

RESILIENCE AS IDENTITY THROUGH DISRUPTION

BUILDING CAPACITY FOR COHERENCE
IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Policy Brief



POCKETPROJECT
A GLOBAL HEALING MOVEMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Across the world, societies are navigating increasing levels of collective stress - war, displacement, polarization, and ecological instability. These pressures shape how individuals regulate, how communities relate, and how institutions function.

The “Resilience frameworks, measurement tools, and transmission processes in the context of man-made collective trauma”, a systematic review and **meta-analysis of 53 studies** on resilience in contexts of collective trauma conducted by Japhet Niyonsenga and colleagues, shows that resilience develops through the interaction of individual capacities, relationships, cultural meaning systems, and structural conditions. Many current resilience frameworks are based on simplified models of recovery and return to baseline. These models overlook how living systems respond to disruption. Complex adaptive systems ideally move through disruption, reorganize, and continue in altered forms while allowing predurability and coherence over time.

Resilience can be understood as the capacity of a system to maintain coherence and identity while undergoing transformation.

This perspective is supported by emerging practice-based work in trauma integration and collective healing, including the work of Thomas Hübl, which emphasizes presence, relational awareness, and the integration of individual and collective trauma as foundations for resilience.

Taken together, these perspectives point toward a shift in policy and leadership: resilience develops through interconnected systems and requires both inner capacities and supportive external conditions. ***Resilience, therefore, cannot be seen as an individual capacity alone but as being embedded in systems and supported by social justice work along the way towards collective healing.***

01 Understanding the Reality: Systems Move Through Disruption

Many policy frameworks describe change as a linear process - moving from problem to solution, from instability to stability. In practice, especially in contexts of crisis, systems respond differently.

The meta-study mentioned above shows that resilience unfolds across interconnected systems. Individuals, relationships, and environments influence each other continuously. Stress in one area affects the others. Systems are constantly adjusting. Stability, disruption, and renewal are present at the same time. Conditions shift, and responses emerge within those conditions. In this context, resilience describes the ability to maintain sufficient stability and connection to continue functioning while adapting to change.

02 Working on Three Levels at the Same Time

A central insight from the meta-study is that resilience develops across three interconnected levels:

1. **Individual capacities** such as regulation, orientation, and meaning-making
2. **Relational processes** such as trust, support, and co-regulation
3. **Sociocultural dynamics** such as shared narratives, identity, and cultural practices

These levels are always interacting. When individuals are more regulated, relationships become more stable. Stable relationships support stronger institutions. Shared meaning strengthens collective orientation. The Pocket Project highlights that these processes also unfold across time. Patterns of stress and resilience can be carried across generations and expressed in behavior, culture, and institutional dynamics. Working with resilience, therefore, includes working with both present conditions and inherited patterns of the past, such as historical and collective trauma.

03 Presence: Staying Present with Challenge

Resilience is often described as coping or adapting. A deeper understanding includes the capacity to remain in contact with difficulty. At the **individual level**, resilience develops through presence. Experiences of stress and trauma leave traces in the body and nervous system. Avoidance can lead to fragmentation over time. Resilience grows through the ability to stay present with experience, even when it is challenging. This supports gradual processing and integration. The work of Thomas Hübl emphasizes that this capacity can be developed. It involves learning to remain connected to oneself in moments of intensity. At the same time, individual capacity is shaped by context. Social and structural conditions influence how much presence is available. Factors such as inequality, exclusion, and access to resources affect how people experience and respond to stress. Strengthening resilience at this level includes developing the capacity for presence while also recognizing the conditions that support or limit it.

04 Leadership Practice: Creating Stability in Complexity

Leaders are increasingly working in environments that are unstable, fast-moving, and emotionally demanding. At the **relational level**, resilience develops through the quality of connection within groups and communities. The meta-study (Niyonsenga et al., 2025) shows that environments shape resilience, and leadership plays a key role in shaping these environments. One of the most important leadership capacities is the ability to remain present under pressure. When leaders are grounded, it supports clearer thinking, more stable communication, and stronger trust within the social field. The Pocket Project describes this as **resilient presence in relationship** - the ability to stay embodied and connected with others in challenging situations. Leadership in this context becomes a form of custodianship:

1. **holding** continuity while change unfolds
2. **staying** with tension rather than avoiding it
3. **supporting** processes instead of forcing quick solutions

Through these capacities, leaders help regulate the social field. This strengthens co-regulation, trust, and the ability of groups to remain connected in times of stress. **These capacities can be practiced and developed over time.**

05 Working with Meaning: Listening to the System

After disruption, many organizations focus on communication strategies to restore clarity and direction. At the **sociocultural level**, resilience develops through shared meaning. Meaning forms through conversations, shared experiences, and informal interpretations that circulate within a system. The meta-study highlights that these processes shape how groups understand and integrate disruption. Cultural narratives, identity, and collective memory provide orientation in times of uncertainty. When there is a gap between official communication and lived experience, fragmentation can increase. Informal narratives continue to form regardless of formal messaging.

A more effective approach focuses on listening and learning at the level of the system:

1. **noticing** how people describe their experience
2. **identifying patterns** in emerging narratives
3. **creating spaces** for shared reflection and dialogue

The Pocket Project emphasizes that coherence develops over time through these processes and continued learning. When systems are able to “listen to themselves,” shared meaning can emerge that reflects reality and supports collective orientation.

06 What This Means for Policy and Institutions

The Pocket Project argues for a complex-systemic approach to resilience:

1. Policies can support this by integrating multiple dimensions of human experience, strengthening relational environments, and addressing structural conditions.
2. This includes investing in leadership development, supporting community-based processes, and aligning resilience work with broader social and economic policy.
3. Resilience grows in systems where people have the capacity to connect, the space to process, and the conditions to participate.

07 From Understanding to Practice

There is a growing **need for practical pathways and learning** that translate these insights into real capacity. Leaders and practitioners in international organizations, NGOs, and government are increasingly working in complex environments that require more than technical expertise. They need the ability to stay present under pressure, relate across differences, and work effectively with dynamic systems.

The Pocket Project's Resilience Program provides a structured approach to developing these capacities by integrating research - including the meta-study (Niyonsenga et al., 2025) - with practice-based methods for working across individual, relational, and systemic levels.

A key application of this approach can be seen in the Ukraine Resilience Program, developed in response to the ongoing impacts of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This program supports young adults in conditions of prolonged stress and uncertainty. It combines training in nervous system regulation and trauma integration with relational practices that strengthen trust, co-regulation, and collaboration within groups.

Participants develop the capacity to:

1. **remain grounded** and present in high-intensity environments
2. **support others** without becoming overwhelmed or disengaged
3. **facilitate constructive dialogue** and shared meaning-making
4. navigate complexity while maintaining coherence in their work contexts

The program also emphasizes scalability through local capacity-building. By training multipliers within Ukrainian institutions and communities, resilience practices can be embedded in education systems, organizational cultures, and community networks. This creates continuity and reinforces resilience not only at the individual level, but across relational and societal systems.

CONCLUSION

The meta-study shows that resilience develops through interconnected systems: individual, relational, cultural, and structural. Resilience describes the capacity to move through disruption while maintaining coherence and continuity of identity. Developing this capacity requires attention to both human development and the conditions in which people live and work.

Resilience, therefore, is embedded in systems and strengthened through relational processes, cultural meaning-making, and ongoing work toward social justice and collective healing. In a time of increasing instability, the question becomes how we build the capacity to stay present, connected, and responsive within complexity.

The Pocket Project's Resilience Program offers a practice-based pathway for this work - supporting leaders and practitioners to develop grounded presence, relational awareness, and the ability to engage with systems in motion. It is an invitation to participate in building coherence: within ourselves, in our relationships, and across the systems we are part of.

LEARN MORE:

[Pocket Project Resilience Program](#)