Radical Transformation in Local Government: The Pursuit of Resilience through Decision-Making

Gemma Edwards

Bega Valley Shire Council, Bega Valley LGA, New South Wales, Australia

Abstract

This study explores the role of social and political processes in complex decision-making at the local government level, particularly in relation to transformational approaches to embedding "resilience" within planning and decision-making processes to alter community outcomes. Using the Bega Valley Shire Council and CSIRO's earlier pilot project, 'Embedding the Enabling Resilience Investment (ERI) Approach in Bega Valley - Supporting Regional Scaling', we reflect on the ERI approach, the process of its introduction and its impact on the organisation and reflect on the challenges and lessons encountered a year after the project's conclusion.

We first outline the intricate systems shaping local government decision-making, highlighting the politics of planning—how decisions are influenced not only by technical considerations but also by political viability, competing imperatives, and entrenched social dynamics. Next, we critically examine the ERI as a practical tool for identifying public and private values, beneficiaries, and investment pathways for resilience. We then reflect on the challenges of operationalising this transformational approach within the constraints of local government, including the temporal nature of political cycles, the rigidity of existing parameters, and the limitations of technocratic solutions. Finally, we explore how these insights can inform local governments seeking to embrace radical transformation, enhance governance through participation, and deliver public value in politically uncertain contexts.

This study provides a critical perspective on resilience-building, advocating for deliberate actions that challenge the status quo, navigate complexity, and redefine "success" in decision-making. Rather than offering definitive answers, we reflect on the lessons learned from implementing 'resilience building' initiatives and pose critical questions about how we might better facilitate radical transformation despite systemic constraints—positioning the pursuit of resilience as a catalyst for broader social and political change.

Introduction: The Politics of Planning and the Pursuit of Resilience

Decision-making at all levels of government is rooted in social relations and political imperatives. In local government, this dynamic is especially visible: decisions made at a council level directly shape the lives of constituents, creating a space where international imperatives (e.g. the Paris Agreement or the Sendai Framework) filter down and encounter local realities. Planning and the production of plans that govern and direct resource allocation is never an apolitical process (Flyvbjerg 1998); At the local government level especially, it is a direct negotiation between decision making agents and those they govern, of spatial priorities, competing visions of the future, and varying levels of risk appetite, within a broader environment shaped by cultural, institutional, and financial constraints.

Resilience, as a policy objective, suffers from vagueness and abstraction. Though widely supported in principle, it often fails to compel investment of time, courage and money because of its perceived delayed returns, uncertain effectiveness, and relatively intangible benefits in the

context of temporality (Tanner et. Al 2017, Vale 2014). Within four-year election cycles, resilience is difficult to champion: it does not easily translate into the kind of visible outputs politicians are pressured to produce. The politics of planning, particularly in regional contexts like the Bega Valley where resources are constrained and social proximity intensifies pressure on officials, often relegates resilience to the periphery of 'core business' rather than being treated as an imperative as a strategic initiative or collection of initiatives in order to maintain, or at least uphold partially, an expected level of service delivery.

Additionally, the proportional responsibility of taking action related to complex policy issues muddies the water on who (institution) is ultimately responsible for translating high level aspirations into apportioned responses based on the estimation of the size and urgency of the problem within the sector, level of government or even the agent within the institution (Torabi et. al 2018).

Fragmented policy spaces are further complicated by the elected federal and state governmental priorities and interests. The question of who is responsible for managing climate change risk is deeply political, entangled in debates related to economic growth as an indication of success, accountability for driving growth in line with the expected and accepted activity supported through interpretation of social licence to do so (Knox, 2020; Head, 2010; Bulkeley, Newell 2015). Recent examples of social and legal imperative to enact regulatory changes that could provide clear guides on expected and accepted behaviour indicate the fragility of political will in this space (the short-lived carbon tax scrapped in 2011, and more recently the overturned ruling on the government's duty of care to protect young Australians from climate harm in 2022.)

Action on climate change has historically been framed as a potential disruptor to growth, with decisions filtered through a neoclassical economic logic that positions environmental concerns as externalities rather than systemic conditions. Consequently, decisions about how and where to intervene are not merely technical but laden with political considerations. The translation of systemic processes into numerical targets (Knox 2020), such as those found in documents like the Intergenerational Report, reflect the symbolic role of policy in establishing future priorities through present decisions; decisions shaped by the institutional ideologies of the governments in power.

At the local government level, these dynamics manifest in complex ways. Local governments inherit priorities and programs from state and federal tiers, mandated through legislation but subject to interpretation based on demographic needs, economic standing, and political climate. Yet while responsibility may be devolved, capability often is not (OECD 2023). Councils are expected to plan for long-term climate adaptation with limited resources, ambiguous mandates, and often without the power to enact broader structural change. The funding structures established under the Whitlam government in the 1970s have seen little reform in the decades since, and they no longer reflect the broad and expanding remit of modern local councils.

The development of policies under political and public pressure can result in symbolic actions more aimed at signalling commitment than delivering practical solutions. Expert knowledge is shaped and legitimised by institutional ideologies and political values, elevating some voices while marginalising others. Technocratic approaches, while appealing in their promise of objectivity and order, tend to depoliticise inherently political problems; in the process, sidelining the very people whose experiences and insights are crucial to resilient outcomes

(Kehler, Birchall 2021). As anthropologists of policy have shown, plans are not neutral artefacts but political tools that reflect and reinforce institutional priorities (Shore, Wright 1997: Wedel et. al 2005). The development of a plan itself becomes a performative act, embedded with symbolic power.

In this context, resilience planning is often developed through ‘plans to make plans’; documents filled with verbs like "investigate" or "develop" but rarely specifying how or with what resources. These plans are burdened by expectations they cannot meet, or aspirations never fully realised (Sustainability Development goals, Measuring what Matters) and judged by KPIs that shift with each political cycle. Without consistent definitions or measurement strategies, local governments are left chasing moving targets, criticised both for acting too slowly and for overreaching their remit.

Ultimately, planning in local government is a process of navigating uncertainty while attempting to produce order. It involves estimating political risk, interpreting community sentiment, negotiating institutional mandates, and presenting these decisions through plans that reflect legitimacy and confidence. Yet behind each plan lies the struggle of interpretation, capacity, and constrained agency. It is in this crucible that resilience must be embedded. The difficulty encountered whilst in pursuit of resilience should not be viewed as a failure of knowledge, but as a symptom of a system operating within institutional structures upheld by what Knox (2020, pg 8) calls “the mundane work of knowing and managing the social order.”

Discussion

ERI as a Practical Intervention

The Enabling Resilience Investment (ERI) approach sought to address these challenges by developing a structured, participatory method for embedding resilience thinking into investment prioritisation (Box, et. al 2025). Anchored by a series of five workshops, the project brought together internal and external stakeholders to map systemic vulnerabilities and co-design multi-benefit interventions using transport infrastructure as a boundary object. These outputs were then fed into the Resilient Investment Case Explorer (RICE), a tool developed by CSIRO in partnership with Value Advisory Partners (VAP) to visualise resilient investment scenarios and quantify socio-economic benefits.

The ERI approach offered promise in several respects, and the project itself was successful in its delivery. It provided a language and framework for articulating public value beyond economic returns, potentially enabling councils to attract funding for more holistic outcomes. It exposed staff to systems thinking, scenario planning, and the challenge of incorporating uncertainty into strategic decisions. Furthermore, in its implementation the project created a temporary space for collaboration across siloes and sectors, enabling a multidisciplinary assessment of value, benefits and beneficiaries of critical assets.

Structural and Operational Constraints: Why ERI Was Not Enough

Despite its strengths, ERI did not deliver radical transformation. This was not due to flaws in the approach per se, but rather the systemic friction it encountered. Local government operates within rigid constraints: short-term funding cycles, election-driven priorities, fragmented

policies, and siloed internal structures. Resilience work, by contrast, requires long-term commitment, flexibility, and cross-boundary collaboration.

During the project, CSIRO worked with internal planning groups to embed findings into operational documents. Yet despite these efforts, the transformation was not sustained through this work alone. A question posed at the final workshop, "Whose job is it to do resilience?" revealed a core problem: ownership. The question was met with silence, until someone joked, "Gemma, she's new and it's in her title." This moment, while light-hearted, exhibits precisely the issues encountered in the policy space and through the planning process negotiated and apportioned through all three levels of government and across sectors. Without clearly defined roles or resourcing, resilience becomes everybody's responsibility- and thus nobody's. Furthermore, if no one 'owns' the responsibility of doing this work, then how precisely is it included in the business-as-usual operations, resourced or measured?

Differences in precisely what the desired future state was by all parties involved in designing, delivering and participating in the project, or to adequately bridge the gap between theory and practice, further impeded uptake. While public-private partnerships are often crucial for developing and testing innovative approaches, they can also suffer from conflicting motivations, especially when the drivers behind the project differ across institutional lines (Buuren, Edlenbos 2004; Ansell, Gash, 2008).

Ultimately, the greatest constraint was structural. The application of a potentially transformative methodology through a finite, grant-funded project limited its ability to embed lasting change. Meeting milestones to deliver contractual outcomes left little room to develop a deep contextual understanding of the Bega Valley or the organisation itself. The project was implemented without fully diagnosing the current state of operations, cultural readiness, or capacity constraints; and as a result, confusion remained at its conclusion around what should happen next. Significant time and energy were spent trying to define the next steps, a process only made possible because a project officer remained appointed for an additional year beyond the formal project end. And, once the grant funding was spent and the time elapsed, the project ended. As a result, ERI acted as an overlay, not a response to current realities.

The ERI project was not a failure for any parties involved and in fact, provided opportunities to further understand what radical transformation in local government requires, and surfaced critical questions about the nature of transformation in this context. First, it highlighted that resilience is not just about physical infrastructure, it's about creating conditions that allow alternate, opposing and withstanding ways of seeing, valuing, and engaging with the physical and social world to enable deliberative processes. In the context of BVSC, this meant reorienting the planning processes that enable staff and decision makers to identify and develop strategies to maintain and upgrade infrastructure to become more resilient. This included identifying multi benefits and beneficiaries and understanding how to create processes that allow time and space to engage with those beneficiaries and identify who doesn't benefit and why. In this way, the learning is that transformation requires relational infrastructure: the trust, time, and spaces needed for reflection, sensemaking, and adaptive learning (Pelling, 2010).

Second, the ambiguity of resilience can be a strength. When approached as a generative, rather than prescriptive, concept, it can open up conversations about assumptions, power, and public value. Yet this requires facilitation, iteration, and courage. As Birchall et al. (2023) notes, sustained political leadership is crucial for prioritising adaptation, translating high-level goals

into actionable tools, and aligning fragmented planning systems. Without this leadership, adaptation goals risk remaining high-level aspirations, disconnected from fine-grained planning tools, legislative backing, and community buy-in; relegating 'resilience' a nice-to-have outside of core business, rather than a strategic imperative.

Finally, radical transformation demands deliberate, ongoing action. It is not a one-off project but a cultural and institutional shift (Russell, Christie 2021). Councils must be willing to question their indicators of success, reimagine governance as a participatory process, and create conditions where the public good is the most compelling political imperative. The challenge lies not in overcoming politics but in engaging with its complexity (Head, 2010). Further to this, it cannot and must not fall to local government solely to establish and implement actions to decrease vulnerability. This must be the priority of the government in power, the strategic priority of federal and state agencies responsible, and must be a multidisciplinary and concerted effort to apportion this work and enact change where it is required.

The pursuit of resilience offers a unique opportunity to reframe public value, challenge the status quo, and address the systemic inequities embedded in our planning and decision-making systems (Meerow, Newell 2019). But doing so requires a reorientation of our funding structures, planning processes, and markers of success. It must reflect community trust, adaptive capacity, and future-facing governance.

Conclusion

Critical reflection on the ERI pilot highlights the systemic misalignments, operational constraints, and cultural dynamics that must be addressed if councils are to embed resilience in meaningful ways (Box et. al 2025). This reflection offers timely insights for policymakers, researchers, and local government professionals grappling with how to move toward systemic resilience.

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