

# ROWING AGAINST THE TIDE

**Making the case for community resilience**

Nina Mguni & Lucia Caistor-Arendar / December 2012



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## **ABOUT THE YOUNG FOUNDATION**

We are The Young Foundation and we are determined to make positive social change happen. We pioneered the field of social innovation with The Open University, UpRising and Studio Schools. We work closely with individuals, communities and partners building relationships to ensure that our thinking does something, our actions matter and the changes we make together will continue to grow.

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# AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Nina Mguni** is a Senior Associate at the Young Foundation. Nina works on a range of projects advising the public sector on new ways of working. She has particular expertise in Wellbeing and Resilience and recently led the Young Foundation's work to develop a tool for measuring wellbeing and resilience in communities. Nina is leading on Beyond GDP, a research project supported by the European Commission about measuring wellbeing and resilience at a local level. Nina has a Masters Degree in Economic History (MSc) from the London School of Economics.

**Lucia Caistor-Arendar** is an Associate working within the Community Resilience and Housing team. Lucia is working on Beyond GDP, a research project supported by the European Commission about measuring wellbeing and resilience at a local level. Lucia was involved in research and action within the field of urban regeneration, placemaking and grassroots community activism through the Future Communities programme - exploring the ways in which new and existing housing developments can become places where people want to live. Lucia has a Masters Degree in Urban Studies (MSc) from University College London and a Degree in Architectural Studies (BArch) from the Glasgow School of Art.

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# INTRODUCTION

We recently visited two neighbourhoods, one in Malmö, Sweden, the other in Barcelona, Spain. At the end of the commuter line, both neighbourhoods are peripheral to large cities. These neighbourhoods face multiple vulnerabilities: high rates of worklessness, newly arrived migrants inhabiting dense housing, and recent memories of tensions.

And yet, despite some of these very visible fault lines, we glimpsed pockets of resilience. Organic responses which emerged to calm community tension, resilient individuals who devise and put into action initiatives, for example, which support fathers to bond with their children or residents helping new migrants to learn Catalan. Such responses are often immediate, tackling issues as they surface. The individuals that take these actions are driven, persistent, positive forces of change, who do not operate within professional constraints and protect their neighbours from some of the bite of the recession. In short, we saw glimpses of community resilience.

Much has been written on the need to fix our gaze on how we surface and interpret quality of life, moving [Beyond GDP](#) and material deprivation, to include aspects that we generally understand to constitute 'the good life'. For instance, our publication [The State of Happiness](#), set out how a wellbeing agenda can influence public policy. However, as the recession persists, we have now started to grapple with the notion of resilience, and how to help communities [adapt to change](#).

We have set out our thoughts on a definition of community resilience: what nourishes it, what acts as a barrier to its development and what role professionals and the state play in brokering or impeding community resilience. This think piece draws on our observations in the two neighbourhood areas: Roquetes in Barcelona, Spain and Lindängen in Malmö, Sweden. The challenges in these places resonate with many of the issues faced closer to home and much of the scenarios described will be familiar to policy makers working in the UK context. The lessons drawn will therefore hopefully be of interest.

## DEFINING RESILIENCE

The Young Foundation defines a resilient community as one that has a collectively held belief in their ability to adapt and thrive in spite of adversity. Individuals activate relationships with their peers, with networks and state structures to capitalise on dormant and existing capacity. This emergent action can bring about positive change, boosting protective factors to ensure that a community can transform itself over time in the face of challenges. Of interest to us is how dormant, intrinsic resilient traits can be activated, and the process of making less resilient communities more resilient.

Our understanding of community resilience has much to borrow from development discourses. The focus here is often on how the community, the state and NGOs respond

to environmental hazards, identifying the risk factors and the assets within a community, and the level of opportunity to address the challenges that communities face.

Understanding resilience requires a dynamic interpretation of the factors at work within a community, not just focusing on what is happening now, but also how a community will respond in the future. It also has the potential to inform design of policy and interventions.

Our attention is on how to shape local policy, prompted by slow-burning traumas like the fiscal squeeze and increasing need. As austerity continues apace, with forecast and actual public sector cuts taking effect, the extent to which the wider community can absorb and adapt to austerity will be much determined by the creative responses of individuals, their networks and organisations. We look at the everyday crises, such as the closure of a car factory in East London or the loss of public sector jobs in some local areas in the north, or increasing number of single pensioner households.

Particularly as finite public resource is reduced, there is a role for grass root organic responses to the crisis. The question is how to make such self activating responses visible and viable and therefore what is the role of the state, to get out of the way and let communities get on with it or to manage community response? We argue for something in between.

Our concern is the extent to which a community can withstand shocks and can activate links which help it to adapt and transform. Communities can be resilient, and exhibit resilience, by becoming more isolated and defensive, just looking to recover from trauma before returning to their previous state. In the Young Foundation's study of unmet needs, this "survival resilience" is described as "developing a thick skin"<sup>1</sup>, whilst adaptive resilience is described as responding to challenges, learning how to cope and seeking out new opportunities. Our focus here is on how a community cultivates new solutions by drawing on resources from outside and thereby increasing capacity within their area.

## MEASURING RESILIENCE

Policy makers' attention, and consequent allocation of resources, is often determined by fixed 'quality of life' indicators based on the provision and access to services and infrastructure. Such decisions rarely take into account the fluidity of change and softer, fluid indicators such as whether neighbours regularly greet each other on the street, belong to a local football club or have some form of inter-faith forum. Such features might be termed forms of social capital.

Consideration of community resilience brings into focus the informal community leaders, the formal and informal networks, and hierarchies that exist at different levels within the local area. It prompts two main questions: firstly, what assets, including social capital, exist and secondly, what are the catalysts that galvanise these assets to address local issues. For instance, a local allotment whose members meet on a monthly basis could also serve as a hub for skills sharing for older men, or a place to deliver resilience interventions.

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<sup>1</sup> Watts, B et al. (2009) *Sinking and Swimming*, London: The Young Foundation.

Our work on the [Wellbeing and Resilience Measure \(WARM\)](#) identifies three scales that contribute to community resilience:

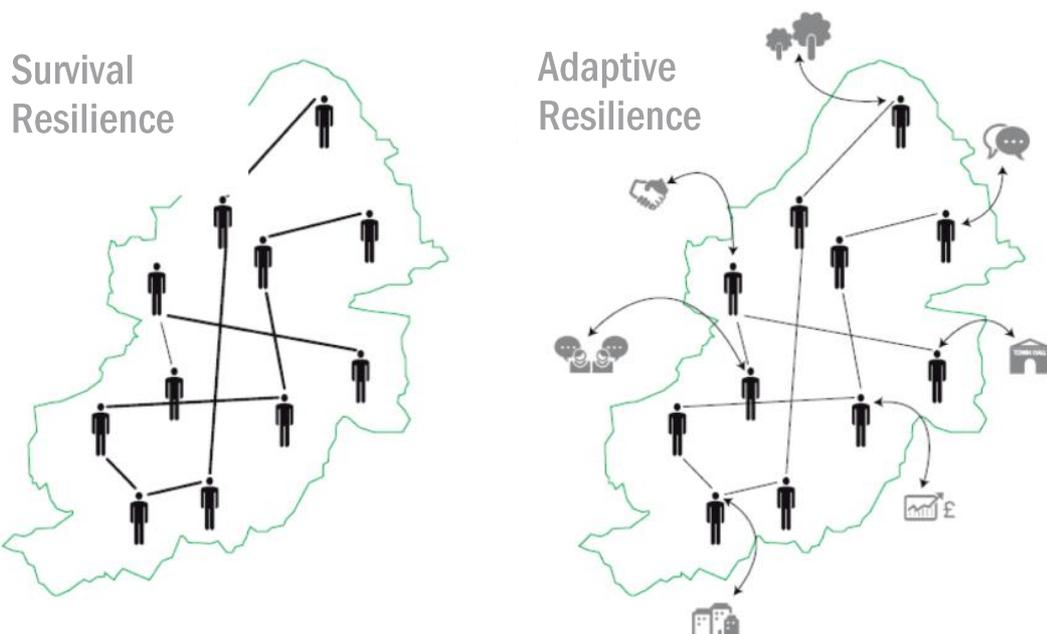
- **Self:** the way people feel about their own lives
- **Support:** the quality of social supports and networks within the community
- **Structure and systems:** the strength of the infrastructure and environment to support people to achieve their aspirations and live a good life.

Each of the three levels interacts to influence community resilience in an area. Likewise we know that there are specific attributes that can enhance protective factors that boost resilience.

At an individual level, our statistical analysis of the [Understanding Society survey](#) has identified responses associated with attributes of resilience such as whether you have friends/family around for drink or meal, your ability to face problems, and whether you regularly stop and talk with people in your neighbourhood.

Measuring community resilience should reveal the organic networks and activism as well as the vulnerabilities, for instance social isolation, in order to see a community in its totality. Indicators associated with resilience can be masked by traditional forms of measurement. Some organic initiatives, and the outcomes of these initiatives, will not be captured readily by measurement tools like surveys or interviews, but will need other approaches like observation and ethnography. These methodologies capture the realities of the people that live and work in an area, on their own terms.

The extent to which a community is resilient will evolve, and platforms for real time mapping of communities that residents create in collaboration with stage agencies will help document levels of resilience.



# ROQUETES AND LINDÄNGEN

## NEIGHBOURHOOD CONTEXT

The contexts of Roquetes and Lindängen vary greatly, however there are also many similarities that can be drawn between the ways these neighbourhoods were formed. A brief description follows, including the story of how they developed into neighbourhoods.

Both Roquetes and Lindängen are on the periphery of post-industrial, port cities. Roquetes is located on the northern edge of Barcelona in the district of Nou Barris, and has approximately 8,300 inhabitants. Lindängen is located on the southern edge of Malmö in a district called Fosie. This neighbourhood is smaller in size with a population of approximately 6,600 inhabitants (figures from 2011).

Like many port cities in Europe, Barcelona and Malmö followed a similar pattern of development during the 20th century. In the 1960s both were thriving industrial cities. To house a growing workforce that had migrated from rural parts of the country, residential areas quickly formed at the edge of the existing city where land was more affordable and yet in close proximity to work. Roquetes and Lindängen consolidated into neighbourhoods as a result of this rapid urban expansion. The resulting urbanisation of these two areas has been starkly different and this has played a significant role in defining the characteristics of these places.

In line with Sweden's strong welfare state, Lindängen was the result of a masterplan conceived of during the 1960s aiming to provide large amounts of social housing in the district of Fosie. The imposing concrete apartment blocks were organised around vast green spaces with a stand-alone high street bringing them together in the centre. Carbon copies of this neighbourhood can be found all over the world. There were also some pockets of privately owned homes that are smaller in scale and often have private gardens. Over time, the tenure divide has exemplified the fault lines within the community.

In contrast to Malmö, Barcelona does not have a history of social housing provision and at the time there was no strategic plan for integrating the areas of expansion into the city. Most land was privately owned and residents were left to organise their neighbourhood themselves. The strong history of self-organisation in this community has had a strong impact on their current sense of ownership, participation, entitlement and belonging to their neighbourhood. Only in recent years have there been attempts to formally integrate Nou Barris and other peripheral neighbourhoods into Barcelona's urban plan, for instance by connecting them to the city's metro system and improving access to other services.

Presently, there are certain commonalities between Lindängen and Roquetes: the original housing is no longer fit for purpose, the neighbourhoods are still highly residential, still peripheral despite the improved transport links, and they are still relatively poor.

## Urbanising Sundays in Roquetes

From 1963-66 residents of Roquetes would come together on their day off work for 'Urbanising Sundays' where they would collectively help build the housing and infrastructure that was needed for them to get on with their everyday lives. During this period they initiated and self-financed the installation of street lighting and a sewage system for the area. For the sewers, the council supplied the machinery, engineers and materials but the residents supplied the labour and most of the funding for the project.



*Residents of Roquetes building the sewers. Source: Historical Archive of Roquetes.*

Furthermore, both neighbourhoods (and the residents that live there) feel that their portrayal in the media and their general identity has many negative associations. Deprivation, community tensions, riots in Malmö, and militancy in Roquetes influence how outsiders view the area as well as how residents feel about themselves.

## Bus Hijack in Roquetes

In the late 1960s Roquetes still had no transport infrastructure connecting it to the city and residents' calls for a bus route to extend to their neighbourhood were being ignored. Nothing was done as it was argued that buses were not able to climb the steep ascent. In 1974 members of the community hijacked two buses, driving them up to the hill to prove that the buses were indeed capable of reaching the area. As a result of this direct action a bus route was put in place for the area. Although many local residents are proud of this achievement, this anarchic approach creates inevitable tension with the local council.

# PRESSURE POINTS

Of particular interest to us are the pressure points that stimulate or hinder resilient responses. Who do they affect and what is the outcome? Below we briefly describe a number of observations and findings from the two neighbourhoods. These pressure points identified are in no way an exhaustive list, but point to the challenges faced in these particular areas at three different scales: systems and structures, supports and the self.

## 1. Systems and Structures

Clearly the economic crisis has contributed to the pressure points. However, interviewees felt that there were longstanding chronic problems which were only exacerbated by the economic crisis. Persistent unemployment has been and continues to be a feature of the local areas in question.

Anti-social behaviour and unrest may have been stoked by a bleak economic outlook. Disturbances involving young people in Lindängen and ethnic tensions in Roquetes may in part be a response to wider economic discontent. The local neighbourhoods have higher levels of unemployment, with more benefit claimants than their respective city averages. However, the persistence of deprivation and poor labour market outcomes has generally not prompted a reconfiguring of support services in the areas, despite increased demand.

### Peripheral neighbourhoods

Lindängen and Roquetes are both felt to be physically and socially peripheral neighbourhoods of their respective cities, by residents and external agencies. As both areas are highly residential they lack the social, cultural and economic infrastructure to attract people from outside the neighbourhood. This is compounded by poor transport connections linking these areas with the city centre. Though they are both now located on ring roads that loop around the edge of both cities, this highway has also served as a significant physical barrier in both places, dividing Lindängen in two and separating Roquetes from more affluent areas.

The lack of physical integration of these areas has also had social repercussions. The local identity in both neighbourhoods is quite defensive, and residents feel that they are not part of the city. As one resident told us, people are afraid of sticking out, they feel secure in their small world. Although internally there are strong levels of pride and belonging to their respective neighbourhoods, both areas have a poor reputation externally.

### Housing

Lindängen has high levels of overcrowding. The vast majority of socially rented houses only have two bedrooms and the rigid housing types make them difficult to adapt to evolving family structures. A local resident told us how she would like to have another child but she does not want to leave the area and it will be virtually impossible to get a larger home. In addition, each housing association has a very different approach to resident welfare and the resulting competition for space and resources has created tensions in the community.

Nou Barris has one of the highest levels of evictions in Spain. Many migrant families, especially from Ecuador and other Latin American countries, obtained mortgages to buy homes during the property boom. With unemployment rising, residents in financial difficulty are now struggling to meet their mortgage repayments and are in negative equity. This is a very sensitive subject for residents as they are witnessing families being forced

out of their homes that are now sitting empty as no one can afford to buy them. At the same time, many new properties have been built on the back of intense speculative property development before the financial crisis, and they are sitting empty too.

### **Crime**

Perceptions of crime are high in both areas. However, in the case of Roquetes, this did not correspond to the actual incidents of crime, which were in fact very low. In Lindängen, the poorly maintained public spaces, and the many incidents of arson and vandalism, have exacerbated the poor image of the area and resulted in feelings of insecurity. Residents felt that the media's branding of Lindängen as Malmö's 'ghetto' has compounded the external misrepresentation of their neighbourhood. Nevertheless, there have been some visible acts of violent crime that have had a very strong impact on the wellbeing of the community.

## **2. Supports**

Whilst strong community ties are evident, fractures also exist within both communities. A foreign, relatively young, migrant population (from Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, India and Pakistan, in the case of Roquetes, and Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa in Lindängen) live amongst older communities who had been internal migrants, or from Europe, in an earlier wave of migration in the 1960s and 1970s.

The older members of the community are often strongly associated with the area and, in the case of Roquetes, have built the area with their own hands. This sense of belonging is, at times, described by residents in terms associated with territoriality and defensiveness, which can give rise to tensions between the younger and older populations. Often it is hard to disentangle whether the tensions are borne from inter-generational misunderstandings or are a result of foreign migration. Lindängen is certainly associated with the latter.

And whilst most observers commented on the existence of strong social networks, for a minority of new migrants, most notably women in Lindängen, the support of these networks are not available to them.

Roquetes has also seen episodes of intra-ethnic group tension, particularly evident amongst the young people in the area. A football tournament for young people held in Roquetes was made up of teams drawn solely along ethnic lines. Over time the teams have become completely mixed, creating a new platform for dialogue between these previously divided groups.

## **3. Self**

In both neighbourhoods foreign migrants are concentrated in small, dense areas. New migrants find it difficult to enter into formal waged employment due to language barriers, and low skills or skills mismatch. Local service provision has responded to this, for example residents in Malmö have easy access to language courses which help them to integrate into the employment market. However, worklessness and consequent poverty were evident. Both service providers and residents talked of poor educational outcomes and low aspiration, which had established a negative social norm in the local area.

Some children of migrants struggle in educational settings, despite being familiar with the language. In Lindängen, children and young people were often relaying information between schools and other services and their parents. It was difficult for parents, who were relying on the information provided by their children, to take an active part in their children's education and ensure that poor behaviour was dealt with properly. One parent

noted that younger children were often used as interpreters to support other children in the classroom, which was stressful for both pupils.

Low aspiration was described only for specific groups within the Roquetes community, and was not necessarily an overriding feature. However, limited social mobility was clearly evident.

## **RESPONSES TO PRESSURE POINTS**

Below, we set out that some of the solutions to the issues identified above. The solutions are drawn from our observations and those of residents and employees from the area and reflect what we believe are key attributes associated with community resilience.

### **1. Self**

Some of the people we met exhibited individual resilience. They persisted in the face of failure, they invested their time and energy in their local area, they believed that they, as residents, could and did make a difference and they resisted feelings of failure or resignation. Put simply, they tried to make things happen.

Some of the residents we spoke to are what we term ‘informal community leaders’. They responded to emerging needs quickly and often with little resource. They started groups for fathers because they identified that they needed a social space in which to connect with their families, or they volunteered their time to teach Catalan to newly arrived immigrants. This response was often informal, reacting to emergent needs and working with existing resources, be it someone’s front room or the local youth centre.

### **2. Supports**

Most agencies interviewed commented on the strength of organic networks, which often were the immediate response to challenges. These networks operated between families or close friends, and were a source to lend money to buy a house or provide accommodation, or they stretched beyond immediate social circles and provided information, employment or organised action.

Organic networks often act on the premise of ‘making do’, utilising what is available, and are highly responsive to potential or existing threat. Two examples from Roquetes stand out. In one instance, the threat of racial tensions was muted by local community dialogue. In another instance, in response to a lack of information on dental hygiene, the strong network of community stakeholders, including health workers, local school representatives and residents, set about providing information to children using puppets, in which the messages could be relayed to parents and other family members through creative channels.

These networks usually respond to fractures within the communities, be it fraught inter-generational relations or tension along ethnic lines. A project that set out to photograph all the members of the community in Roquetes not only showed how diverse the communities are, it situated people in different contexts within the photo, for example as fathers or brothers, and with friends. Other initiatives, such as organising a festival in which people bring soup from their native countries, or producing a compendium of family remedies for everyday illnesses and ailments, also served to bring people together.

## **Supporting Arab men in Lindängen**

Lina, a young mother from Lindängen, argues that there is a lot of support for women and young people but the Arab men in the community are not supported. There is nothing for them in Lindängen. Lindängen is very residential, with few residents actually working in the area. Some work very long hours over the border in Denmark so many mothers are left to cope alone. After work, men tend not to come back to their neighbourhood, but will go to the mosque or socialise in cafes in the centre of town. As a result they often end up spending very little time with their families. Lina feels that it is important for fathers to play a greater role in supporting their wives and children. For the past two years Lina has been organising family gatherings for the Arab community from her own home. They prepare coffee and treats so that the fathers come along and spend time with their children. So far around 12 fathers have been coming along. But for Lina this is not enough. She argues that there needs to be more support in place for men in the community; there needs to be a space just for them where they can meet and also connect with relevant support services such as GPs and parenting advice.

### **3. Systems and structures**

In some instances, what had started out as an organic and immediate response was often formalised by statutory services with innovative community responses re-configured and shaped to serve a wider need. Therefore, what was initially bonding social capital, immediate and organic, became linked social capital, proactive and planned. For example, informal community leaders in Roquetes who were once antagonistic, challenging, and wary of co-optation, were invited to partner and challenge from the inside. To this end, innovative models were travelling to other parts of the city, extending their reach.

In addition, the statutory service provision has responded accordingly. Some of the people we interviewed recognised that they often used soft information, collected from observations and conversations with residents, to help them think about how they will design a statutory service. In addition, though not a novel idea, statutory services are based locally and are highly visible.

## **District response to evictions in Nou Barris**

Districts authorities in Barcelona have a certain degree of flexibility in the way they address the particular needs of each area. In the district of Nou Barris the council is currently piloting a new response to local evictions that attempts to minimise the number of residents that are being forced out of their homes. Often residents at risk of losing their home are not identified early enough for the process to be mitigated by the council because they may only ask for help once the eviction process is already underway. The district council is now trying to target people with a high risk of eviction as early as possible. Recognising the strength of communication *within* the community, preventative measures are harnessing the role of local informal leaders. In Roquetes the council are working with the locally elected leader of the neighbourhood association to develop his role as a key intermediary between the council and local residents. For this particular project they are using this relationship as a vehicle for passing on information to residents about what their legal and housing options are. Although in its infancy it is a system that is working well.

# FINAL THOUGHTS

Some of the factors, such as overcrowding, inevitably require structural responses. Statutory service delivery will always be needed. However, as both the case studies show and our statistical analysis of the Understanding Society survey suggests, connections between neighbours, groups and frontline staff can help to activate change, create shared resources and bring about positive, transformational outcomes.

There is value in the immediate, organic responses that result from socially connected communities. They are responsive to emerging issues and hold the tide of more serious problems that may surface in the future. This helps communities to survive.

But, the more organic and centrally located in one or a few particular individuals, the more such initiatives are susceptible to disappearing. People move on, they get tired or other priorities arise. Organic and immediate is not always sustainable in the long run if the responsibilities and power within supportive networks is not carefully distributed.

In our view, state agencies can be most effective in supporting sustainable initiatives. Whilst there are no one-size-fits-all approaches, there are certain ingredients that cultivate self agency or social networks. Most notably statutory agencies can provide the space for informal, and sometimes anarchic, networks to emerge and take shape, welcome creative responses, and support those responses that are effective. This may mean providing small sums of money and assets to newly established initiatives or individuals, or actively fostering resilience by providing individual resilience interventions (for instance, Full of Life, a peer supported community resilience programme).

This establishes different terms of engagement in which informality is credible and in which innovation and resilient communities are borne from a better fit between the state and communities.

When designing public policy interventions, looking through a resilience lens accounts for the adaptive capacity of the community itself. It does however require a different approach to the way in which state agencies identify and measure what is happening at a local level, as well as the terms in which they engage with communities. If anything at all, the community resilience agenda is about nudging both communities and statutory agencies to adapt and believe that communities can do more for themselves on agreed terms of engagement.

*For more information about this publication and The Young Foundation's work on community resilience please contact:*

Nina Mguni: [Nina.mguni@youngfoundation.org](mailto:Nina.mguni@youngfoundation.org)

## RELEVANT YOUNG FOUNDATION PUBLICATIONS

Mguni, M, Bacon, N and Brown, J (2012) *The Wellbeing and Resilience Paradox*, London: Young Foundation.

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