

Societal resilience: Contextualising cohesion in an age of disruption

Dr Annalise Higgins and Georgia Lala

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Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures is an independent, non-partisan, future-focused boundary organisation dedicated to tackling the complex, long-term challenges shaping Aotearoa New Zealand's future.

We provide high-quality, evidence-based insights to address critical national and global issues arising from rapid social, economic, technological, and environmental change.

Our name, Koi Tū, was gifted by Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei. Koi means “the sharp end of an arrow” and “to be bright and clever,” while Tū means “to stand” and conveys resilience. Like our namesake, Koi Tū aims to get to the heart of the most pressing long-term issues.

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Authors



Dr Annalise Higgins is a senior fellow at Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures.

✉ annalise.higgins@informedfutures.org



Georgia Lala is a fellow at Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures.

✉ georgia.lala@informedfutures.org

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Executive summary

Democratic societies are much more than the sum of the economy, laws, and institutions. A functioning society relies on confidence that the system is broadly fair, on a commitment to social cohesion, and on a sense of a meaningful stake in a common future. The emerging concept of societal resilience is significant in this context precisely because navigating an age of disruption is not solely about weathering shocks or holding society together under stressors. It is about sustaining the collective capacity to adapt, act, and thrive amid uncertainty and change.

Recent years have been defined by compounding disruption: pandemic recovery, geopolitical instability, climate-related extremes, rapid technological acceleration, weakening trust in institutions, and escalating information disorder. These forces are interconnected and expose liberal democracies' fragilities. At the same time, structural pressures such as rising inequality and declining perceptions of fairness and institutional integrity are weakening the implicit social contract in many liberal democracies, including New Zealand.

Conventional policy approaches built around siloed systems and linear problem-solving do not align with this reality. Today's risks are systemic and interconnected.

This paper advances societal resilience as a systems-level framing for this challenge. It shifts attention from individual domains to their interactions and connections. It argues that leaders and policymakers would benefit from a more mature understanding of our society's ability to respond to disruption, adapt to continuous change, and deliberately evolve to thrive while maintaining the foundations of democratic legitimacy.

Koi Tū conceptualises societal resilience as emerging from the interactions between seven domains: environmental, economic, technological, institutional, social, informational, and geopolitical. This framework seeks to situate social cohesion (comprised of the institutional and social domains) within a systems-level context. While cohesion has recently received significant policy and public attention and remains salient and relevant, the answer to the question of why it matters invites a shift to the systems perspective societal resilience offers.

For leaders, the framing of societal resilience supports several ongoing shifts: from efficiency-first thinking to resilience-by-design; from siloed risk management to strategic foresight; and from reactive to proactive policymaking. It also elevates institutional trust as a strategic asset and reinforces the significance of maintaining democratic legitimacy under pressure.

Societal resilience is emerging as a core strategic imperative for democratic societies. For New Zealand, there is a timely opportunity to develop a coherent framework that integrates across domains and offers policy-relevant insights to support our nation to thrive in an uncertain future.

An age of disruption

Descriptions of uncertainty and disruption currently dominate public life. Leaders speak about volatility, complexity and disruption as permanent features of the modern world.¹ While the acronym VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) has seemingly become overused and faded from fashion in recent years, the conditions it describes have never been more topical.

The early 2020s delivered, in rapid succession: a global pandemic, a surge of geopolitical instability, severe weather events, multiple violent attacks on marginalised communities, and a step change in technological disruption that will have far-reaching implications for what resources are scarce and the location of competition in the future. None of these disruptions occurred in a vacuum. They overlapped and put deep pressures on many of society's foundations.

This immediate disruption is taking place in a much broader context. The global information environment has been fundamentally altered in the space of a single generation. Social media platforms and algorithm-driven information systems have transformed how people access information, form opinions, and engage in public debate. Traditional media outlets are no longer the gatekeepers for accurate information, and information is no longer scarce (although it is too often detached from expertise, verification, or context).² This transformation has created enormous opportunities for communication and participation, but it has also produced new vulnerabilities. Information pollution (including mis-, dis-, and mal-information) is increasingly recognised as an existential threat to democracy. In some contexts, the very foundations of shared reality are at risk.³

At the same time, many of the assumptions that underpinned social stability within liberal democracies are increasingly being questioned. In New Zealand in particular, the long-held belief that hard work should deliver fair opportunities is increasingly under strain. The long-standing social contract is no longer universally accepted and perhaps not suitable for the world we now live in. Rising housing costs, intergenerational inequality, and cost-of-living pressures are among the pressures that have contributed to a growing sense of a weakened social contract for some.

This 'polycrisis' poses profound challenges for leaders, policymakers, and democracy itself. Policymakers are frequently making decisions in contexts defined by uncertainty, contested information, and rapidly shifting public sentiment.⁴ Simultaneously, many liberal democracies continue to experience declining trust in institutions, rising polarisation, and growing concern about their long-term capacity to respond effectively to major challenges.

As a result, many contemporary policy challenges cannot be about economic growth, service delivery, or even national security in isolation. Increasingly, debates come back to balancing immediate pressures against a long-term desire to sustain democratic societies' collective capacity to thrive and survive in an age of disruption.

Can democratic systems main their legitimacy under pressure? Can institutions evolve quickly enough to respond to accelerating change while preserving public trust? What does it look like for a society and a country to thrive in the twenty-first century?

¹ See for example Luxon, C. (2026, May 13). *Securing New Zealand's future in a more volatile world*. Beehive.

<https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/securing-new-zealand%E2%80%99s-future-more-volatile-world>

² Scharfbillig, M., Lewandowsky, S., Altay, S., Van Alstyne, M., Kozyreva, A., Hertwig, R., Lorenz-Spreen, P., DiResta, R., Valenzuela, S., Egidy, S., Quattrociochi, W., & Orben, A. (2026). *Fractured reality: How democracy can win the global struggle over the information space*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://doi.org/10.2760/9358883>

³ See for example Naffi, N. (2025, October 1). *Deepfakes and the crisis of knowing*. UNESCO.

<https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/deepfakes-and-crisis-knowing>

⁴ Wantless, A. (2025). *The information animal: Humans, technology and the competition for reality*. Oxford University Press.

These are systems-level challenges, a concept Koi Tū has written about at length.⁵ It can be easy to think about small-scale interventions that will make a difference at the individual level. And yet systems-level challenges cannot be solved at the level of the individual alone. Individuals exist within families, whānau, and communities. Communities exist within societies mediated by institutions. Institutions sit within wider national and global systems. Resilient individuals matter deeply. Likewise, cohesive societies matter deeply. However, neither individual resilience nor social cohesion alone can compensate for systems level challenges, declining trust, or fractured information environments.

In this context, sustaining societal resilience is emerging as one of the defining policy challenges of our time. Koi Tū sees societal resilience as a critical frame to support leaders and policymakers. As disruption becomes more persistent and interconnected, a deep understanding of what drives societal resilience will be a fundamental requirement for democratic stability, national security, and collective wellbeing.

Societal resilience

What is societal resilience

If disruption is now a defining condition of modern society rather than a temporary interruption, then policy conversations both globally and in New Zealand need to shift to how society can retain its ability to thrive under sustained pressure. Increasingly, the challenge is charting a path forward and maintaining social licence during prolonged periods of uncertainty and change. Societal resilience offers a framework for thinking about that challenge.

Societal resilience is a society's collective capacity to absorb, recover from and adapt to both short-term shocks and long-term stressors.⁶ Such disruptions may originate externally, including through geopolitical instability, supply chain disruptions or pandemics, or internally through declining institutional trust, social fragmentation or economic inequality.

Societal resilience is inherently dynamic. A society's response to disruption may vary depending on the circumstances. In some instances, it may be appropriate and desirable for a society to return to its original state after disruption. In other instances, it may be appropriate for a society to evolve. The rationale for wanting a resilient society should not be reduced to an argument about maintaining the status quo. What matters is society's capacity to choose how it responds in a manner that sustains long-term democratic stability.

Koi Tū conceptualises societal resilience as emerging from the interaction between seven domains: environmental, social, institutional, economic, technological, geopolitical and the information environment.⁷ Together, the social and institutional domains reflect what is commonly understood as

⁵ See for example Sridhar, H., Low, F., & Gluckman, P. (2025, December). *Systems thinking, foresight and wicked problems: Implications for policymaking*. Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Koi-Tu-Systems-Thinking-and-Wicked-Problems.pdf>

⁶ The concept of resilience spans multiple disciplines, each of which include their own conceptualisation of resilience. We believe this definition best encapsulates the totality of resilience thinking. For further exploration see MBIE's work on resilience: Pells, S. (2023, June). *Resilience: Definitions, concepts and measurement: A literature review* (CEU Working Paper 23/02). Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment. <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/assets/resilience-definitions-concepts-and-measurement-a-literature-review.pdf>

⁷ This approach is inspired by Pursiainen, C. (2025). Societal resilience as an interdisciplinary research programme? Perspectives and challenges. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 123, 105481. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2025.105481>. It adapts some of Pursiainen's proposed domains and adds the information environment. It also articulates where social cohesion fits into the proposed set of domains and argues for an increased focus on the interactions between domains.

social cohesion, a concept Koi Tū has placed at the centre of its work since 2019.⁸ Yet no single domain, including those encapsulating social cohesion, can alone explain societal resilience.

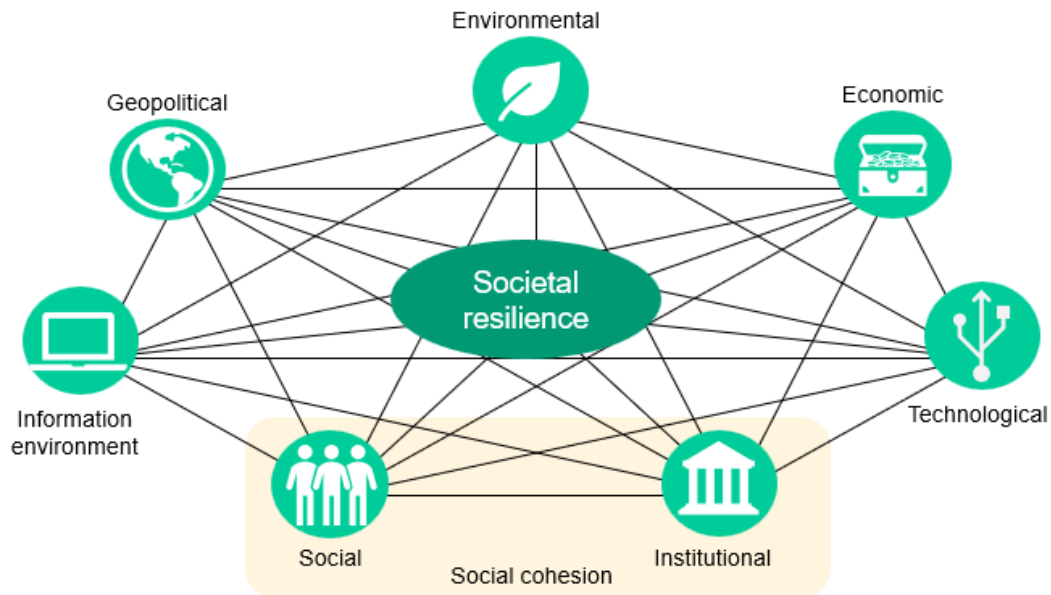


Figure 1. Societal resilience framework

Domain	Example factors
Environmental	Climate systems, biodiversity, natural resources, land, water, and environmental pressures
Economic	Employment, income, markets, trade, productivity, infrastructure, and financial stability
Technological	Digital systems, artificial intelligence, innovation, and critical technologies
Institutional	Government capabilities, public services, governance, and institutional trust
Social	Communities, social relationships, social trust
Information environment	Integrity and resilience of information systems and how individuals engage with information
Geopolitical	International relations, security, supply chains, and global stability

Table 1. Domains of societal resilience

⁸ Gluckman, P., Bardsley, A., Spoonley, P., Royal, C., Simon-Kumar, N., & Chen, A. (2021). *Sustaining Aotearoa New Zealand as a cohesive society*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Sustaining-Aotearoa-New-Zealand-as-a-cohesive-society.pdf>; Gluckman, P., Spoonley, P., Bardsley, A., Poulton, R., Royal, T. A. C., Sridhar, H., & Clyne, D. (2023). *Addressing the challenges to social cohesion*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Addressing-the-challenges-to-social-cohesion.pdf>;

Contextualising social cohesion

In the face of disruption, New Zealand is increasingly turning to concepts of social cohesion to understand the resilience of our society. We are heartened by the renewed attention to social cohesion, reflecting a broader recognition that societies and the people who make them up are more than mere human capital. Social cohesion indeed provides important insight into the state of interpersonal and institutional relationships. In this sense, social cohesion is a useful indicator of whether our social fabric is holding together under pressure.⁹ The study and measurement of social cohesion remain important, and we must continue these efforts.

However, a resilient society is more than its social and institutional domains. High levels of interpersonal trust do not automatically translate into the capacity to manage geopolitical shocks, climate events, technological disruption or supply chain failures. Without linking cohesion to wider domains, we risk misdiagnosing resilience as a pure social attribute rather than an emergent property of interconnected domains.¹⁰

Furthermore, the resilience of a society is systemic, not just individual. While individual resilience and interpersonal trust matter (and warrant further exploration), resilience cannot be reduced to the sum of individual attitudes or behaviours. By focusing on social cohesion alone, we risk shifting responsibility onto individuals to remain resilient. In the context of cost-of-living pressures, rising inequality and accelerating information disruption, we cannot expect individuals to absorb the disruptions of failing systems that they themselves may not have direct control over. Individuals must be understood within the wider systems that shape their opportunities and constraints.

Subsequently, the value of societal resilience lies in its elevation of narrow, domain-specific approaches focused on the individual to systems-level thinking focused on the collective. Societal resilience emerges not just from the strength of each domain, but from the interactions between them. Understanding societal resilience therefore requires policymakers to consider how disruptions move between domains rather than treating each challenge as a separate problem managed within policy silos. Social cohesion can and should be contextualised by zooming out and situating it within the broader set of system-level domains that also impact societal resilience.

Resilience's relevance for leaders

Societal resilience offers a framework for thinking through the question: how can policymakers and leaders adapt when many of today's most significant challenges do not fit neatly within traditional policy boundaries or department silos? Economic shocks cause social pressures. Information disruption weakens institutional and social trust. Climate change has simultaneous fiscal, political, and geopolitical consequences. In this high-stakes environment, leadership requires thinking about how risks interact across domains.

Resilience has become an increasingly prominent concept across all manner of discussions ranging from public policy to national security, infrastructure planning, and community development. At times, the term risks becoming overused or imprecise. Yet that growing prominence is also a valuable source of opportunity.

⁹ See the following for how Kōi Tū has historically positioned the relationship between social cohesion and societal resilience and their relationship: Bardsley, A. (2020, April 1). Societal resilience – Unpacking the black box. Kōi Tū Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/societal-resilience-unpacking-the-black-box/>; This most recent work builds on existing Kōi Tū work.

¹⁰ See for example Coutts, A. (2026, April 1). What the government's plan for social cohesion gets wrong about community division. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/what-the-governments-plan-for-social-cohesion-gets-wrong-about-community-division-278702>

Resilience is an intuitive and widely understood concept that resonates across sectors and disciplines. When societal resilience is clearly defined and understood, it offers policymakers a practical language for communicating the interconnectedness of domains. It offers a way of talking about our collective ability to withstand disruption, adapt to change, and thrive under pressure.

Societal resilience is a conceptual framework that is complementary to existing policy frameworks, particularly Treasury’s Living Standards Framework and its recognition of the importance of long-term thinking. Societal resilience focuses specifically on society’s capacity to respond to shocks and stressors, and on evaluating the interactions between the seven domains.

A societal resilience lens invites system-level thinking. It enables leaders to articulate relationships, dependencies, and vulnerabilities in the spaces between individual silos. This shift in thinking preserves each domain’s stand-alone importance, whilst offering several implications for policy design:

1. Encouraging leaders to prioritise adaptability alongside efficiency

Systems designed primarily for efficiency often perform poorly under stress. Policy is already shifting towards prioritising resilience, because short-term efficiency often does not outweigh long-term robustness during disruption. Analysis elsewhere has highlighted the potential value of faster recovery after shocks, before even factoring in the day-to-day benefits of societal resilience.¹¹

2. Reinforcing the importance of institutional trust as a strategic asset

Public trust influences whether governments can respond effectively during crises, implement change with short-term pain but long-term gain, or maintain social license to operate. Institutional trust is an often overlooked but incredibly valuable strategic asset. Treating it as a domain of societal resilience invites consideration of its relationships with other domains and ultimately a clearer articulation of the underlying processes at play.

3. Highlighting the importance of maintaining democratic legitimacy

There exists ample evidence that under sustained pressure, societies become more vulnerable to polarisation, disinformation, declining trust, political fragmentation, and extremism. Shifting to a social resilience framing opens an important conversation about how to protect the conditions under which a liberal democracy can function effectively and legitimately in the current age of disruption.

4. Incentivising earlier and more integrated responses to emerging risks

Traditional policy systems have focused on responses to disruption once impacts have already become acute. Globally, there is significant interest in foresight and risk management. Societal resilience offers closer alignment with the emerging foresight-based ways of thinking about risk, where proactive preparedness sits alongside effective mitigation. Its systems-level positioning and focus on interactions also invites an integrated understanding of impacts that requires thinking to extend beyond policy silos.

5. Enabling a dynamic definition of ‘success’

The goal of maintaining high levels of societal resilience will never be to prevent all disruption or preserve society exactly as it currently exists. Change is inevitable and, in some cases, desirable. Societal resilience is about constructively facing the future and finding ways to thrive with disruption and protect the aspects of democracy that matter most.

¹¹ Shaw, D., & Scully, J. (2026). *Assessing the public value of societal resilience to disruption*. National Consortium for Societal Resilience (NCSR+). <https://www.preventionweb.net/publication/documents-and-publications/assessing-public-value-societal-resilience-disruption>; Authors evaluated societal resilience in terms of community capacity to recover after a shock (a more narrow definition than advanced here) and found an SROI of 35:1.

Leaders and policymakers must be encouraged to recognise that societal resilience is a key strategic imperative. Societal resilience needs to be explicitly recognised, monitored, and integrated into decision-making. Internationally, societal resilience is an emerging and rapidly developing field of thinking. Aotearoa New Zealand has an opportunity to draw on existing leadership in understanding institutional trust and social cohesion to contribute to how this framework is developed and implemented.

A pathway forward

Societal resilience is both an asset and capability that societies can develop over time. Consequently, New Zealand policy makers should position societal resilience as a part of an ongoing policy agenda. In an age of sustained disruption, resilience is increasingly becoming a core requirement for national stability, democratic legitimacy and long-term wellbeing.

Already, there is clear international momentum behind a shift towards societal resilience. Across Europe and within multilateral organisations, governments and research institutions are increasingly adopting resilience-oriented frameworks that extend beyond traditional sectoral approaches.¹² These efforts reflect a growing recognition that modern risks reflect interconnected domains which require more integrated ways of understanding society's capacity under stress.

However, New Zealand lacks a comprehensive way to assess resilience across its interrelated domains. While important work exists in assessing social cohesion, economic performance and wellbeing, there is no national framework that integrates these domains effectively. New Zealand needs a structured, measurable and integrated societal resilience framework that will help us understand the resilience of our society and support long-term policy making.

As an interdisciplinary institute with expertise in long-term planning, systems thinking and evidence-based policy analysis, Koi Tū is well placed to lead the development of tools that translate the complex systems dynamics of societal resilience into actionable insights for decision-makers.

Societal resilience represents an asset that can help our society respond to turbulent times. However, only when we can understand the totality of its interconnected domains and their interactions can we implement meaningful policy. Such work may prove crucial in a time of new shocks in the form of technological disruption and enduring stressors in the form of interrelated disruption.

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¹² See for example Kaim, A., Geva, K., Siman-Tov, M., Adini, B., Bodas, M., Peleg, K., & Jaffe, E. (2024). Mapping societal resilience across eight European nations in the context of multifaceted associations with global indices: An ecological study. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 108, 104562. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2024.104562>

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Koi Tū Trust

Level 11, 48 Emily Place, Auckland 1010

PO Box 91850, Victoria St West, Auckland 1010

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