Building back better with trampolines

The trampoline metaphor provides the best conceptual model for resilience and social cohesion, both crucial for the post-pandemic recovery.

By Invition

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Before the pandemic is over, we need to adapt how the world should look afterwards. Many "build back better" proposals are in circulation. In studying them, we need to focus on two distinct elements: resilience and social cohesion.

As argued in The Resilient Society, a wonderful book launched at this month's Singapore Fintech Festival, resilience is the ability to bounce back. It is a feature of systems that show elasticity. Resilience is, therefore, distinct from being strong and robust, and different from being aware of or capable of dealing with risk.

When a society is only robust, it contains any external force with its internal strength. The Covid-19 pandemic is such an external force, but one that quickly showed it could overwhelm even the strongest of nations. Robustness here did not help.

Even combining robustness and risk aversion, and seeking to guard against rare black swan events, would not have helped.

Throughout the pandemic, the coronavirus showed how it would overcome even the most closely constructed and far-ranging system of avoidance measures. Everyone, no matter how risk averse in minimizing their own exposure, was quickly drawn into the pandemic’s circle of effect.

By most expert accounts, Covid-19 is just one of a sequence of large-scale disruptions. This pandemic is likely to be just the start. Others are on the way. The message from this experience should be: "You can run, but you cannot hide. Resilience is futile."

Resilience is, however, can help. Let's know the unknown shocks hit - we will bounce back.

In economics, we think of a pandemic shock as an exogenous disturbance. It emerged from outside the economy or the system.

In today's world, however, other large shocks have emerged from within that is, they are endogenous. The global climate crisis today powerful affects businesses, livelihoods and relations across nations.

But the climate crisis is not an exogenous disturbance. Instead, it emerged from everyday human activity normalised since the industrial revolution. This geopolitical rivalry now profoundly affects technological advancement, trade relations and the global supply chains, cultural and people-to-people ties, and education and scholarship.

Geopolitical rivalry is a long-distance game but an endogenous one. Today U.S.-China tensions come from a potent combination of China’s economic success in the era of hyper-globalisation together with a growing military muscle in its dealings with the rest of the world, and America’s perception of the challenge to its hegemonic position from a fast-rising challenger great power.

SOCIAL COHESION

The breakdown of social cohesion is real all around the world. By the 2000s, global stress—whether measured in strikes and demonstrations or in media accounts of social discord—had exploded four times what it had been just 10 years earlier.

In the historical crisis, this increase is concentrated in upmarket short-term houses, but when it occurs, it is rarely found in earlier levels. Social cohesion is when people in society do not undermine or cheat but instead work together and help one another.

One way to achieve social cohesion might be through providing a sense of trust and community to the group. But trust can also lead to moral hazard and free-riding: "If you really trusted me, you would not be looking over my shoulder all the time." Such a sense of belonging in the group is not necessary nor sufficient for individual members to cooperate and help one another.

In research by the Social Mobility Foundation at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, we are exploring what matters instead of what everyone sees, as engaged in a positive-sum game, where raising others' lifts oneself.

When social cohesion deteriorates and populist agendas on nationalist, racist or xenophobic agendas, this impacts domestic politics and domestic policymakers from taking on important global responsibilities. Such domestic overreach is almost never due to an exogenous disturbance, but emerges endogenously from short-comings within the society itself.

Deterioration of social cohesion, therefore, is an endogenous disturbance.

The consequential effects of social cohesion cannot be over-estimated. The United States is the world’s largest economy, has the world’s strongest military and runs excellent hospitals. Yet, in early 2020 as its divisive leader Donald Trump degraded America’s ability to have its people come together, the country’s responses to the pandemic resulted in death rates exceeding 1,500 per million, even as Singapore, China, New Zealand and other countries kept Covid-19 facilities to allow for 1 per million.

Today, despite the far greater access to vaccines, many poorer nations remain. America remains the only country with the world’s highest cumulative number of infections and deaths from Covid-19, ahead of India, which has larger population, or Indonesia, which has far lower per capita income, than the US.

BOUNCING BACK

Looking ahead for possible post-pandemic social models, resilience and cohesion need to be central. Systems need to show elasticity. To that end, I suggest a metaphor for how we can build back better: the trampoline.

The Resilient Society mentions "trampoline" in passing: in the world it does not appear to index. Singaporeans will remember the moment at the 2013 S’pore Symposium when then Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam was asked if Singapore believes in a social safety net. Another replied: "I believe in the notion of a trampoline."
The metaphor has been cited since to evaluate specific policy proposals in Singapore.

More than specifics, however, the trampoline provides the best conceptual model for both resilience and social cohesion, while simultaneously clarifying both exogenous and endogenous disturbances.

Resilience is the elasticity and springiness in society that allows bouncing back from a shock. The trampoline is about bounce-back. Social cohesion is when different sections of the community cooperate and collaborate. So, too, the trampoline’s different components: the first, fabric, the steel frame, and the edge rings and collared openings holding together support and bounce mat—all have to work together, or the entire structure fails.

If a micro-trampoline appears in the fabric and it is not quickly repaired, the entire bounce mat can stop. Against a shock continues to resonate, so too with social cohesion—small mounds of readings must not be allowed to foster or they will grow. Next, you cannot dance on a trampoline that might or will break, and you cannot dance on a trampoline that might or will break.

But at the same time, society cannot be flexible as it will not hold and bounce.

Third, as with global supply chains or ordinary physical chains, the part that is just strong for trampolines needs the greatest support. The entire national or global system is only as strong as the weakest link.

Fourth, a trampoline needs to be kept in regular use. Failing societies unchallenged for too long outweighs the risk of small minor dislocations and provides valuable stress-testing. Successfully dealing with small shocks provides a reservoir of confidence, and if any social or employment dislocation, to go higher, one needs to take actions. And, for risk aversion, and sit quietly. Sociological forces is what gives people hope so that upward trajectory, they see their children and their children’s children continuing to experience improvement, will be well. Even those currently deprived from society continues to have space for them and they are not permanently excluded. Hope powers the positive agenda.

Finally, a trampoline is not a "normal" one. The resilient structure is built for shock. Do not expect societies to operate as freight, breakdowns are a part of what you want to see something that is going to bounce back better when it hits a bump on the road.

As the world adapts to the post-pandemic equilibrium and tries to build back better, the model of a trampoline can help provide both resilience and social cohesion.

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