Resilience or tolerance? Contextualising youth resilience under economic and political adversity

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Abstract

Drawing on the lives of youth living in precarious conditions, we analyse in this paper the ways in which the youth in Zimbabwe respond to varied shocks that they face in their everyday lives. We note that for many years the political and economic challenges have eroded the capacities of many Zimbabweans, but the impact on the youth has been discernibly high. Yet the youth have remarkably survived the tenacity of political, social and economic challenges. Many people have described this response as resilience. As such we seek to test this aspect of bouncing back in view of social, economic and political developments in Zimbabwe since 2000 and determine if this can be an aspect of resilience or its just sheer luck. We want to know why this phenomenon is uniquely Zimbabwean? Why did the Zimbabwean youth fail to get to the tipping point? What can be learnt from this? We use meta-analysis and direct interviews of the key informant and individual youth to test our hypotheses that Zimbabwean youth have an outstanding way of responding to shocks and are able to re-bounce back without necessarily being recruited into forces of violence, crime or anarchy.

Key words: Zimbabwe, Resilience, Youth, Crisis, Violence, Crime

Introduction

The paper seeks to examine resilience using the experiences of young people in selected sites in Zimbabwe. It is based on the fact that the concept is slowly creeping into the governance realm breaching its traditional natural science spaces and policy makers now make reference it. There is now increased interest in peace and conflict resilience, transitional justice and resilience, gender based violence and resilience[1]. However, this paper argues that youth resilience should be context-specific and responses to a plethora of factors that operate within each locality. There are overarching factors that can be identified across the study locations that determine mutually or exclusively the way people respond to externalities including the political repression, surveillance, access to justice, resource endowment in each locality (or lack of the same), economic distribution and cultures of accountability by public duty bearers. These factors intrinsically link with youth participation in democratic governance processes, their innovation in the economic sphere and ultimately, their

resilience in Zimbabwe. In view of this dynamic and complexity, we recommend pragmatism and argue that, when defining, understanding and fostering youth resilience, this needs to be viewed from the view point of the youth, the utility of their socio-economic networks, youth agency and the various processes that hinder or facilitate the deployment of that agency on a practical basis. This will be a departure from the usual theoretical framing of "resilience" and promote asking the practical questions over resilience.

Background

Research on youth resilience has increased substantially owing to the challenges of unemployment in Zimbabwe amongst youth and the emergency of the new economy – the informal economy- where young people find pass time in. The government of Zimbabwe, for example, held a conference titled: *Youth Investment and Inclusive Growth Conference: Harnessing the Demographic Dividend through Investment in Youths*(October, 2017) to try and understand how they can best work with development partners and business to try and support youth initiatives. Zimbabwe, in common with most African countries, has a very large "youth bulge", with 73.4% of the population under the age of 34 years[2]. At the policy level, the state is seized with programmes that are aimed at creating new formal jobs to absorb the millions of young people roaming the streets, as a way of containing the challenges of the youth bulge. Job creation has also become a selling point for political parties in their election manifestos[3].However, the challenge is that the quality of jobs created or promised is not attractive at the very least and demeaning at most for the many young people to the extent that claims by government that they are creating jobs on a daily basis stands out to be ridiculous. The kinds of jobs claimed to have been created are mainly menial jobs at local government level and these are unattractive to young people some of whom have tertiary qualifications. The state alone is incapable of meeting the job demand given the size of the youth population and the projections in the next 30 years. The economy would need to be growing by double digits annually consistently in order to make an impact on youth unemployment. The government claims formal unemployment stands at 6.6%, but this is other commentators suggest that over 80% of the working population in employed in the informal sector, a view supported by opinion surveys such as the Afrobarometer[4].

The rise of the new economy, the informal economy, often referred to as *kiyakiya*[5]economy in Zimbabwe, has created the need to understand how young people cope in the tough socio-economic and political environment. These coping mechanisms give an opportunity to understand resilience. The *kiyakiya*or hustling economy also thrives because of the existing social networks that are used by young people to help each other pull through these tough environments. There is a linkage between youth unemployment and social exclusion (ILO, 2016). An inability to find

employment creates a sense of vulnerability, uselessness and idleness among young people[6].

The political context of the country is worrisome. Politically motivated violence has been experienced in both urban and rural areas of Zimbabwe which saw the participation of youth as both victims and perpetrators. The most violent period of recorded political violence in Zimbabwe has been during the elections of 2008 pitting the ruling ZANU PF and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change. In the post-2008 political violence, the social relations have largely retained their structures, institutions and machinery that perpetrated political violence, such as the continued presence of the security personnel in communities had been observed. The local government structures, both the elected councils and the structures represented by the traditional leaders, have also largely been politicised and have become an extension of the cell structure of the ruling party. The effect of this has been that no activities in the community cannot take-off without tacit approval by the traditional leader, a usual gate-keeper of the ruling party. The traditional leaders also wield the power to "expel" members of the community who are considered recalcitrant because they do not toe the party line. In short, the institution of the traditional leadership has been conveniently conflated with ZANU PF and has been used to maintain the client-party relationship. In communities where the traditional leaders have tried to be independent and refused to comply, their communities are left to suffer as they are denied access to food aid and other resources such as farming inputs, normally under the guise of the Presidential input support scheme. Families which are known or suspected to support opposition political parties, who are mostly young men, suffer the same fate. They are denied access to food aid and in worst cases live with the threat of eviction from their land[7].

Resilience: The Conceptual Debate
The concept of resilience has emerged from many different disciplines; psychology and ecology, most prominently[8] and applied to many different things. Yet how we understand processes of resilience, what it looks like and what it entails is only poorly understood. The concept has also been applied in the field of physics, climate change and agriculture. Like its sister concept 'sustainability', resilience seems to be presented as a shining goal for the future but without clear conceptual and theoretical understanding of what it means[9]. There are however cross-cutting issues that are common in the concept of resilience and Erical Seville (2008) identifies three aspects: (i) the ability to prevent negative consequences occurring;(ii) the ability to prevent negative consequences worsening over time; and (iii) the ability to recover from the negative consequences of an event[10]. Contemporary socio-political definitions of resilience go beyond the Latin root '*resilio*' - meaning '*to bounce back*' or returning to a status quo after stressors - to emphasise preventing future vulnerabilities and risks,

while increasing adaptation, self-organisation, and abilities to counteract, cope with, or transform after traumatic events. Resilience can thus be understood as a framework of intersecting absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities (Chandler 2015; Mitchell 2013), which individuals and communities have at their disposal to prevent or recover from external and structural shocks and stressors. Using the ecological perspective, Holling (1973, p.14) defined resilience as: "*A measure of the persistence of systems and of their ability to absorb change and disturbance and still maintain the same relationships between populations or state variables…and it is concerned with persistence or probabilities of extinction*". But from the material sciences where the notion of resilience is borrowed, it describes the ability of a material to recover its shape after a deformation[11]. At a community level four things are happening all the time in a resilient community: (a) building regenerative capacity, (b) sensing emerging risks, (c) responding to disruption, and (d) learning andtransforming[12].

The challenge with a concept like resilience to violence, which is both ambiguous and dynamic, is, for analytical purposes, to identify a concrete and measurable relationship. Through this process, resilience is defined as the process of effectively negotiating, adapting to, or managing significant sources of stress or trauma. Assets and resources within the individual, their life and environment facilitate this capacity for adaptation and '*bouncing back*' in the face of adversity. But how do young people in selected communities in Zimbabwe define resilience? Can we cut and paste the "confusion' of what 'resilience is and apply it to violent contexts involving young people? What are the gaps in the definition of resilience and what are the factors aiding or threatening youth resilience?

This paper seeks to engage with this gap. It explores the definition of "resilience" from the youth perspective using lived experiences, perceptions, attitudes and prejudices in the context of socio-economic challenges as well as post-conflict situations. It examines youth networks that enable them to cope with their circumstances and challenge the current thinking of the definitions of the term "resilience". The paper discusses factors that threaten or aid 'resilience' and explores the context in which this "resilience' is supposed to emerge. The overarching question is, *How do young people define the term "resilience" given their peculiar contexts?* The process therefore implies a contribution to the growing field of literature and policy-making about resilience in the context of peace and development. The conclusions are drawn from experiences of young people selected for FGDs in four locations of Zimbabwe in a project supported by IDRC titled "*Active engagement, social innovation and resilience among young people in Zimbabwe*" under the IDRC Africa Youth Cohort. The project locations are Lupane, Bulawayo urban, Mutare urban and Chipinge. These are briefly described below. A total of eight (8) Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted, two in each location. Each group had an average of eight young people between the

ages of 18-35. It had a mixture of unemployed young people as well as those that were self-employed in the informal sector. The groups were further divided with young men and women having separate discussions. A structured guide was used in all groups with the view to interrogate youth understanding of resilience, the factors that aide or threaten resilience and the challenges of youth participation in violence. Mutare and Chipinge are in the Easten side of the country, whereas Lupane and Bulawayo are located in the Southern part of Zimbabwe. They give regional dynamics, and different experiences. For example the experiences of the Southern half of Zimbabwe have been influenced by less development and a history of historical atrocities of Gukurahundi in the early years after independence. The community of Lupane experienced and witnessed this violence, including other surrounding areas in Matebeleland. The Eastern side on the other hand has had experiences of violence, especially related to insurgence in Mozambique which affected mainly Chipinge. Whilst this paper looks at specific locations, it does not claim that the findings can be generalized across country. However, the findings point to the fact that every location has unique variables which policy makers need to respond to even though they may have general country idea.

Context –Location
Chipinge - Birchneough Bridge
Birchnough Bridge lies 200km South of Mutare, the fourth largest city. It is characterized by dry temperatures and often receives rainfall below that average. As such a lot of irrigation schemes are available where people farm different crops and vegetables. Some even form cooperatives to grow vegetables. Thus, many people derive economic activity from one of the largest inland rivers in Zimbabwe, the Save, by using its water to irrigate their crops. However, only a few people afford to farm in these places because of the stringent requirements which are set for them. As a way of surviving some women are vendors, selling food stuffs and vegetables at the bus stations. Meanwhile most men are into brick making since there is no meaningful substantial farming. Most people have resorted to cattle and goat rearing for survival means. This in turn assists them because they can sell their cattle or goats and get money to look after their families and pay school fees for their children. The proximity to Mozambique also facilitates cross-border trading, especially on second hand clothes.

Most people in Checheche area are into farming activities and grow cash crops like cotton are being widely grown. Business in this area comes from Mozambique since some people go there to black market fuel for vehicles and second hand clothes. Further, some people are venture into livestock production including chick farming but a low scale and some are into the business of selling mice and locusts by the road sides.

Lupane

Lupane is the provincial capital of Matabeleland North province and is centrally located compared to other districts such Binga, Nkayi, Tsholotsho and Hwange. The place has always been looked down upon because it is described generally as sleepy and backward, with poor infrastructure and poor educational facilities at both primary and secondary levels. However, it has a potential of growing into a university town like Stellenbosch University of South Africa if it is well managed. Most of the people in this area are not educated and are looked down upon. The youth from this community described that they generally need help so that they understand how to live a better life. The community often suffers from droughts requiring assistance from humanitarian based NGOS, but the area is also well endowed with natural resources which include timber and gas. However, the locals have little access to these and don't benefit much from the exploitation of these resources. On the political front, Matabeleland North, including Lupane, is known for the infamous Gukurahundi atrocities that occurred soon after independence in 1980, ostensibly to deal with the "dissident scourge"[13]. Before the "new political dispensation" opposition political parties had no access to campaigning in this district and known activists were persecuted. Everything was centralized and controlled by the ruling ZANU PF to the extent that those associated with opposition may fail to get opportunities or food aid. The youth say that the traditional leaders are also a part of the repressive system and aid in denial of enjoyment of civil and political rights. They also do not accept any gatherings of young people without their permission. From the discussions about the history of the area, the youth are aware of the Gukurahundi story and also sites of mass graves. This instils fear amongst the locals. For those who have done well, they have taken the great trek to South Africa where there are perceived greener pastures.

Mutare urban

Mutare is located 265 kilometres to the east of Harare and borders with Mozambique. It is within the proximity of the most lucrative gold mines in Zimbabwe, as well as the famous diamond mines of Marange/Chiadzwa "discovered" round about the time Zimbabwe was facing international isolation. The area became a high security zone with the military used beat "illegal" miners known as *magweja*, mainly young men who were looking for a quick fortune. Because of the proximity to the Mozambican border, many young people irk a living through cross border trading; where they import second hand clothes for resell. Many young people struggle to acquire travel documents and as such they enter Mozambique illegally. The items imported are mostly clothing and illicit beers which are banned in Zimbabwe because their alcohol contents are unknown but are a favourite of many young people because of their high toxicity levels.

Bulawayo Urban

This is the second largest city in Zimbabwe and used to be the industrial hub of the country. But by the beginning of 2000, industries closed shop and high levels of unemployment emerged. The options were few for mainly the young people. These currently find it easy to cross to South Africa in search of greener pastures. The young women are mostly into cross-border trading, getting their wares from either South Africa or Botswana, which are a few hundred kilometres. Bulawayo is also rich in cultural and traditional heritage where the arts industry thrives and is a source of living for some young people.

Context of Violence Participation Experience of Violence

Elections in Zimbabwe are synonymous with violence. The youth argue that their state of unemployment make them vulnerable to participation in violence. Therefore if the youths are paid money to harass and intimidate people they will eventually do so. Other youths take illicit drugs to get high and numb their sensitivity during the perpetration of violence. But the issue of drugs and substance abuse is also one way of coping with the harsh realities they are confronted with every day. For them, they use terms like *"kusticker"* meaning to say they use drugs with names like "*Mary-jane*", *musombodia and* psychiatry drug *maragado* to literally freeze the mind and forget about their sorrows. They argue that their vulnerability will lessen if they are involved in productive income generating ventures or find employment. This argument concurs with other studies of youth and violence participation of the linkage between poverty and violence participation (World Bank, 2013).

There is hardly consultative engagement between policy makers and youth to fully understand what issues affect youth. This is demonstrated by the fact that representatives such as the local Councillors or the Member of Parliament are not even known and only engage with youth around elections. So elections are an opportunity: "If you hear word that there is a politician coming for a rally we just go to the meeting with the hope that we might get goodies such as rice or funds which are given others. Everything that I would have planned for the day has to stop[14]. Besides violence that is election related, in Mutare urban, a new form of youth violence is emerging centred around drugs with formation of gangs and gang violence. The ring leaders are called "Masters" and they direct the robbery operations, robbing people of sellable gadgets like phones. The gangs also fight for territory to control commuter omnibus terminus and collect a fee from every commuter omnibus that loads on their area of control. They normally work with senior police officers because they are never arrested for the violence and the crimes they commit.

Everyday resilience: Young people's activities

"Resilience" in crops refers to a variety developed that thrives under harsh weather conditions. It is difficult to apply the same principle when it comes to young people dealing with their environment. Young people will do anything to survive especially as it relates to livelihood. From the communities that the FGDs were carried out, young people were doing all sorts of odd jobs. For example, in Chipinge District, young women were engaged in nutritional gardens for a living. This was thriving because of the existence of irrigation facilities. However, their challenge included a flooded market to sell their produce, which eats into their potential profits. Conversely, young men resort to illegal activities such as importing *mbanje (cannabis)* from neighbouring Mozambique whose border is only a few kilometres away as well as second hand clothes. For the urban young men in Mutare, spending the day at a soccer betting shop has become the norm. The small ventures they try such as manufacturing cooking oil in the backyard industrial area have come to naught because products from neighbouring South Africa out price them.

There is a general feeling that the country is getting better economically but that has not been experienced by the younger generation. Young men are illegally cutting trees indiscriminately for sale as firewood for brick-moulders which ordinarily warrants an arrest, but this is not happening. The lingo including phrases like "*kukwanakwana"*, meaning they have to fit in and learn new skills such as brick laying in order to increase chances of getting short term jobs called *"piece jobs"*, is used. This is one of the coping strategies. In urban Pumula, in Bulawayo, young men run small businesses such as cell phone repairs, airtime selling, and touting for pirate taxis among other things. For the young woman they indulge in cross-border trade, run saloons and some even go into prostitution which is thriving in the urban areas. And they have names for all their activities. Words like *kiya-kiya, ukubambabamba, chipoko round*, all describing their informal sources of income. Some become very active politically, some supporting the ruling party while others side with the opposition in the hope of getting some sort of payment, or access to some funds and goods/aid from the party.

Resilience as a Youth Perspective

Young people in Chipinge feel that they are adapting to the situation but this adaptation is mostly in the negative. It is just to survive. They bemoan the fact that, even though some of them have finished schooling, jobs have been hard to come by. For those that do find jobs, they are under employed as they only find menial jobs. Some are opening shops or starting small business ventures but these do not generate sufficient income to be sustainable. At the end of the day, these ventures are stressful. The so-called projects that youth embark on such as poultry rearing result in a flooded market. All these factors militate against resilience. In Pumula in Bulawayo, the local governance structure was cited as over controlling and that anything in the ward

cannot take place without express approval. This even includes the use of the local community hall for youth meetings.

The youth feel that they are resilient because they are able to cope and adjust to any situation. This is in spite of the fact that the economic environment continuously threatens to erode their resilience. They argue that they work with what is available and try to succeed, but they remain strongly optimistic about a better future. If they are confronted with a challenge they look for a solution while at the same time summoning their inner being for motivation. They allude to the fact that their families are supportive and are also a source of encouragement. There is hope in the messaging, "things will be better my child", from their parents. The hope is also embedded in their belief that they can contribute to change through participating in electoral processes: "Voting in 2018 gives me hope and I will know that I tried"[15].Persisting in hope, for example, "This year we are still making more bricks yet at home we have bricks that were made last year and remained unsold because of a flooded market"[16].

The youth believe that they can adapt to the economic environment and working with what is there. They claim that, even though they have plans to open up shops, they cannot do so right now because of lack of financial support. But that hasn't stopped them from working to support them, and coping with councils also claiming rates from their small businesses, and reducing their income. To draw conclusions that people or a community are resilient, there is need to look at the capacity of the people to not have to go through extremes... being knowledgeable and having capacity to do something, to change their circumstances (Lerch, 2017). It is important for the stakeholders to have power in decisions that affect them. However, other youth argue that the way they are responding to everyday challenges is not resilience but rather tolerance:**"***Hapanamunhuakagadzirwaane DNA yenhamo. Hapana resilience, pane tolerance*"[17] [There is no one created with a DNA of poverty. There is no resilience but rather tolerance]. They had tolerated bad things from the system including poor service delivery and lack of employment opportunities for far too long and were hoping that participating in the 2018, 30 July 2018 elections would help to make the desired positive change.

So accepting that things are hard, young people take risks to deal with the current challenges; for example, young women engage in prostitution and young men play cat and mouse games with the Environmental Management Agency in firewood poaching. The youth have come up with terms that describe their 'resilience', phrases like "*Die Hard*". They would also encourage each other individually to vote with the hope that the country's economy will improve. They are also encouraging each other to continue with studies and be skilled in preparation for a better economic environment. For

those who cannot go to school for whatever reason, they are acquiring new skills. They also talk a lot about politics on a daily basis and this is a phenomenon common with the young men in urban areas when the congregate. They argue that apart from just sitting and loafing in the community, they also share ideas about how to make their environment a better place.

In defining resilience, young men from Pumula have taken a community activist approach and have taken it upon themselves to empower other young people. One young man summarises his view:

> As for me I have become resilient by becoming a person who is watchful in terms of my community and to always participate and always have some level of knowledge and information. This is because by getting knowledge or education you are half way the beggar. So being resilient is also hustling and always trying to get a way or a means of survival you know. The other thing is even attending such meeting because you get information to always be aware of what is happening in the community and even the music thing that I do[18].

They have organized groups and encouraging other young people to stop abusing alcohol and drugs, even though they know that they are unemployed, and do so to cope with their burdens. They even argue that everyone is resilient because everyone knows how to build, paint, etc. because they had to learn all things for them to survive. They take pride in that if one travels to South Africa the resilience of the Zimbabwean youth is demonstrated by the fact that they are respected because they work hard and they can do all things. They are given all sorts of contract jobs in the community and they are always learning new skills on the job. Through their networks they make sure that they invite other youth from the community to help out so that everyone has something to do. In Pumula, the youth feel that they run the community and they make things work even though they sometimes encounter problems with their local Councillor.

Resilience is the ability of a system (like a community) to absorb disturbance and still retain basic function and structure. Building resilience means intentionally guiding the system's process of adaptation in an attempt to preserve some qualities and allow others to fade away, all while retaining the essence—or "identity"—of the system (Lerch, 2015). In a community, identity is essentially determined by what people collectively value. There is therefore the need for local stakeholders to have real power in decisions that affect them. An important question is how do we conclude that a community is resilient? It is demonstrated by the agency shown by youth in Pumula who have the capacity to try to cushion one another from going through extremes... being knowledgeable and having capacity to do something, to change their

circumstances. There is belief that they have agency—a sense that they can make choices that will affect their lives (Lerch, 2017).

Living with Resilience

For resilience to take place there must be supporting individuals, structures or institutions that are in place, but these structures and institutions may also threaten resilience. The existence of natural resources in the community, can work towards strengthening resilience as the locals can utilize the resources to generate incomes. In Pumula and Lupane, War veterans were accused of forcing people to attend political meetings, affecting their productive base. In rural areas the compromised role of the traditional leaders can also weaken resilience. Traditional leaders continue to play an important role in sustaining the status quo enforcing the ruling political party power base. This trend is also noticed in the 30 July 2018 election outcome where the ruling party won the presidency curtsey of the rural vote. The existence of Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) providing skills training and rights training also help young people to cope with their realities by building capacity as citizens. The presence of humanitarian NGOs with food aid in drought prone areas can promote temporary resilience but create a cycle of dependence from external factors. This is the case of Lupane and Chipinge and food aid has been used as a political tool.

In the rural areas, building a sense of community is helping to cope with the economic livelihood. For women, village savings clubs are opportunities where they meet regularly and discuss business ideas and at the same time investing financial resources, even though it is at a small scale. Being a member and contributing to the savings club, the young women are able to borrow money to start up their cross-border businesses. The interest rates are not as high as those from the formal financial institutions and the terms are accessible to the locals. Young men are not in such beneficial clubs. They just while away time through social activities like soccer and that builds a sense of belonging and support structures. Sometimes they choose to sit on bridges smoking cannabis, a phenomenon also common with urban youth. But as they smoke, they also discuss business ideas or how to make their lives better. These social networks are a source of hope because through exchange of information and ideas they help each other to cope and or share the burdens. What also threatens resilience for young women is getting into early marriages believing this could help them adapt to life's challenges.

Poverty also increases the vulnerability of young people, especially leading to abuse by political elites. It makes them vulnerable to political manipulation and sometimes at the risk of participation in political violence especially during elections. The female youth raised the issue of lack of awareness of their rights as contributing to their vulnerability especially sexual abuse. This makes coping strategies for men and women

different.

Conclusion

This paper has revealed that the concept of resilience is contextual and should be understood in varied ways. A resilience focus thus offers the potential to challenge the top-down policy intervention approach, where policy making is prescriptive and tries to address youth issues from a "controlling approach". By understanding how young people are conceptualising resilience, policy responses should shift the focus from enforced solutions to considering the positive outcomes of youth ventures which are a resultant of informal networks and interactions. Though they seem few, policies can build supporting structures. Policy makers need to realise that policy prescriptions must be informed by what young people desire and these stakeholders must be consulted for their input. Young people know what we want even though they are hardly consulted by policy makers when they make decisions that affect them. This illuminates how bottom-up, internal and organic processes rooted in local experiences can be enhanced without imposing interventions built on external expertise (Menkhaus 2013). Resilience must also be understood as a dynamic and responsive process, rather than a static set of attributes or a measurable outcome.

Acknowledgement

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