

By Invitation

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.



Danny Quah

For The Straits Times

Before the pandemic ends is when we need to debate how the world should look afterwards. Many “build back better” proposals are in circulation. In studying them, we need to focus on two ideas: first, resilience; second, 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 again from being aware of or capable of dealing with risk.

When a society is only robust, it confronts 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. Through mutation, the coronavirus showed how it could overcome even the most closely constructed and far-ranging of avoidance measures. Everyone, no matter how risk averse in minimising his 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 threats to humanity. This coronavirus got through. Others are already on the way. The message from this experience should be: “You can run, but you cannot hide. Resistance is futile.”

RESILIENCE TO SHOCKS

Resilience, however, can help. Let known and unknown shocks hit – we will bounce back.

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

In today’s world, however, other large recent shocks have emerged



Resilience is the elasticity and springiness in society that allows bouncing back from a shock, says the writer. The trampoline is all about bounce-back. Social cohesion is when different sections of the community cooperate and collaborate. So, too, the trampoline’s different components all have to work together, or the entire structure fails. BERITA HARIAN FILE PHOTO

from within; that is, they are endogenous. The global climate crisis today powerfully affects business operations, 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.

Geopolitical rivalry now profoundly affects technological advance, trade relations and the global supply chain, cultural and people-to-people ties, and education and scholarship.

Geopolitical rivalry is a large disturbance but an endogenous one: Today’s US-China tensions come from a potent combination of China’s economic success in the era of hyper-globalisation together with a growing musculature 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 2010s, global unrest – whether measured in strikes and demonstrations or in media accounts of social discord – had exploded to four times what it had been just 30 years earlier.

In the historical arc, this increase is concentrated in sporadic short bursts, but when it occurs, there is rarely fall-back to earlier levels.

Social cohesion is when people in society do not undermine or cheat but instead work with and help one another.

One possible 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.”

Thus, a sense of belonging in the group is neither 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 if what matters instead is that everyone sees they are engaged in a positive-sum game, where raising others lifts oneself.

When social cohesion deteriorates and populists agitate on nationalistic, racist or xenophobic agendas, this impacts domestic politics and distracts policymakers from taking on important global challenges.

Such domestic unrest is almost never due to an exogenous disturbance, but emerges endogenously from shortcomings within that society itself. Deterioration of social cohesion too, 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 fatalities to under five per million.

Today, despite its far greater access to vaccines than many poorer nations, America remains the polity with the world’s highest

cumulative number of infections and deaths from Covid-19, ahead even of India, which has a 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” once in passing; the word does not appear in the index. Singaporeans will remember that moment at the 2015 St Gallen Symposium when then Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam was asked if Singapore believed in a social safety net, and he replied: “I believe in the notion of a trampoline.” The metaphor has been used since to evaluate specific policy proposals in Singapore.

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

Resilience is the elasticity and springiness in society that allows bouncing back from a shock. The trampoline is all about bounce-back.

Social cohesion is when different sections of the community cooperate and collaborate. So, too, the trampoline’s different components – the taut fabric, the steel frame, and the edge rings and coiled springs holding together support and bounce mat – all have

to work together, or the entire structure fails.

If a micro-tear appears in the fabric and is not quickly repaired, the entire bounce mat can rend apart as shocks continue to test the system. So too with social cohesion: Small misunderstandings must not be allowed to fester or they will grow.

Next, you cannot draw a trampoline too tight or it will break, and you cannot draw it too loose or the user will break. Society cannot operate when it is stretched to hyper-efficiency or pounded into robustness, as it will not withstand an external shock. But at the same time, society cannot be flabby as it will not hold together and advance.

Third, as with global supply chains or ordinary physical chains, the part that is least 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. Having societies unchallenged for too long ossifies the O-rings around the edges of the trampoline. A string of small crises is to be welcomed, and provides valuable stress-testing. Successfully dealing with small shocks prepares society for the big disturbances.

Fifth, modelling ourselves on a trampoline changes how societies perceive inequality. Rigid egalitarianism demands high maintenance, and is not resilient.

Instead, what is resilient is the dynamic fluidity when every part of society is able to bounce back after being hit by bad shocks, such as disease or employment dislocation.

To go higher, one needs to take chances, and not be risk averse and sit quietly. Social mobility is what gives people hope so that on that upward trajectory, they see their children and their children’s children continuing to experience improvement in well-being. Even those currently deprived feel society continues to have space for them and they are not permanently excluded. Hope powers the positive-sum game.

Finally, a trampoline is not a Formula One race car. The resilient structure is not built for speed. Do not expect societies to operate at frenetic, breakneck pace if what you want is something that is going to bounce back better when it hits a bump on the road.

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

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Professor Danny Quah is dean and Li Ka Shing Professor in economics at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore.