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Translocal networking as a cornerstone for community resilience: Activities by the Asian Coalition of Housing Rights (ACHR)

Astrid Ley [1]*

[1] University of Stuttgart / Chair of International Urbanism, Keplerstr. 11, 70174 Stuttgart, Germany

E-Mail: astrid.ley@si.uni-stuttgart.de (F. L.);

* Author to whom correspondence should be addressed; Tel.: +49-711-68583360

Abstract: Research on community resilience has focused strongly on the local features of communities backing resilient behavior. However, I argue that the relationship building of communities beyond the locality represents a significant aspect of community resilience. The aim of this paper is to extend the notion of community resilience by highlighting that in today's world locality is characterized by connectivity. Communities organized on various levels are considered better equipped to deal e.g. with natural disasters and therefore more resilient. Translocal social resilience approaches mostly focus on migration. Translocal social networks and capacities can be found in migrant communities, but also in those communities that have mobilized into networks beyond their locality around livelihood issues. This translocal community resilience as an emerging concept can learn from earlier studies on transnational urbanism by including aspects of horizontal learning, peer-to-peer support and mobilization to collectively address issues of injustice. The paper refers to findings about the networking of urban poor communities (Herrle, Ley and Fokdal, 2015) and an expert group workshop organized at University of Stuttgart "Collective action and resilience in emerging city regions" (April 2017). Case studies on translocal and transnational community networks in Asia related to the Asian Coalition of Housing Rights (ACHR) will serve as illustrations.[1]

Keywords: translocal social resilience; community resilience; Asian Coalition for Housing Rights.

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[1] The paper is based on a forthcoming chapter "Local Resilience through Translocal Networking" (Ley, A. forthcoming) in: Burayidi, M.A., Allen, A., Twigg, J. and Wamsler, C. (eds.): Handbook of Urban Resilience. Routledge.

Community resilience – the emergence of a concept and its missing aspects

Building resilience is a key aspect of global agendas such as the Agenda 2030 process with the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) and the Habitat III process with the New Urban Agenda and respective indicators that seek to measure vulnerabilities and exposure as well as resilience capacities. In the wake of disaster events during the last two decades awareness has increased of the significance of social resilience at the individual, household and community-level (Sherrieb et al 2010, Moser and Stein 2011, Walker and Salt 2012, Satterthwaite 2011). Social resilience is a people-centred concept. It encompasses coping, adapting and transformative capacities to face multiple shocks and stresses (Keck and Sakdapolrak 2013, McIan et al 2014, Saja et al 2018). Community resilience can be considered part of this framework with stressing the capacities and resources of collective actors. This has gained momentum and recognition to complement resilience concepts that were more limited to technical and physical aspects. However, there are some shortcomings in the discourse on community resilience. In the context of informal settlement dynamics Mulligan et al (2016) for instance raise critical concerns as not only tensions within communities emerge but the framing of community is rather contested. To prevent overlooking "maladaptation" (Burton 1997) as an adaption of only a part of a community to the detriment of others, more comprehensive concepts are developed such as the social resilience framework by Saja et al (2018) that provides five dimensions (social structure, social capital, social mechanisms, social equity, and social belief). The concept of social resilience by Saja et al (2018) includes community networks as a key attribute. This reflects the importance given to local networks in other studies (UN 2014, Rahman and Kausel 2013, Twigg and Mosel 2018, Satterthwaite 2011). What has been overlooked is the critical role of connectivity beyond the locality.

Connected communities are more resilient

In today's world communities are less bound to a place than assumed. Instead communities connect to other communities either within a region, country or even internationally. A prominent example is the recovery process after the Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Here, it was the low-income community of Vietnamese-Americans that recuperated faster with the support of the globally organized diaspora (Leong et al 2007). Seemingly relationship-building outside the locality play a significant role for community resilience. Also, in migration studies connectedness has become an object of research (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004) as well as an aspect of climate change response (migration as adaptation). A key critique to the analytical approach is that it analyses a status quo of connectedness and less the emergence over time (Sakdapolrak et al 2016:86). An important point of reference here is the emerging concept of translocal social resilience that has emerged in migration studies (Sakdapolrak *et al* 2016). The key message is: connected communities are more resilient to address shocks and stresses and have the ability to transform their livelihood situation. Translocal social resilience is, however, not limited to migrant communities as studies in transnational urbanism indicate (Smith 1998, Appadurai 1996, Krätke et al 2012) by pointing to the mutual support of translocal community networks. Translocal connectivities are, however, not free of critique. The capacity of the urban poor to organize transnationally is questioned (Pithouse 2012).

In the following, particular emphasis will be given to such networks of urban poor communities in Asia.

Translocal community networks in Thailand

Organized communities in Asia facilitate responses to multiple risks and vulnerabilities, they overcome hazards and disasters, create alliances and support recovery actions led by the local authorities. Well-organized community networks are therefore increasingly involved in recovery processes after disasters. These collective actions are embedded in transnational networks such as Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) or the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR). They are active based on the understanding that the rebuilding is centred around their livelihoods and not around the pure rebuilding of shelters (Archer and Boonyabancha 2011).

The Indian Ocean tsunami end of 2004 hit around 3300 settlements along the coast in South and Southeast Asia, killing 350.000 people and leaving another 2.5 million without homes. Furthermore, the conventional disaster relief efforts were characterized by a lack of coordination and a top-down approach that undermined people's initiative. Therefore, ACHR aimed at strengthening the collective capacities of communities for disaster rehabilitation and beyond.

In Thailand communities that were affected by the Tsunami linked their activities and learning experience around rehabilitation with one another. Through face-to-face meetings and exchanges innovative ideas or solutions could be transferred rapidly. Each province has set up a network of tsunami-affected communities to support one another, to negotiate with the state and to manage own funds.

One important aspect for their preparedness was that many of these communities were already organized prior to the disaster (personal communication Celine D'Cruz, ACHR, April 2017). The Community Planning Network in Southern Thailand for instance had already established horizontal learning between communities as a mode of operation. After the tsunami, they supported in relief operations as well as in negotiations against evictions. Some of these networks were born out of specific issues. One of these issue-based networks is the boat-building network whereby communities were not waiting for government compensation but provided immediate and flexible mutual support in negotiations and boat-building skills in order to restore livelihoods. On a more strategic level, communities facing evictions linked up to resolve land conflicts.

These kinds of community-led responses are communicated on a translocal scale through exposure visits, peer-to-peer exchanges and publications. Forms of horizontal learning facilitate a people-centered resilience process whereby connected communities consult one another and jointly stand against the implications of top-down planning. For instance, many communities faced threats of evictions after the Asian tsunami 2004 when governments, such as Thailand, introduced coastal regulation zones and thereby hindered affected communities to return. Networking opens the door for displaced communities that resided on coastal land to negotiate with government land rights issues (ACHR 2006).

In the context of ACHR translocal relationship-building is seen as a complementary strategy for communities whose trust and opportunity for knowledge production and engagement with the state is based on smaller geographies.

"Smaller geographies and constituencies support the principle that relationships matter, makes it possible to engage qualitatively with the nature of power, keeps the knowledge produced relevant to engage with the local politics and allows communities to go at their pace. I am learning that going global is not necessarily all good and actually jeopardizes the principles besides being more expensive. Global

makes sense as long as it is deeply relevant to the local." (personal communication with Celine d'Cruz, May 2018).

Concluding remarks

Translocal connectivity needs to be taken into consideration as a significant aspect of community resilience. The focus here is on translocal and transnational networks of urban poor around housing and improving livelihoods. The translocal community networks from Thailand illustrate how communities are networking beyond the scope of rebuilding shelters instead taking more comprehensively their livelihoods as focal point. Moreover, this translocal peer-to-peer support seems to address some critical issues such as giving a stronger voice to the needs of disaster affected communities towards other actors.

Nevertheless, translocal community resilience needs to be critically questioned if activities do not lead to the exclusion of groups who are outside the network (Twigg and Mosel 2018, p. 12). Furthermore, community-led processes with a focus on translocal network-building often overburden already vulnerable communities. Also, it stands in stark contrast to the agenda of rapid response by many donors in post-disaster situations (Archer and Boonyabancha 2011).

Community resilience including translocal activities need to be considered a complementary strategy that needs to create synergies with the responsibilities and efforts of other actors for the overall resilience of cities.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.