

# National Resilience: From Bouncing Back to Prevention

By K U Menon

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, the concept of resilience has received renewed attention as one element of psychological defence and nation-building in many countries. Its pertinence has been reinforced in the aftermath of the recent tsunami. One definition of resilience is the ability to survive and prosper in the face of adversity and change. The term has been used in relation to responses to a broad range of national challenges, such as SARS and a poor economic environment. It has also been applied to organizations as well as to individuals, communities and countries. This article takes a brief look at the evolution of the concept of resilience and at how Singapore is beginning to develop its own understanding of it in order to develop practical measures.

## Introduction

In the wake of September 11 and the events that followed, the word “resilience” came to acquire a certain notoriety. Oft-repeated speeches by President Bush and others in the US Administration and also visiting Prime Ministers like Tony Blair paid tribute “to the resilience, resolve and character of the American people”. The city and people of New York and the Pentagon which were targeted by Al-Qaeda emerged as “symbols of American resilience”.

Closer to home, the word also found currency in speeches by our own leaders in recent months. In his 2004 New Year Day message, then PM Goh noted that, “When confronted with a weak economy, Singaporeans were united and resilient.” In April 2003, then Deputy Prime Minister Lee in his keynote speech to the Economic Society of

Singapore observed that, “However difficult the changes we have to make, the status quo is not an option... Our future depends on Singaporeans being resilient and self-reliant.”

In May 2003, Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan commented that, “coping with SARS has brought out the best in Singaporeans—resilience, determination, social discipline, willingness to change attitudes and to accept tough measures.” And, in a speech in April 2003, then Minister for Home Affairs Wong Kan Seng urged Home Team officers to display “resilience”.

More succinctly, then SM Lee remarked on CCTV2 in Beijing in June 2004, in response to a personal question on his thoughts on life, that, “Life is an adventure because when you start, you don’t know when it’ll end, because you don’t know what you are going to meet, and you want to go to a certain place, you find road blocks, landslides, earthquakes.... You must have a certain resilience, and a certain optimism that you can overcome these problems. Otherwise you’ll give up.”

## Shades of Resilience

The many uses of the word illustrate some of the types of resilience in academic literature—psychological, economic, social, community and individual. Dictionary definitions and those of psychologists reveal two key elements. The first is the ability to recover or “bounce back”. The second is the existence of adversity, disruption, misfortune, hardship or some form of threat. To generalize in simple terms, resilience is the ability to withstand and recover from negative events, influences and set-backs. The latter could include physical and economic crises, creeping and sudden crises, deliberate psychological or physical attacks, subversive influences, accidents or hardship.

"Resilience is the ability to survive and prosper in the face of adversity and change."

The concept of resilience gained prominence primarily in the field of mental health. Academic research on the subject of resilience began some 40 years ago with pioneering studies of schizophrenia. It was assumed that a certain quality of resilience characterised the offspring of schizophrenic parents who did not display their parents' symptoms. Then in the 1990s, researchers and clinicians shifted from a prevailing focus on pathology, or what is wrong with people, to examining what helps people to survive and thrive. In the months after September 11, mental health specialists were much sought after by the media for giving advice on how to cope with past and future terrorism.

Today, research about resilience covers subjects ranging from Holocaust survivors to entrepreneurs who prospered after early failures. Research has also moved away from early theories which stressed the role of genetics and claimed that some people are born resilient.<sup>1</sup>

Now there is a wealth of literature defining the characteristics of resilient people and organizations. Resilient individuals have a sense of personal control and take responsibility for and ownership of their own lives. They maintain strong connections not only with other people but with causes, ideals and their religion. Resilient people are active in acts of charity and in helping others.

Research and resilience indices derived from studies of small isolated communities in Canada and other places show that resilient communities share certain key characteristics.<sup>2</sup> The Centre for

Community Enterprise in Canada studied the rise and fall of many rural communities in North America and derived a model of community resilience comprising 23 resilience characteristics. They thereafter published a manual that describes this model with the hope of guiding rural communities to be more resilient.

#### Response to 9/11

September 11 accelerated interest in studying resilience. It brought home the realization that it is not sufficient to have elaborate systems and processes in place to cope with the physical dimensions of a crisis. These are, more often than not, manageable through adequate allocation of resources, upgrading of equipment, training and deployment of manpower, regular exercises and tapping on external expertise. The more difficult task at hand is to foster within organizations and within society that elusive "soft power"—that quality of resilience or the X-factor—which explains why some societies and organizations have the ability to weather crises and threats, and emerge not just unscathed but even strengthened.

The experience of newly established resilience organizations and initiatives in the UK and US is instructive. The UK appears to be focusing on enhancing infrastructural resilience and the ability of government institutions to respond to crises. Its Civil Contingencies Secretariat, which was set up "to improve the resilience of Central Government and the UK", has defined "resilience" as the:

<sup>1</sup> Robert Brooks, "Resilience and the Threat of Terrorism", see [www.drrobertbrooks.com/writings/articles/0403.html](http://www.drrobertbrooks.com/writings/articles/0403.html). See also Diane Coutou, "How Resilience Works" in *Harvard Business Review on Building Personal & Organizational Resilience* (Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation, 2003) 1-18.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Community Resilience Manual*, the Centre for Community Enterprise, 2000 <http://www.cedworks.com/communityresilience01.html>

...ability at every level—national, regional and local—to detect, prevent and if necessary handle disruptive challenges. These could range from floods, through outbreaks of human or animal disease, to terrorist outbreaks.<sup>3</sup>

The UK Civil Contingencies Act 2004, recently passed by the British Parliament on 18 Nov 04, would create a long-term foundation for managing civil contingencies at all levels.<sup>4</sup>

In the US, the National Resilience Development Bill of 2003 is aimed at enhancing American citizens' psychological resilience, specifically in response to the psychological and emotional impact and consequences of terrorist threats and attacks.<sup>5</sup> The goal is to "increase psychological resilience and mitigate distress reactions and maladaptive behaviors of the American public" through mental health and public health programmes. In the words of Congressman Patrick Kennedy who introduced the Bill, this is because "terrorism is psychological warfare". The Bill seeks to convene a task force to identify and define scientifically proven means of reducing stress reactions and increasing psychological resilience in preparation for and response to the possibility of yet another terrorist attack on the United States. To fund the provisions of the Bill, states would have to set aside 1% of the overall emergency preparedness funds they receive from the Department of Homeland Security for implementing efforts to build psychological resilience locally.

Both the US and UK have given much attention to developing the concept of resilience, albeit with a somewhat different emphasis. But one thing they do share is that which prompted them: the underlying threat of transnational terrorism.

## National Resilience

"National Resilience" is perhaps the least researched aspect in the whole subject of resilience. Nonetheless, it is a concept of

particular significance for small beleaguered countries like Israel. For Israel, "national resilience" is a key factor in its ability to cope with and withstand current and future challenges. Recently the Centre for the Study of National Security at the University of Haifa conducted a wide-ranging survey of national resilience involving more than 2000 adult interviewees representing all sectors of Israeli society.<sup>6</sup> The survey focused on four main issues — the level of fear and anxiety amongst the public, the level of patriotism, the level of trust in state institutions and the level of support for strong, militant positions taken by the government. Militancy here was reflected in four key survey items:

- nuclear weapons as a key element of Israeli strategy;
- every military action undertaken by Israel is justified;
- all means are justified in Israel's war on terror;
- if attacked by enemy missiles, Israel will retaliate with its full military might.

The report stated: "These surveys, which comprise established scales which measure patriotism, attitudes towards security and peace issues, fear of war and terrorism, trust in institutions etc., portray the state of national resilience and allow us to monitor changes on a continuous basis."<sup>7</sup>

The survey concluded that several years of terrorism had failed to break the morale or undermine the resilience of the Israeli public. It revealed high levels of patriotism and faith in the Israeli Defence Force in the midst of concurrently high levels of anxiety and fear that terror would harm them and their families.

We can learn much from the Israeli experience. At every level of society, measures are deliberately taken to ensure that the sense of resilience among Israeli citizens is strengthened and that the normalcy of life is maintained despite a protracted low intensity conflict. For instance, insurance coverage is available for immediate repairs of homes and property of Israeli citizens

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.ukresilience.info/role.html>

<sup>4</sup> For more info on the Act, see <http://www.ukresilience.info/ccact/index.htm>

<sup>5</sup> For the Bill's status, see <http://olpa.od.nih.gov/legislation/108/pendinglegislation/natresact.asp>. For the Bill itself, see: <http://www.theorator.com/bills108/hr2370.html>.

<sup>6</sup> David Rudge, "Survey: Public Firm Despite Fear From Terror," *Jerusalem Post*, May 26, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> For the survey report, see: <http://nssc.haifa.ac.il/files/Resilience%20Project.htm>.

damaged by attacks during the intifada. The Police, Army, religious and municipal and other authorities also work quickly to restore an incident site back to its original state after a bomb or other incidents. The local municipality covers all medical and funeral expenses of victims and families and special effort is taken by senior officials to attend every funeral. The authorities also follow up to ensure that families are taken care of after such incidents and provided the wherewithal to survive and move on.

In schools in Israel, teachers have been specially trained to build resilience amongst their pupils by recognizing the symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and helping young people talk about their feelings. Parents are also regularly encouraged to look out for signs of trauma in their children. A recent survey of young people in Jerusalem by the Israel Center for the Treatment of Psychotrauma found that 50% of adolescents in the city had been exposed to an attack and that 20% had lost a relative.<sup>8</sup> Despite this, researchers found that Israeli children are “extraordinarily resilient” and that only 5% had developed full blown PTSD.

### Singapore’s Response

**T**he National Resilience Division (NRD) established in MICA in mid-2002 is very much a creature of September 11. It sprang from a growing realization that in the face of the peril posed by growing transnational terrorism, in addition to implementing robust security measures, we also need to shore up the psychological resilience of our people.

But the concept in itself is not altogether new and is subsumed within the idea of “psychological defence” developed by the Ministry of Defence as one of the five arms of Total Defence that contribute to the national defence of Singapore. The formal definition provided by Mindef touches on two key elements: “Being loyal and committed to our country” and “Having pride in our country”.<sup>9</sup>

For NRD, psychological resilience extends beyond psychological defence. Psychological resilience

during crises encompasses individual resilience as measured by our confidence in our ability to weather crises, crisis readiness, and responsible social behaviour and community resilience as measured by our social capital, community spirit, volunteerism, etc. During peacetime, resilience comprises a strong national identity as citizens of Singapore and a sense of belonging and rootedness to the nation.

NRD is currently working with the Institute of Policy Studies on a National Orientation Survey (similar to that undertaken by Haifa University) with a large sample of over 2000 Singaporeans and to draw up a framework for measuring resilience. In keeping with the mission of MICA, the division has initiated a variety of programmes and activities to promote a sense of belonging, rootedness and pride amongst Singaporeans. These emotional ties are essential to nurturing resilience.

But nurturing resilience cannot be the domain of a single division, ministry or agency. It transcends all ministry boundaries. The challenge ahead is whether NRD can work with all other agencies concerned to develop an overarching national strategy for building resilience, capitalizing on inter-agency cooperation for more effective deployment of expertise and resources.

### Conclusion

**R**esilience has evolved into a warm, fuzzy buzz word that has come to mean all things to all people. But we live in dangerous times: for Singapore and for many countries it must necessarily remain a deadly serious business. It would do well for all of us to remember that finding meaning and value in such an environment is an important aspect of resilience. Everyone readily agrees that resilience is a good attribute to have and that it should be enhanced, promoted and nurtured at all levels of society. Now we need to explore practical ways to achieve this goal and to ensure we reach out to a maximum number of Singaporeans. ■

Research for this article was carried out by Senior Resilience Officer, Koh Kew Soon.

<sup>8</sup> See Rob Winder, “Young Israelis ‘traumatised’ by conflict”, *BBC News Online*, 2 June 2004.

<sup>9</sup> See the full explanation of “psychological defence” on the Total Defence website at <http://www.totaldefence.org.sg/totaldefence/psychological.html>.