions), we can ask ourselves how resilient we are to change, we can stress test our ability to respond to major changes or events (e.g. “perfect storm” events), and we can review whether we have the right “plan B’s and C’s” in place. Scenario analysis is most effective when we think broadly about plausible possibilities and apply them to our context.

2. Horizon scanning

The OECD defines horizon scanning as a technique for detecting early signs of potentially important developments through a systematic examination of potential threats and opportunities, with emphasis on new technology and its effects on the issue at hand. They describe that it explores novel and unexpected issues as well as persistent problems and trends, including matters at the margins of current thinking that challenge past assumptions.

Horizon scanning has a natural link to scenario analysis. It includes looking at “weak signals” that are not immediately obvious, of possible changes and events “on the horizon”.

3. Stakeholder analysis

Analysing and mapping your stakeholders in your eco-system, and understanding the resilience that exists in this map, can show you areas of strength and weakness. You can gain an understanding of which stakeholders really are critical. Such weaknesses may be “two of three links along the stakeholder chain”. Do you have appropriate resilience plans in place with your critical suppliers and contractors, with workaround “plan B’s and C’s” available in case circumstances change?

3. ‘What if?’ Decision Trees

You might not call options analysis by this name, but in plotting different paths of how events and decisions could take shape and your ability to respond, you may find yourself using Decision Trees in some form (perhaps assisted by Scenario Analysis).

4. Business Impact Analysis

ISO 22300 describes Business Impact Analysis, or BIA as the process of analysing activities and the effect that a business disruption can have upon them. It is about understanding your activities, what’s critical to them, and what kind of workarounds are sensible if they are disrupted in different ways. BIAs are usually used to inform a Business Continuity strategy.

5. Business Continuity Plans

ISO 22300 describes a Business Continuity Plan (BCP) as documented procedures that guide an organisation to respond, recover, resume and restore itself to a pre-defined level of operation following a disruption. A BCP must be practical, not theoretical. It should be informed by a good risk assessment and high quality BIA. It should represent your focus on people and sustainability. How people work together to respond to disruption and maintain resilience is key. You don’t want things to fall through gaps between teams.

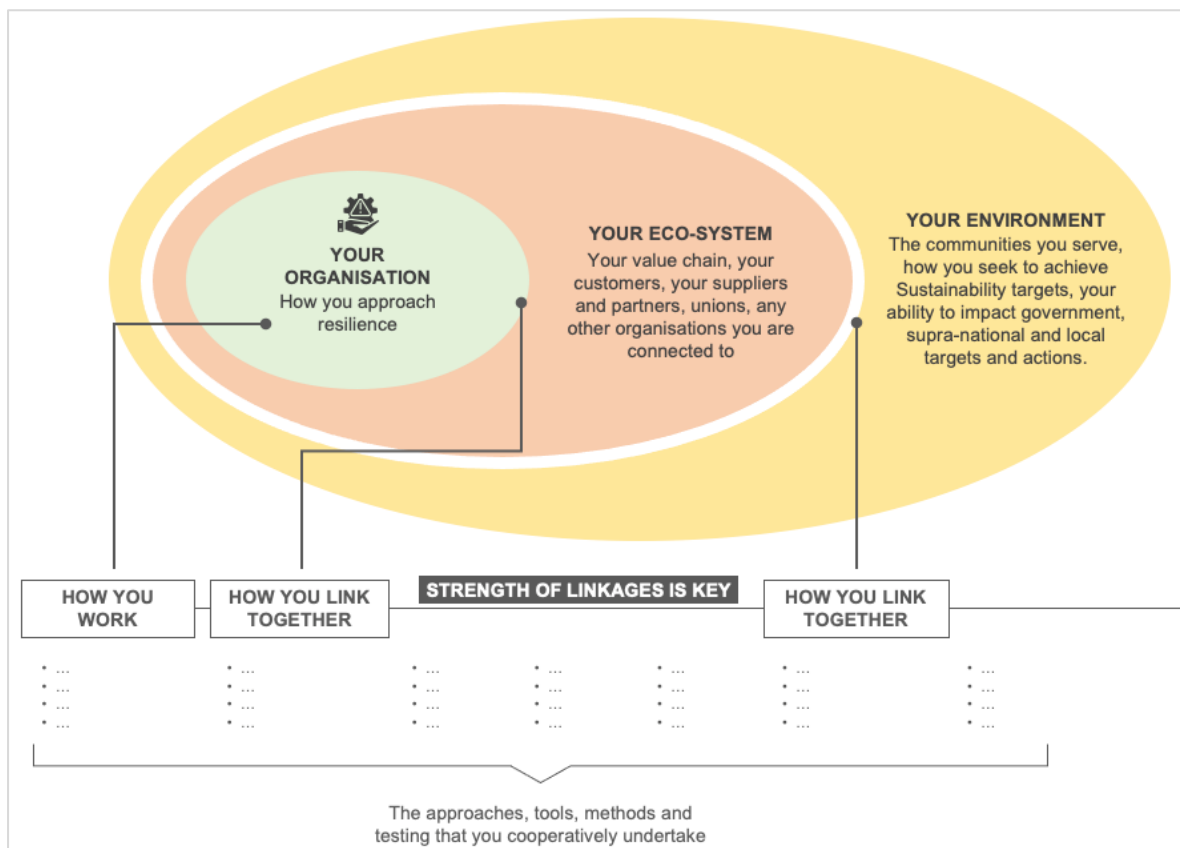
By ensuring you have a good state of resilience, and are constantly working on actions to ensure it is effective, you establish a platform for a cooperative approach.

2. Use good foundations to cooperate with others

As mentioned earlier, ISO 22300:2018 (Security and Resilience – Vocabulary) defines resilience as *the ability to absorb and adapt in a changing environment*. This entails anticipating and being ready to absorb and adapt, not just reacting quickly when something unplanned happens. Although it does not mention eco-systems and the environment in which an organisation operates, it is implied.

A practical framework for resilience should include how you liaise with others. Rather than assume that organisations in your eco-system “will do their own thing”, make the time to analyse and understand your network of relationships and what’s most critical, to you and others. Whilst it is common to have resilience and business continuity clauses stitched into commercial contracts between partners, it is important to go further than legal and commercial coverage. Actively engage with your eco-system partners to cooperate for resilience.

Discuss with different parties how you can achieve cooperative resilience, in a way that benefits yourselves, the communities you serve, and the overall environment. Share and discuss your resilience plans with each other and discuss integration points. Perhaps you could jointly hold collaborative workshops and resilience exercises and “hackathons” to see how you work together, spot gaps and improve. Organisations have been doing this during much of 2020, as they have responded to the impacts and pressures that COVID-19 has forced upon them. As the world recovers from the pandemic, we should maintain this focus.



Your organisation and your eco-system

3. Be prepared – and ready – to demonstrate cooperative resilience

A good state of cooperative resilience is something that needs to be constantly maintained. It is not a “set and forget” activity. When linkages are in place and tested, you will be prepared and ready to act in unison and in a purposeful way when change or a disruption event occurs.

Consider the example of a business responding to extreme weather in areas where key suppliers also have operations. If the risk of extreme weather disruption is apparent, how well do they work with their suppliers, customers, insurers, local government departments and local community organisations to jointly and implement cost-effective and agile resilience to be ready for potential disruption and to minimise the impacts of events in the most purposeful way possible?



Good cooperative resilience means knowing your operations and how they connect with others, having a practical framework in place, being prepared, and acting positively to protect your activities, your stakeholders and the environment in which you operate. It also means, sometimes, accepting or tolerating a certain amount of disruption (what may be described in your “risk appetite”).

As part of your ecosystem review, you need to understand how your own suppliers may serve other sectors. For example, consider the semiconductor industry. If they come under pressure to supply a number of industries (as has been the case during the COVID-19 pandemic), what could that mean for your needs / where would you be in the queue? Plan ahead and conduct scenarios and exercises for such cases.

During 2020 we have seen many examples of what we can collectively achieve when we set our minds to it. Businesses and their value chains around the world have worked with the public sector to demonstrate cooperative societal resilience in response to COVID-19. People have found innovative solutions to urgent problems in timeframes that would not be possible without a high degree of cooperation. For example, pharmaceutical and medical businesses, and others such as mining and industrial firms have donated PPE to hospitals. Manufacturers, retailers and others have quickly retooled production lines to make ventilators and healthcare PPE. Breweries have adapted production processes to make hand sanitiser. Pharmaceutical businesses, biotechs and researchers have worked together to develop vaccines for COVID-19 at unprecedented speed, backed by government funding. Supermarkets and grocery retailers around the world have worked with their supply chains to achieve admirable resilience. The restaurant sector has shown resilience by adapting to provide take-away meals, delivered by agile delivery firms.

Cooperative resilience can go further still, to help us tackle societal and environmental matters including climate change and the broader sustainability challenge as defined by the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), and [Disaster Risk](#) (including extreme weather, geological disasters, cyber attacks, and acts of terror).

Conclusion

When businesses, governments, international organisations, authorities, NGOs and all other stakeholder groups cooperate to achieve a shared state of resilience, everyone benefits.

2020 and the collective response to COVID-19 has shown us what can be achieved when we set our collective minds to solve pressing problems. We should continue to draw from the positive examples we have seen and apply them to make the world more resilient and ready for the future.

As a starting point, we need to ensure that we have a good state of resilience in our own organisation, which includes scanning the horizon for opportunities and threats. Once we have a clear understanding of our own view of the world, we should make sure we discuss resilience with those in our ecosystem and commit to achieving cooperative resilience for the benefit of everyone, and the broader environment. It's the sensible thing to do.

About the author

[Gareth Byatt](#) is an Independent Risk Consultant and owner of [Risk Insight Consulting](#). He is based in Sydney, and has 20 years experience in international risk management and resilience.

An “assessment tool” for understanding a state of resilience is available on request.

