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# Searching for Resilience

## Contribution to GTI Forum After the Pandemic: Which Future?

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### Introduction

The mounting economic, ecological, and human losses from disasters triggered by extreme hazards are an indicator of unsustainable development. Extreme hazards, such as the coronavirus, can expose and increase the fragility of social institutions and undermine hard-earned development gains. Our lack of resilience, i.e, the ability of people, organizations, and social systems to cope with extreme shocks while still sustaining functionality, is now in stark relief. So how do we fix that?

### Reducing Risk, Strengthening Resilience

Disaster losses occur when *vulnerable* people and assets are *exposed* to extreme *hazards*. Disaster risk management aims to reduce the likelihood of losses by muting the causes and effects of vulnerability, exposure, and hazards and strengthening the capacity to recover from a disturbance. Typically, this involves (1) enhancing preparedness for effectively responding to a disaster, (2) structural and non-structural measures to mitigate risk drivers, and (3) supporting resilient recovery (“build back better”). In general, the more resilient a society, the more effective the response, the quicker the recovery, and the less the impact of the hazard.

### A Window of Opportunity

When social systems are subjected to extreme shocks, their capacities and vulnerabilities, become clear. Invariably, extreme events have a disproportionate impact on poorer and marginalized groups that increases socioeconomic inequalities within and between nations. These various insights gleaned from a system shock can be used to identify priority actions

during the recovery period that strengthen resilience and prevent the re-establishment of the initiating risk.

Moreover, extreme events can disrupt the status quo of social systems and create an imperative to act. The interruption of continuity can mobilize political will and resources to respond, recover, and adapt. All systems go through what are called “adaptive cycles,” recurring phases of rapid growth, conservation, release, and reorganization. While these phases can be chaotic and traumatic, they can provide a window to initiate policy reforms to meet immediate needs in a way that addresses risk drivers that are difficult to change in “normal” times.

Resilient recovery is only part of the picture. A “build back better” approach can serve as a precursor to a “build better before” strategy, supporting a transition to a more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable society. However, opportunities for reform can also close quickly in the rush to return to normalcy.

## Understanding Risk and Resilience

From a UK perspective, the full impact of the virus is still emerging, with a risk of multiple waves of infections. An initial assessment reveals an inadequately prepared government that adopted an ineffectual centralized approach. The response relied on a leadership team that lacked diversity in background, skill, and practical experience. All these deficiencies were compounded by the government’s lack of transparency, accountability, empathy, and clarity.

Perhaps most significantly, the government has not adequately protected essential workers and the most vulnerable groups, notably the elderly, chronically ill, ethnic minorities, and lower-income households. The relative impact of the virus on different socioeconomic groups has revealed a lack of policy coherence across sectors and further highlighted societal inequalities and regional differences. The virus is being allowed to exacerbate societal divisions across political parties, media, academia, civil society, and regions. These divisions reveal deep-rooted fragilities and tensions across British society.

On a positive note, the travel restrictions and downturn in economic activity have caused a sudden drop in pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. In urban areas, this has resulted in rapid and noticeable improvements in air quality and reduced road and air traffic noise. More people are

using local shops with increases in walking and cycling that lower the risk of heart and respiratory diseases, obesity, and cancer—diseases that increase the risk of COVID-19. In this respect, the virus has increased public awareness of links between public health, environmental health, and climate mitigation. This could be further expanded to a more holistic understanding of public health that connects human health, environmental health, and planetary health, linking environmental degradation and an increasing risk of emerging zoonotic diseases.

Seen through a resilience lens, the key weaknesses are poor governance, slow learning, inadequate preparedness, limited inclusion, weak social cohesion, and lack of policy coherence. Key strengths include local self-organization to strengthen risk governance, public compliance with rules and advisories, increased solidarity and mutual assistance amongst communities, enhanced connectivity across different constituencies (academia, media, and civil society), and increased citizenry awareness of human and environmental health issues.

## The Importance of Good Governance and Leadership

The quality of a nation's governance and leadership, the strategic choices it makes, and its implementation approach are key to an effective response and subsequent recovery. As COVID-19 exposes systemic failings in the dominant model of development, it will take good governance and visionary leadership that is prepared to act as opportunities arise. As the crisis moves from response to recovery, it is likely that governments will start to apply Keynesian economics to support private-sector industries and increase public investments to stimulate demand, provide employment, and pull the economy out of a recession. This offers the possibility of accelerated investments in resilience-based development policies and practices for meeting economic, social, and environmental goals.

A pandemic recovery can support a “build back better” transition to safer more sustainable development, most likely to be in line with the Policy Reform variant of GTI's [scenarios](#). In so doing, this could open political space for a more preemptive build better before scenario in line with the more progressive New Sustainability Paradigm. However, disaster recovery experience tells us these opportunities will not materialize automatically, but rather will require a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches, rooted in core principles of resilience and good governance.

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## About the Author



Marcus Oxley is a disaster risk management practitioner and policy advisor. He has worked with governments and NGOs across Africa, Asia, and Europe on actions to prevent disasters and strengthen the resilience of communities and organizations. From 2007 to 2017, he was the founding Executive Director of the Global Network of Civil Society Organizations for Disaster Reduction (GNDR), the largest international civil society alliance for reducing the risk and impacts of disasters. He currently is building Resilience Solutions, a consultancy to help clients survive and prosper in a complex and uncertain world.

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