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Resilience: just do it?! Governing for Resilience in vulnerable Places, University of Groningen, 9-10 October 2014

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WORKSHOP REPORT

Resilience: Just do it?! Governing for resilience in vulnerable places, University of Groningen, 9–10 October 2014

Gwenda van der Vaart^{a,1}, Elen-Maarja Trell^{b*}, Britta Restemeyer^{b,2}
and Melanie Martijntje Bakema^{c,3}

^aDepartment of Cultural Geography, Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, Landleven 1, 9747 AD Groningen, The Netherlands; ^bDepartment of Spatial Planning and Environment, Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, Landleven 1, 9747 AD Groningen, The Netherlands; ^cDepartment of Economic Geography, Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

Keywords: resilience; capacity building; governance; community resilience; disaster management

Introduction

On 9 and 10 October 2014 an international workshop ‘*Resilience: just do it?! Governing for resilience in vulnerable places*’ was organised by the Coastal Resilience Research Group (CRRG) of the Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, the Netherlands. The workshop attracted 45 academics and practitioners interested in both exploring the concept of ‘resilience’ and ‘doing’ resilience in practice. A wide variety of countries (UK, Belgium, Italy, France, Germany, Slovakia, USA, Chile, Philippines, Indonesia and the Netherlands) and a broad range of disciplines, including planning, economic and cultural geography, environmental and political sciences, sociology, and arts were represented at the workshop. During the two workshop days, the participants explored the concept ‘resilience’ in-depth – not only theoretically and in relation to their personal research interests, but also in a practical and hands-on way by working on a ‘resilience strategy’ for the Province of Groningen.

Background of the workshop

The term ‘resilience’ has remarkably quickly gained currency in academia as well as in practice and is nowadays widely promoted as a promising concept to deal with shocks and uncertainties in the face of environmental, social and economic crises. However, there remains ‘an apparent gap between the advocacy of socio-ecological resilience in the scientific literature and its take-up as a policy discourse on the one hand, and the demonstrated capacity to govern for resilience in practice on the other’ (Wilkinson, 2012, p. 319).

Due to the ambiguity of the concept ‘resilience’, research has largely focused on exploring the meaning of the concept, a few recent examples include: ‘Resilience and regions: building understanding of the metaphor’ (Pendall, Foster, & Cowell, 2010),

*Corresponding author. Emails: e.m.trell@rug.nl; coastal-resilience@rug.nl

‘Resilience: a bridging concept or a dead end?’ (Davoudi et al., 2012), and ‘Resilience and disaster risk reduction: an etymological journey’ (Alexander, 2013). Although the concept sounds promising in theory, it is difficult to implement it in practice. Current practices show that resilience is often used as a panacea to various problems. The term ‘resilience’ therefore runs the risk of becoming a heavily contested buzzword. As a recent special issue in *Planning Practice and Research* (2013) edited by O’Hare and White illustrates, the way the concept of resilience has been used in practice up to date is not always unproblematic. In some cases ‘resilience’ might simply be a means to redress a problem and to justify an outdated or inherently unjust policy. In other cases resilience may be so vague and far removed from its meaning that a so-called ‘resilience approach’ may lead to less desirable, not nearly resilient, outcomes.

Considering the above this international workshop aimed at exploring ways of ‘doing’ resilience, while still keeping a critical lens on ethical, social and political issues at stake. For this purpose, researchers and practitioners with different (levels of) expertise and from a range of geographical contexts were brought together to discuss the ways they conceptualise and use resilience in their work.

The structure of the workshop

The international workshop lasted two days, both divided into two complementary ‘practice’ and ‘theory’ parts.

Both days started with a theoretical part which provided space for a critical discussion of the concept of resilience. The theoretical part was divided between four parallel presentation sessions and four corresponding keynote speeches by invited speakers. In the second, practical part of each workshop day, a start was made with ‘doing’ resilience. In order to give the participants an opportunity to implement their resilience related expertise in practice, the focus turned to the workshop location: the Province of Groningen. A fieldtrip to north-east Groningen was organised to introduce the social-geographical context and current dilemmas that this region is facing. Challenges such as the risk of flooding and earthquakes (related to the extraction of natural gas, cf. Bakema, 2014; Van der Voort & Vanclay, 2015) as well as problems connected to population decline, ageing of the population, and unemployment (cf. Haartsen & Venhorst, 2010) were introduced. In addition, opportunities in the area for sustainable energy production (cf. de Boer and Zuidema, *in press*), tourism or the development of small businesses were discussed. The knowledge and experiences gathered during the fieldtrip on the first workshop day served as an input for the creative group work session during the second afternoon when the participants were asked to develop and present a ‘resilience strategy’ for north-east Groningen (see Figure 1).

When creating the resilience strategy the main focus was on finding synergies between the place-specific opportunities and resources to tackle the current challenges that north-east Groningen is facing (for more information on the resilience strategy see Zuidema & Trell, 2014).

The theoretical part of the workshop was divided into four tracks, each focusing on a specific topic in connection to resilience:

Track 1: How to govern for resilience?

Given the gap that exists between the abundance of discussions about resilience in theory and the lack of empirical evidence on how to govern for resilience in practice, this track specifically aimed at exploring resilience strategies from a policy and decision-making

Figure 1. A group of participants of the workshop developing a resilience strategy for north-east Groningen.

perspective. The concept of resilience calls for actively incorporating risk and uncertainty into decision-making, which leads to a need for more open, dynamic and adaptable forms of governance. Acknowledging the complexity of current societal problems – such as climate change, urban growth and population decline – and the inherent uncertainty of predictions about climate change and future socio-economic developments, policy-makers are increasingly facing the challenge to prepare and make decisions on a short-term basis that nevertheless ensure the ability to adjust to changing and unforeseen circumstances in the long run.

Following Davoudi et al. (2012), two questions stood central in track 1, namely ‘resilience of what to what?’ and ‘resilience for whom?’ As the concept of resilience originates from ecology, both questions refer to the challenges of translating the concept from the natural sciences to the social sciences. The first question calls for clarifying the meaning of resilience and the boundaries of the studied system, while the second question relates to the issues of power and justice. In connection to the latter, Davoudi et al. (2012) critically reflects on the idea of ‘self-organisation’ intrinsic to resilience thinking and how it can be translated to the policy world by government officials. Self-organisation can be defined as a process in which a new system or network structures and patterns emerge without external coordination (Heylighen, 2008). Davoudi et al. (2012) argues that the idea of ‘self-organisation’ can lead to governments’ retreat from their responsibilities, instead counting more heavily on the self-reliance of communities. This may lead the ‘resilience’ approach to be abused to push through inherently neoliberal policies, which neither take into account that individuals do not have equal capacities nor that building resilience in one place might lead to less resilience in another. The above-mentioned two questions thus need to be critically addressed when current governance practices and their contribution to resilience are studied.

The keynote speech by the invited speaker for track 1, Richard Sliuzas from the University of Twente (the Netherlands) and current coordinator of the Resilience and Risk Mitigation Strategies thematic group of AESOP (Association of European Schools of Planning) illustrated the importance of keeping a critical eye on the question of ‘resilience for whom?’. Drawing from his long-term experiences with various international development projects, Sliuzas used two riverside development projects in India and Uganda to illustrate his arguments. In both projects, the potential threat – river flooding – was used as an opportunity by the local government to transform the riverside area from slums to upper-class residential and commercial districts, thereby dislocating many people that used to live there. With these examples, he made the point that considering different interest groups and questions of power is very important when ‘doing’ resilience. He emphasised that, just as different cultures have different notions of the meaning of governance, resilience too may be framed in a number of manners, depending on culture, societal and political interests and perspectives.

The presentations in track 1 covered a wide variety of resilience related research. A number of presenters explored the resilience of cities or regions in relation to a specific threat, for example, the resilience of Iranian townships to water scarcity or the resilience of Dutch, Flemish and British cities to flooding. Other researchers considered resilience more as an outcome of a good governance process, in which learning and participation were considered to be the key elements. In total, the presentations of this track gave the audience three key messages. First, urban planning and design should be better utilised to create resilient places, in particular because the design process itself creates opportunities for experimentation and reflection (emphasised during the presentation by Jonathan Clarke). Second, increasing the adaptive capacity of a society is necessary to become more (flood) resilient. For example, the presentation by Barbara Tempels, drawing from results of a survey among residents of a flood-prone area, Geraardsbergen in Belgium, showed that communication about flood risk should be improved to enable societal actors to better prepare for a potential flooding, thus increasing their adaptive capacity. Within the context of resilience to flooding, Britta Restemeyer emphasised that new governance arrangements between the state, the market and the civil society are required to increase the adaptive capacity of society. The government needs to fulfil an important role in this: public stakeholders can and should stimulate private stakeholders to participate more actively in flood risk management. Third, the presentations by Nora Mehnen and Jannes Willems made clear that new governance tools and a stronger focus on embedding learning into governance processes is needed for the government to be resilient in a changing context. Nora Mehnen then discussed the potential of the ‘Hotspotmonitor’ developed at the University of Groningen – a tool with which people can mark their favourite nature places on different spatial scales (local, regional, national and world level) – to contribute to good governance in protected areas. Jannes Willems in turn highlighted the importance of learning in relation to infrastructure redevelopment projects to adequately anticipate and deal with dynamics and change. In his perspective, learning should be object-oriented as well as intersubjective: object-oriented learning is important to better understand the system and possible interventions, whereas intersubjective learning refers to actors and organisations and how they can make sense together of the system and system changes.

Track 2: The social side of resilience

While track 1 dealt with resilience in relation to questions of good governance, in track 2 the focus turned to the social side of resilience and the resilience of (vulnerable)

communities. Previous research shows that in order to develop and enhance community resilience, community members must be able to actively engage in building the capacity to thrive in an environment that is characterised by change (Skerratt & Steiner, 2013). In addition, when talking about the resilience of a community, attention should also be paid to other 'social' aspects such as community identity, place attachment, social capital and community cohesion. Recent research indicates that having strong personal networks, high levels of participation in community activities, and a sense of belonging in a community can contribute to the resilience of a community (see Anwar McHenry, 2011; Derrett, 2003; McIntosh et al., 2008; Wilding, 2011). In recent years, the role of arts has increasingly been emphasised in connection to resilient communities and community development in general (e.g. Anwar McHenry, 2009; Grodach, 2010; Kay, 2000; Mulligan et al., 2006). The arts are argued to foster collective action, the development of social capital and are credited with having a so-called 'survival value' by providing the innovation necessary for communities to cope with change (Anwar McHenry, 2009).

Presentations and discussion in track 2 pointed to the importance of including the everyday life-world and knowledge available within local communities when planning for resilience. During his keynote speech, Iain Biggs (University of West England and PLaCE International, UK) noted that resilience is often imposed on supposedly vulnerable communities 'from outside', usually without much reference to the community members' ideas and priorities or without making use of their lived experiences. However, such top-down approaches may not be the best solutions to the emerging problems and moreover, can add to distrust that may already exist between communities and policy-makers (see Van der Voort & Vanclay, 2015). Connected to the above, Biggs encouraged researchers, planners and policy-makers alike to be more sensitive to the power and justice aspects of 'doing' resilience and thus to always consider on what authority *they/we* speak about *other's* resilience.

In relation to more local solutions and capacity building for community resilience, the participants also explored the possible role of the arts. Jethro Brice and Seila Fernandez Arconada, two independent artists from the UK, noted that the current interest in community engagement and resilience merits new attention to creative and experimental methods that socially engaged arts practitioners use in their practice. They explained that art can bring a different set of aims and sensibilities: embracing uncertainty, having an expanded frame of reference (exploring the familiar from unfamiliar angles, opening up space for voices and narratives less heard) and using creative language (generating new approaches for communicating between individuals and specialists). During their presentation, Brice and Arconada introduced their collaborative public art project *Some: when*, in which they work together with individuals and community groups affected by floods. Here, the need to work together with local residents and make their voices visible, in order to respond to challenges that are faced, emerged again.

In general, throughout the session an image of the arts arose which included recognition for the arts' ability to enable people to explore what is meaningful to them, get people to think differently, and help envision what the future could look like. A link to social capital was also drawn. In her presentation, Gwenda van der Vaart, for instance, explored the connection between participatory community art and social capital. She argued that art projects provide a context in which people are brought together, stimulating social interaction and the broadening of social networks and thus, contributing to a community's social capital. As became clear during Deepika Andavarapu's presentation on understanding resilience in urban slums, social capital can be used by community members to survive and recover from various disasters – i.e. contributing to the

community's resilience. In her Indian example, the social capital of the slum community was important for post-disaster recovery and transformation. The research and presentation of Victoria Brown, however, reminded the audience of the potential negative role of the social within resilience. Hereby, she pointed to lock-ins, social baggage and anxiety effects which can give a distorted picture and hinder positive developments.

This track reinforced the view that to enhance community resilience, there is a need for trust and exchange between professionals/policy makers and their expert knowledge and members of the various communities and their local (expert) knowledge. In this context, arts could potentially play an important role in translating between these different lifeworlds and types of knowledge – between theory and the reality of everyday life, working with professional and lay understandings, different types of authority, skills, perspectives and narratives.

Track 3: Disaster management and disaster recovery

Track 3 focused on the application and use of the concept of resilience in the context of disasters from both theoretical and practical perspectives. How do societies design planning processes for recovery after disasters? And how can governance structures best be created in order to trigger transitions towards more resilient places in the face of disasters? International protocols for rebuilding after disasters, and the academic literature, focus on the importance of engaging with the public in post-disaster contexts. However, despite wide agreement on the importance of social engagement in 'resilient' recovery processes, practice often proves to be different. Because of the chaotic context that prevails after a disaster event, post-disaster decisions are often taken in a top-down and ad hoc manner and longer-term post-disaster goals such as increasing community resilience are overshadowed by an urge for a fast recovery. It is therefore not surprising that, traditionally, the focus in disaster studies has often been on preparation for disaster events and management of the early emergency stages after a disaster (Ingram, Franco, Rio, & Khazai, 2006). However, recently the tensions between top-down emergency response actions and the importance of social engagement have led to a shift in disaster studies towards a focus on disaster governance. This entails a broader recognition of the important roles that the different actors (ranging from national and local governments to NGOs and local residents) can potentially play in post-disaster recovery processes (Tierney, 2012). In addition, it reflects the increasing emphasis on longer-term recovery processes to enhance resilience (Ingram et al., 2006).

Building on these theoretical starting points, the contributions in track 3 explored the roles and practices of communities in different post-disaster contexts. In his keynote speech, Steve Platt from Cambridge Architectural Research (UK), emphasised that different types of management and governance in subsequent different post-disaster stages are needed (including the involvement of different professionals). In order to illustrate his arguments, Platt discussed his experiences with three cases of post-disaster recovery – in Japan, Turkey and Chile. In the recovery processes after the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster in Fukushima in 2011, Japan focused on temporary housing solutions which slowed down the actual recovery. The focus on emergency management and short-term solutions limited the room for planners in creating longer-term re-development plans and starting up community engagement activities. Additionally, in the city of Van in Turkey there was too little room for local level engagement in the recovery process after the earthquake in 2011, because the rebuilding was too rapid and without proper inspections. Focusing on his experiences in Chile, Platt concluded that Chile perhaps

managed the recovery after the 2010 earthquake and tsunami in Maule ‘just right’, by simultaneously catering for short-term needs, e.g. for temporary housing, and at the same time focusing on an inclusive longer-term recovery process with room for collaborative planning processes in which residents, businesses and governments could work together.

The paper presentations in track 3 included case studies on governance of (longer-term) recovery processes connected to the earthquakes in L’Aquila (Italy) by Angelo Imperiale, in Tohoku (Japan) by Malka Older and in Christchurch (New Zealand) by Melanie Bakema, and floods in Assam (India) by Sneha Krishnan. Emilia Yustiningrum presented the reciprocal influence of disasters on politics in Indonesia. Furthermore, an analysis of environmental justice in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina (USA) and multiple typhoons in Bangladesh was presented by Kevin Gooley, and a study about the use of the ecosystem services approach to assess and improve resilience in the context of environmental disasters by Roberto Pastén. The insights from the case studies illustrated that in developed and developing countries alike, tensions arise between the focus, directions and speed of response from the government or governmental agencies and the needs and ambitions of local people and the private sector.

The main message of this track was for the researchers, disaster managers and policy-makers alike to recognize the importance and value of grassroots initiatives and community activities in post-disaster recovery processes. Controversially, the geographically spread experiences of the participants in this track showed that post-disaster governance processes often do not allow much room for bottom-up initiatives, which can subsequently lead to post-disaster environmental injustices. As the presentations showed, although communities themselves are the key actors for the resilience of their communities, their activities to make a transition towards increased resilience are more hindered than encouraged. One of the main reasons for this is that different kinds of governance are needed in different time periods after disasters in order to not let short-term needs constrain longer-term aspirations. Whereas more top-down emergency management is needed in the early time periods after a disaster in order to provide for relief efforts, aspirations in longer-term recovery processes ask for more bottom-up governance approaches, in which local people and the private sector can participate to stay attached to their places under transformation.

Track 4: Risk communication, public participation and capacity building

Acknowledging the importance and potential of local level knowledge and local involvement in risk management, track 4 focused on communication and capacity building strategies used in places at risk (with a specific focus on the risk of flooding). The aim of track four was, first, to explore creative and innovative approaches and instruments to raise risk awareness of citizens in order to increase disaster resilience of places and, second, to analyse the opportunities and constraints for involving public stakeholders in risk management plans, in order to make use of and operationalise (existing) local knowledge and networks.

Within research on flood resilience in particular, it has widely been recognised that effective communication about flood risk is integral to the flood risk management and flood resilience of a community (Brown & Damery, 2002; Raymond et al., 2010). Risk awareness among citizens is considered to have several positive effects on enhancing the resilience of an area. It can, for example, increase public participation in plan making, enlarge people’s willingness to cooperate in making adjustments to private property, and contribute to the effectiveness of evacuation (Grothmann & Reusswig, 2006; Parker & Handmer 1998). But what does (and perhaps what should) effective risk communication

entail? This question was at the centre of the keynote speech connected to this track: ‘On the way to flood resilient cities – the methods and tools to involve and empower stakeholders’ delivered by Natasa Manojlovic, a senior researcher at the Hamburg University of Technology. Manojlovic argued that capacity-building activities and tools for public engagement should surpass simply delivering flood related information and focus more on the opportunities that interactive approaches provide. Using as an example a flood simulation tool – a shipping container set up as a living-room and flooded to give the participants a ‘real-life’ flood experience – she underlined the importance of interactivity and appealing to emotions in order to raise the risk awareness of citizens (Manojlovic, 2015).

Contrary to the rather optimistic title of the workshop ‘Resilience: Just do it?!’ the participants in track 4 were critical about the usefulness of the concept of ‘resilience’ in/for practice. For example, Kevin Greksch and Maik Winges raised the question whether the complex term ‘resilience’ is suited to communicate with practitioners and the public in general. The experiences from their research on climate change adaptation showed that the public may reject the concept because of its complexity as well as for its normative implications. Acknowledging the complex mix of interests and stakeholders involved in resilience discussions, Jasper Heslinga was more optimistic about the potential of resilience in practice. Using the Dutch Wadden Sea coast as a case study, his research focused on the ways that tourism can increase the social–economic resilience of coastal areas on one hand, and the ways in which resilience thinking may help researchers to understand complex integrated social and natural systems on the other.

A key point raised by several participants in track 4 was the question of the multitude of actors (and power-relations) in so-called resilience approaches – from whose perspective is resilience ‘done’? And what should be the role of different stakeholders (state, market and society) in making places more resilient? Resilience thinking in the context of flood risk implies a shift of emphasis and a shift in responsibilities away from the central control and management towards the more local level and a network of stakeholders. The research by Tom Scholten and Thomas Hartmann illustrated that, within Dutch water management, such a shift brings about a need for new sources of legitimacy and possibly new mechanisms of participation. While Dutch water authorities seem to be exploring ways to make use of third party knowledge and input for flood risk management, the ways to balance the different (and at times conflicting) interests throughout the public participation process remain unclear. The presentation by Elen-Maarja Trelle on the other hand showed that, in line with the dominant engineering and top-down approach that has dominated Dutch water management for centuries, the Dutch citizens are not well equipped to deal with a flood event nor are they well aware of the water related risks that they may face in the near future. This raises the important question to what extent is the Netherlands resilient to flooding? Focusing on community resilience in the context of the UK, the research by Steven Forrest explored the Flood Resilience Community Pathfinder scheme of the UK Government and showed that local Flood Action Groups may be an important link between the government and the civil society. A significant conclusion in track 4 was that whereas little is known about the (possible) role of the civil society within flood resilience, even less is known about the (possible) role of the market. At the same time, the market has the potential to be a driving force of innovation and an influential element in facilitating local coping strategies. In the context of the UK, the research of Martina McGuinness contributed to filling that knowledge gap by exploring the ways in which small and medium enterprises in the UK are participating in flood risk management and could contribute to generating novel structures to deal with the risk of flooding.

Key findings from the workshop

In conclusion, the organisers and the participants considered the international workshop to have been a successful event with fruitful and thought-provoking discussions and a good spirit among the fellow resilience-enthusiasts. The two days in which the participants discussed, observed and ‘did’ resilience provided food for thought and led to the identification of a number of key issues that researchers as well as practitioners should pay attention to when working with resilience.

The first key issue, recurring in all four tracks, was the use of threats to societies as opportunities for co-creating resilience and stimulating innovation. Such focus on integrating challenges and transforming them into opportunities is common in the context of natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes. However, in the workshop the resilience strategies envisioned by the participants showed that it is possible to transfer such thinking to design transitions in areas that struggle with different issues, for example population decline or economic stress and that by incorporating the opportunities and strengths of an area it is possible to move towards increased (community/regional/rural or urban) resilience.

The second key point of the workshop centred around the consideration of the key actors from whose perspective resilience is ‘done’. The questions as raised by Davoudi et al. (2012) – ‘resilience of what to what?’ and ‘resilience for whom?’ – were discussed widely and manifested in a range of different cases throughout the workshop. The participants concluded that issues of power relations and justice are unavoidably at stake when developing strategies for increasing the resilience of people and places. Given the shift away from central control towards multi-level governance systems and stakeholder networks, novel questions connected to the division of responsibilities between different actors on different levels in creating strategies to increase resilience arise. In addition, the participants of the workshop concluded that when implementing and designing resilience strategies new vulnerabilities may also be created. Thus, a critical eye should be kept on the vulnerable groups and the power of different actors whenever a plan to ‘do’ resilience in practice is compiled.

A third key conclusion relates to resilience and social learning in the context of improving governance structures. When resilience is regarded as an outcome of good governance processes, it becomes essential to foster mutual learning for enabling governance transitions towards resilience. Ideally, in such mutual learning pathways, top-down decision-making processes should not hinder bottom-up initiatives. Following the arguments of Jacobs and Williams (2011) a central message that emerged from the workshop with regards to capacity building is that public participation in making plans for resilience is essential as it makes people feel part of plan-making processes and enables the integration of local knowledge and everyday experiences of people (Ahrens & Rudolph, 2006; Aldrich, 2012).

Finally, despite the risk that resilience is becoming a buzzword without a univocal meaning and a concrete understanding of how to implement the concept in practice, the workshop revealed that the use of the concept in plan-making can trigger bottom-up innovation and recognition of the value of collaboration between different actors. Such small initial attempts, much like the international workshop ‘Resilience: Just do it!’ may be the way forward to implementing resilience in practice. In conclusion, diverging somewhat from the original title of the workshop, the researchers concluded that within social-spatial sciences, further work remains to be done for ‘translating’ resilience from its ecological origins and uncovering the potential and the challenges connected to the use of the concept in practice.

The Coastal Resilience Research Group (CRRG)

The *Resilience: Just do it?!* international workshop was an initiative from the CRRG of the Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen. CRRG is a cross-departmental research group comprising researchers from the departments of Spatial Planning and Environment, Cultural Geography and Economic Geography and is coordinated by Elen-Maarja Trell. CRRG research covers a variety of issues: adaptive governance for flood prone areas; resilience of rural communities; governance of protected landscapes; ecosystem and coastal vulnerability; the role of arts in building community resilience; sustainable energy and rural resilience; tourism in vulnerable coastal regions; risk communication and disaster recovery. The starting point of CRRG research is the realisation of the high level of complexity and nuance of the problems emerging in vulnerable areas in times of changing climate and changing socio-economic conditions. The ambition of the CRRG is to contribute to strengthening coastal regions and establishing sustainable communities. By doing that the CRRG contributes to the university-wide research focus area Sustainable Society and to the Faculty of Spatial Sciences research mission towards Well-being, Innovation and Spatial Transformation (tWIST). Based on the *Resilience: Just do it?!* workshop currently several members of CRRG are engaged in preparation of an edited book ‘Governing for Resilience in Vulnerable Places’, led by Elen-Maarja Trell.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. Email: g.van.der.vaart@rug.nl
2. Email: b.restemeyer@rug.nl
3. Email: m.m.bakema@rug.nl

Notes on contributors

Gwenda van der Vaart works as a Ph.D. researcher at the Department of Cultural Geography, Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen. She studied at the University of Groningen where she obtained her Bachelor’s degree in Human Geography and Planning in 2011 and her Research Master degree in Regional Studies in 2013. In her Ph.D., Gwenda focuses on the role of arts practice and expression in community resilience. Her Ph.D. research consists of a case study in the Dutch Wadden area, in which a participatory approach relying on art-based methods is adopted.

Elen-Maarja Trell is assistant professor at the Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen. She is interested in the role of local level initiatives and public participation in creating more resilient and sustainable places. The themes she explores within this context include: community resilience in declining (rural) areas, climate change adaptation and urban green space/urban gardening, planning for pets, and governance of renewable energy initiatives. She is specialised in using qualitative,

visual and (inter)active research methods such as (participatory) video, mental mapping and go-along interviews. In her previous research projects she has explored young people's place attachment and influential aspects for well-being of rural youths (problem behaviour; gender roles; citizenship) in their everyday context.

Britta Restemeyer is a Ph.D. researcher at the Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in urban planning at the HafenCity University, Hamburg. Afterwards, she successfully completed the double degree master programme Water and Coastal Management at the Universities of Oldenburg and Groningen. Her key interest is how to deal with flood risk in cities. Already during her studies, and later on in her professional career, she participated in German as well as European research projects, such as RIMAX, Climate Proof Areas, KLIFF and MARE. Since 2012 she continues her research interest in a Ph.D. project called 'Flood resilient cities'. By studying the cases of Hamburg, London and Rotterdam, she aims at operationalising the theoretical notion of resilience and suggesting policy strategies for creating more flood resilient cities

Melanie Bakema is a Ph.D. researcher at the Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen. Before starting with her Ph.D., she obtained her Bachelor's degree in Human Geography and Planning and her Research Master's degree in Regional Studies both from the University of Groningen. For her Master's thesis she conducted research on the role of social engagement in the recovery process of the city of Christchurch, New Zealand, after the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes. In her Ph.D. research, she continues with this passion for disaster studies by focusing on disaster governance as a multi-level approach to overcome the social vacuum in disaster studies. Cases that Melanie is investigating are Christchurch, New Zealand, Chiloé, Chile and the North of the Netherlands. By exploring the dynamic interactions between nature and societies in these cases, she aims at fostering transitions towards improved governance structures for creating more resilient social-ecological systems in the face of disasters.

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