

# How Environmentalists Deal with (Yet Another) Global Crisis: Resilience, Vulnerability, and Intersecting Crises

**Jelena Puđak**

*Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar, Zagreb, Croatia*

*e-mail: jelena.pudjak@pilar.hr*

**ABSTRACT** The Covid-19 pandemic has had multiple effects on social systems as yet another crisis, alongside climate change and biodiversity loss, that stems from the complex interaction between human and natural systems. In this regard, building resilience to ongoing and future crises has become a common reference point in both public and scholarly discourse. In the context of building resilience, the civil sector has an important social role to play in promoting the public interest and strengthening the role of citizens in democratic societies, thus enabling them to participate in society's development. The environmental movement, as one of the most successful social movements, combines issues of environmental protection with a concept of social justice and economic development, and thus with building the resilience of society as a whole. The research questions were: how has the Covid-19 pandemic affected environmental NGOs, and what strategies have they applied to cope with and adapt to the new situation? How do environmental activists describe the concepts of vulnerability and resilience within the NGO sector? What are their expectations of future trends in the field to which their activism refers? The results of this research point to the conclusion that resilience is defined in terms of an organization's adaptability, flexibility, inner social cohesion, and capacity to self-organize with an emphasis on networking. Intersecting crises that stem from the complex relationship between human and natural systems pose a challenge of finding an efficient frame for the problem within the movement and of re-establishing a corrective role in society.

*Key words:* intersecting crisis, resilience, vulnerability, environmental NGOs, pandemic.

## 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a global public-health, economic and social crisis that has affected all aspects of human functioning and requires systematic socioeconomic changes to be implemented, which will make us more resilient to such events in the future. However, at the same time, we face long-term environmental crises whose complexity far surpasses the current epidemiological crisis. It is important to emphasize that these are interdependent, intertwined crises. In order to solve them we must consider their mutual connections and interactions (EEA, 2020; Malm, 2020; Gibb et al., 2020; Espejo et al., 2020). These “compound risks” amplify the already present socioeconomic disparities, and they disproportionately affect those with less access to power and resources, which makes such people more vulnerable to hazards (Phillips et al., 2020; Sultana, 2021). This puts the concept of environmental justice, and the associated environmental movement, at the center of struggles to envision and operationalize future public policies so as to combat crises in a socially just manner.

When talking about building resilience, the civil sector has an important social role to play in promoting the public interest and strengthening the role of citizens in democratic societies, thus enabling these citizens to participate in society’s development. As such, the civil sector does not only work with beneficiaries and stakeholders but is also expected to contribute to policy proposals in the area in which they operate. The environmental movement, as one of the most successful social movements, combines issues of environmental protection with the concept of social justice and economic development, thus building up the resilience of society as a whole (Dawson, 2010; Della Porta & Parks, 2014; Fisher, 2016; Wahlström et al., 2010).

In this paper, I will present the results of qualitative research conducted on the population of environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Croatia. Relying on social resilience concepts, as outlined in the theoretical framework, I will describe the viewpoint and experiences of activists on work in a non-governmental organization during the crisis period (the aftermath of the second wave of the pandemic). I will also cover: (i) how it affected the civil society sector and what strategies they applied to cope with it and adapt to the new situation, (ii) definitions of the concepts of resilience and vulnerability in the sector in which they work, and (iii) expectations of future trends to which their activism is related.

## 2. Framing resilience within social systems

Amid pressing environmental crises, namely climate change and biodiversity loss, and the current pandemic (including all the challenges it is placing, and will place on society in the future), resilience is a concept commonly referred to, not only in public discourse, but also in scholarly research (Nüchter et al., 2021). However, resilience as a

concept is still contested in terms of definitions and measurable variables. It originated from medical science, from psychiatry in the 1940s (Manyena, 2006). Yet when applied in socioecological and sociological research, it refers mostly to a concept that was defined by the ecologist Holling in 1973, who stated that resilience is 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” (1973:14).

In the age of the Anthropocene, when humanity is recognized as a global geological force, resilience offers a conceptual framework that seeks to sustain the vital eco-services that make social life possible (Grove & Chandler, 2016). One important task in relation to social systems is the conceptualizing of resilience for complex, nonlinear, and evolving systems (Lélé, 1998). Adger defines social resilience as “the ability of communities to withstand external shocks to their social infrastructure” (2000:361). Lorenz (2013) suggests supplementing “communities” from this definition with “social systems,” since there are other social systems operating on multiple levels that may have different resilience strategies. The concept of resilience is sometimes compared with the concept of sustainability. Some authors view resilience as a complementary concept wherein resilience is necessary for, but not a sufficient requirement of, sustainability (Fath, Dean, & Katzmair, 2015). Others view the concept of sustainability as unsuitable for analyzing social systems that are prone to change, and they assert that it draws the analysis away from identifying how societies are coping with and planning for crisis, especially in the context of pressing climate change (Davidson, 2013). A more comprehensive definition states that resilience is an “intrinsic capacity of a system, community or society predisposed to a shock or stress to adapt and survive by changing its nonessential attributes and rebuilding itself” (Manyena, 2006). The latter definition incorporates necessary strategies to ensure resilience (i.e., to change nonessential attributes) and to work toward the solution or goal of a resilient system (namely, to rebuild itself). However, interpreting social resilience in this way is just a starting point for assessing the key variables that make a system resilient, and understanding whether resilience is a process or end goal. Some authors see resilience as characteristic of stages in a system’s evolution, with the result being a successful reorganization (Fath et al.). In that sense, resilience is a feature of a successful adaptation process. On the other hand, some authors try to theoretically frame resilience as the ability of a system to “bounce back” to its original state after an external shock – in this sense, resilience is the end goal (Manyena, 2006). In a way, these accounts are opposed, but research nevertheless suggests that despite conceptual and operationalization-related (measurement) challenges, resilience as a concept has analytical strength and requires a case-by-case assessment (Nüchter et al., 2021).

The theoretical accounts that conceptualize social resilience with the help of social system’s capacities are also important for sociological research. These include adaptive, coping, and participatory capacities (Lorenz, 2013); agency (Davidson); self-reflexive

learning (Chandler, 2014); and related concepts like risk management (in the context of climate change) and vulnerability (Manyena, 2006; Stocker et al., 2013). More recent theoretical and empirical research connects vulnerability and its associated concepts (adaptation and resilience) with the characteristics and complex interaction between social and environmental processes (Adger et al., 2009; Davoudi, 2012; Shaw, 2012). Vulnerability depends not only on a specific type of risk, but also on the conditions in which the individuals live, which in turn are the result of historical, cultural, political, economic, and ecological processes (Adger et al., 2009; Brooks, 2003). If vulnerability is defined in terms of the degree of a system's negative reaction to hazards, then vulnerability and resilience can be seen as two poles on the same continuum (Manyena, 2006; Vazquez-González, 2021).

As for building the resilience of social systems, unequal power distribution among different social actors or subsystems is perceived as important. Unequal power distribution among different subsystems disables those subsystems with less access to power from engaging their adaptive capacities, which therefore renders them less resilient (Davidson, 2013; Lorenz, 2013). In that sense, dependence on a supra-system also reduces resilience, and the ability of a system to self-organize builds resilience. Adger (2000) sees social resilience as institutionally determined. To clarify, social institutions are a part of all social systems, and they fundamentally determine their structure and the distribution of assets. In that sense, social resilience can be viewed in terms of the ability to endure institutional change (for instance demographic change or economic change) (Adger, 2000). Social systems are unique in that their reaction to change, crisis, and stress is not defined only by structural aspects of a whole system, but by agency as well (Davidson, 2013). In the context of resilience, agency is important when accounting for differences in power structures, and the ability to anticipate and to act collectively (Davidson, 2013). Collective behavior, especially through civil society, is important for social resilience, and differences in access to power and resources limit the ability of "change agents located in civil society" to respond to crisis (Davidson, 2013:1143). In this article, civil society, i.e., environmental non-governmental organizations, is a social institution through which social resilience can be reinforced. Therefore, the resilience of that subsystem and its reaction to crisis lies at the center of our research.

To successfully mitigate and adapt to climate change, and to survive both the current pandemic and prevent future crises, non-governmental organizations are an important actor fulfilling multiple roles, as a bearer of collective action, an agent monitoring public policy, an educator, and a solidarity and aid provider (Pleyers, 2020). Environmentalism has been one of the most prominent social movements from the 1970s onward (Mertig & Dunlap, 2009). The modern environmental movement (EM) relies on the mass mobilization of public, modern science, mass media and social media in the twenty-first century, and the proportionally expanding educated middle-class

population, who see environmental problems as a consequence of modernity (Gandy, 2000; Mertig & Dunlap, 2009; Rootes, 2004). EM adheres to postmodern values (Rootes, 2004), however not exclusively, as current socio-metabolic processes that led to climate change and biodiversity loss draw attention to the material issues of individuals and communities affected by environmental degradation, discussing their modes of and perspectives on survival (Domazet & Ančić, 2019; Zhou et al., 2015).

Since the 1980s, EM has expanded its interest in environmental issues by linking them with issues of social justice, thus combining issues of conservation and protection with building the resilience of human communities, especially that of marginalized groups (Roser-Renouf et al., 2014; Dawson, 2010; Wahlström et al., 2010). In that sense, environmental justice – and in recent times climate justice – bring the movement's intersectional quality into focus, especially regarding complex and long-term interactions between society and nature, such as those involved in the current pandemic (Mulholland, 2020; Zang et al., 2021). EM also calls for broad systemic change as a solution not only to climate change but also to intersecting crises of our time as well (Mulholland, 2020; Dawson, 2010; Della Porta & Parks, 2014; Fisher, 2016; Wahlström et al., 2010).

The fruitful and complex theoretical contributions of the literature on social resilience – despite being difficult to operationalize – point to the conclusion that resilience is best conceptualized through analyzing a specific social system and its environment. With that in mind, this article's main research goal is to explain and describe how environmentalists conceptualize and define resilience, both in terms of organizational resilience as well as in the terms of resilience of the environmental NGO's sector with an emphasis on the intersecting crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and the current pandemic.

### **3. Methods**

Environmentalism in Croatia was developed in the specific historical context of a nonaligned socialist and transitional semiperipheral country (see Lay & Puđak, 2014; Domazet & Ančić, 2019). In that sense, environmentalism in Croatia has mainly developed from (local) protectionism to issues of participation and public interest, the monitoring of policymaking, environmental justice, and on to being a powerful advocate for environmentally sound development (Branilović & Šimleša, 2009; Lay & Puđak, 2014; Oštrić, 1992). While acknowledging the importance of the context-specific historical development of Croatian environmentalism, it will not be operationalized in the research questions here. There are both practical and theoretical reasons for not doing so. Operationalizing context-specific historical developments and their impact on environmentalism is a complex task beyond the scope of this paper. From a theoretical perspective, since there are no national or historical comparisons of interest

for this research, the aforementioned historical and spatial contexts are of no greater importance for answering our research questions. However, future research, as well as the implications of this research's generalizability would benefit from an analysis of how the specific details of national contexts help shape current resilience, adaptation, and coping strategies within the environmental movement.

In the aftermath of the second wave of the Covid-19 epidemic in Croatia (when research was conducted) there were significant social and economic consequences of this new health crisis (see contributions from *Journal for Spatial and Socio-Cultural Development Studies*, special issue 59 (219): 1-323). Those consequences relate to employment rate decline (roughly 2% annual decline), and changed circumstances of employment that affected certain groups of workers in a greater extend. Changes in work patterns, work space, work-life balance, efficiency and health risks were directly influenced trough policy interventions and regulations that were introduced during the first wave of the pandemic (spring 2020) and to a certain extent remained active till the end of the year (more on work related events during the pandemic and work related experiences see Matković, Lucić, 2021). Organizational changes conditioned by partial and/or complete bans on public and educational activities, local, regional and (inter)national travel restrictions – as well as problem framing changes conditioned by health priorities, affected the organizational and content creation aspect of work in both environmental NGOs, and civil sector as a whole. Although help measures to sustain jobs were introduced, they applied only to private sector and economic activities, putting civil sector in a disadvantageous position. This led to the submission of an appeal to the government and competent ministry in December 2020 from more than a hundred NGOs asking for more transparency and fairness in procedures regarding allocation of financial help to civil sector organizations.

The research questions were: how, in the aftermath of the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, do environmental activists describe the concepts of vulnerability and resilience regarding their organization and field of interest? How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected the civil society sector and what strategies have been applied in that sector to cope with and adapt to the new situation? What expectations does the civil society sector have regarding future trends in the field to which their activism is related? A qualitative methodology was applied to answer these questions. Semi-structured interviews with representatives from six environmental NGOs in Croatia were conducted, including the spatial distribution criterion. The sample included large, institutionalized organizations with permanently employed staff and a high level of professionalization and international cooperation (for an NGO typology see Carter, 2007). The research was conducted from February to May 2021. All the interviews presented in the analysis were conducted by the author of this paper. The interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. The audio files were transcribed and then analyzed on the computer software ATLAS.ti using the method of thematic analysis. The sam-

ple's scope resulted in a satisfactory level of data density and saturation, that is, the thematic repetition in the participants' answers. Saturation started to occur almost immediately (during the second interview). This could point to a conclusion that there is a common discourse on discussed subjects among environmentalists in Croatia.

#### 4. Research results

The thematic analysis allowed development of concepts on several abstract levels, and thematic networks were used to interpret the results. Using multilevel open coding, fundamental concepts were developed inductively, which made it possible to answer the research questions. The results are presented in four categories, and each one includes several themes that the interviewees talked about (Table 1). The four categories are: the effects of the pandemic on the organization and sector, vulnerability, resilience, and future accounts.

Table 1.  
The subcategories and themes that each category contains

The effects of the pandemic on the organization/sector	}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expected logistical and financial difficulties</li> <li>Negative (external and internal) impacts vs. positive impacts</li> <li>Negative impacts on sector</li> </ul>
Vulnerability	}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vulnerability of organization and vulnerability of sector</li> <li>CS marginalization and double standards</li> <li>Pandemic as an excuse</li> </ul>
Resilience	}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resilience of the organization/sector</li> <li>Coping strategies and adaptation</li> <li>Support</li> <li>Resilience building</li> </ul>
What the future holds...	}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Return to a "watchdog" role</li> <li>Uncertainty (with regard to organization)</li> <li>Resource pressure</li> <li>Intersecting crises</li> </ul>

##### 4.1. *The effects of the pandemic on the organization and sector*

The Covid-19 outbreak had a disrupting effect on how people organize work and travel. In the case of non-governmental organizations, public protest and collective actions were forced to come to a stop due to epidemiological measures attempting to curb the spread of the virus. However, protests are not the only activity carried out by non-governmental organizations. Consequently, we were interested in how the pandemic influenced the work and organizational aspects of environmental NGOs, and if these effects were perceived as negative or positive. In that sense, the main themes that interviewees brought up referred to expected logistical and financial difficulties,

internal and external negative impacts and positive impacts, and the negative impact that the pandemic had had on the environmental NGO sector. Interviewees described the most noticeable and first effects of the pandemic as not being able to conduct activities in public spaces, or with the public or beneficiaries, adjusting to online work, working from home, and not being able to conduct cross-border activities because of travel restrictions, while making overall adjustments to the new organization of work:

*We could continue our research, but there are a lot of activities for public and with our members that had to be canceled or put online if possible. There were also extra costs for digital tools.* (Interviewee #1)

*Most of our activities are cross-border activities, and since there was no traveling, we had to reorganize.* (Interviewee #3)

However, when I asked the interviewees to describe which effects of the pandemic were negative, and which, if any, were positive, the reorganization of work was not at the top of the list. The negative effects mentioned concerned the lack of clear information and cooperation with state bodies regarding the reorganization of project activities and international funding mediated by the state. This was especially true in comparison with international project management on behalf of the EU:

*In most European projects there was a clear message that all activities would be put on hold, but state bodies that act as mediators for some EU funds were totally uncooperative, inflexible, and weren't able to adapt to this new situation.* (Interviewee #2)

In addition to a lack of information, NGOs faced the withdrawal of finances (tenders) from national organizations on which they rely for a part of their organizational expenses. These negative impacts were also reflected in organizations' internal difficulties regarding the maintenance of motivation, team spirit, and work efficiency. For some environmental organizations, this put social cohesion at the center of adaptation struggles:

*With all this online work and work from home it is really difficult to keep up the team spirit, and that was quite a challenge for our organization [...] we realized that we have to work on our people, not only on project goals.* (Interviewee #3)

Any positive effects of the pandemic described by the interviewees were rarely perceived as such, and they were detected at the organizational level, rather than the program level. They relate mostly to the advantages of working from home, and of reduced traveling, which from an environmentalist perspective is aligned with a lesser environmental impact.



The negative effects were perceived not only on the organizational and program level, but also regarding the whole sector of environmental non-governmental organizations. Such effects were described primarily as long-term financial insecurity, a reduction in state funding, and, what is termed in this paper, a “crisis competition.” The first two refer to organizational and institutional aspects of the environmental movement, while the latter refers to the fundamental challenges of the environmental movement in framing the urgency of complex and intersecting environmental issues. As of institutional stressors on environmentalism in Croatia, the dependence on state funding increased insecurity within the sector, and this is perceived as originating from external stressors, i.e., the pandemic:

*I think people feel the kind of financial insecurity and instability they probably wouldn't have felt had it not been for the pandemic. We now know that there will be a reduction in funding for the NGO sector and a lot of funding focuses on health, so that additionally introduces a higher level of insecurity. (Interviewee #2)*

Yet the challenge of framing urgent intersecting crises, namely climate change and biodiversity loss, was present in environmentalism before the pandemic. However, it has been additionally emphasized by new crises: not only the pandemic, but also devastating earthquakes in Croatia during 2020, which have entered the competition for media and public attention:

*We have a situation within the sector where climate change and biodiversity loss are two related things that are sometimes seen as essentially competing for attention in the media. And then when it comes to all that in relation to the pandemic, and finally the earthquake – you can absolutely see the turn in society, and it is understandable...that the priorities are different. (Interviewee #1)*

## 4.2. Vulnerability

Interviewees were asked how they would define the vulnerability of organizations and whether they see vulnerability in their own organization and the sector. Although there was no clear definition of the concept, vulnerability was described in terms of several variables including: size of organization, dependence (on state donors), lack of self-financing, lack of state support, and lack of team cohesion and institutional memory. Size of organization was described as an advantage and disadvantage at the same time. On the one hand, larger organizations have larger amounts of human capital and a greater potential to implement complex, internationally funded long-term projects that provide a certain level of security. On the other hand, large organizations have bigger organizational costs (for example wages) that present a challenge to carrying out their work during crisis periods. In this regard, dependence on state donors and state funds are perceived as increasing vulnerability when those funds are withdrawn

(as experienced during the pandemic). Financial disruption during the pandemic was rated as especially detrimental for small associations, and it caused some of them to shut down. However, a lack of state support is not exclusively a matter of a lack of financing; transparent information, education, and acknowledgment of the sector are called for as well. Internally, vulnerability is described in terms of a lack of social cohesion, which is important for work motivation, team spirit, and institutional memory:

*We lost half the staff last year and with them the institutional knowledge, which contributed to the insecurity of the organization. And we realized how dependent we are on these outside factors, and that the funds we relied on could be gone overnight.* (Interviewee #6)

Vulnerability is perceived both within organizations and within the sector, and coping strategies are described as temporally limited:

*We are succeeding in some way, but we are still not in a position to endure the crisis for a long time.* (Interviewee #3)

Sector vulnerability stems from the sector's marginalization (by state bodies) and is described in terms of double standards. Double standards are seen in disproportionately strict rules for NGOs compared with public and private actors, and a lack of state support. This is visible in the amount of emergency funding received by other sectors but not by non-governmental organizations, and in the financing criteria for environmental NGOs, and in state failure to fulfill obligations toward NGOs while expecting full compliance. It was emphasized here that these were existing problems that the pandemic only made worse.

*When applying for a tender and obtaining European funds, all other actors and local government units have automatic assurance of 100% co-funding, except for civil society associations that can get only 70%, which puts us at a disadvantage automatically, especially since last year when these tenders were suspended altogether.* (Interviewee #6)

*There is a new programming period ahead, and as it is one of the EU's goals to involve civil society in decision-making we find it troubling that the state and ministry did not include us. They say that it is because of the pandemic – most often when you ask anything a ministry tells you “we are not working at full capacity because of the pandemic” – but when you need to report to them then they do not allow you to have the same excuse, because your deadline is tight and theirs is not.* (Interviewee #3)

In that sense, the pandemic is not exclusively described by interviewees as a vulnerability factor, but as an “excuse.” Interviewees describe the pandemic being used as an

excuse in several different ways: on an institutional level through a lack of transparency and cooperation from the state toward the civil sector, on the legislative level through a disregard for and delays in the enactment of (environmental) laws, in the media space through low levels of media representation on issues concerned with environmental harm, and in terms of social metabolism regarding increased pressure on resources:

*In Croatia we have literally had feedback from various sectors that since there are now emergency measures, state bodies and investors will attempt to disregard all environmental standards. (Interviewee #1)*

*There are many things for which the pandemic is an excuse... the pandemic is used as an excuse for a lot of delays and the enactment of laws, such as harmonization with the *acquis communautaire* [EU legislation]. So, I think the pandemic will certainly bring an extra level of non-transparency and non-cooperation from the government. (Interviewee #3)*

*Under the cover of the pandemic a lot of things go under the radar because all the media attention is on pandemics and earthquakes. We had a few situations when we had to react to the local authorities and the ministry regarding some harmful activities. (Interviewee #4)*

### 4.3. Resilience

The increased multifaceted vulnerability described by interviewees brought the conversation to the subject of resilience. Interviewees were asked (i) to describe coping mechanisms used during the pandemic period, (ii) to define or describe how they see resilience, and (iii) whether there is resilience within the sector, the organization, or both.

Most frequently, resilience was described as adaptation, flexibility, and diversification (of revenue), especially on the organizational level. Here, both adaptation and flexibility referred to adapting to new ways of working, quickly (re)acting to and reorganizing project activities, and diversifying in terms of the ability to either find new sources of funding or be able to perform with less financial security.

*I would say we are resilient... well, to some extent at least. I mean, we did manage to adapt to this whole new situation, and we conducted almost all the planned activities. So yeah... I would say [resilience] is being able to adapt and to be flexible. (Interviewee #5)*

Networking with international platforms was also perceived as improving the resilience of the organization and the sector. Being able to secure international funding

through network organizations is just one part of the importance of networking. Motivational, administrative, and practical forms of support were emphasized as important. The NGO network systems also proved to be more efficient than the national supra-systems in organizing emergency funds for associations that had been most impacted by the pandemic on a global level. Activities completed via networking also point to the ability to self-organize, present within the sector (but not necessarily within the state), therein reducing a dependence on the supra-system:

*What happened was this connection that developed among NGOs, thanks to the international and European networks where we were able to communicate more and share experiences, and we even had the opportunity to go to webinars on how to reorganize work, how to take care of the team and how to be efficient. (Interviewee #2)*

*It was important to have strong and good consortia from outside where it is somehow easier to get foreign funding because you are not subject to national political changes. So I think resilience is definitely related to adaptation, to the ability to think and cooperate outside of the box, and to having a good ability to network with associations outside Croatia. (Interviewee #6)*

The next important element of resilience is seen in institutional memory and institutional knowledge, as well as in cohesiveness or “togetherness,” as interviewees described it – both inside the organization and on the sector level. Institutional memory and knowledge are built through experience (especially mentioned in the context of guaranteeing large long-term projects), cooperation (especially within the sector and through international networks) and the ability to think “outside of the box” in crisis situations. It is noticeable how interviewees did not mention technological assets or solutions as a resilience factor. One of the important aspects of resilience was described as “togetherness,” not just within the organization but within the sector as well:

*As far as the sector is concerned, I can say that there are a bunch of things that are failing in the civil sector, but still, thanks to the pandemic, NGOs are raising their voice and trying to fight for change and not allow the violation of democratic standards. There is togetherness in the sector. (Interviewee #1)*

*I have confidence in our team. We also have space for further adjustments, and I think that's good resilience. I would mention again that our flexibility and ability to adjust quickly is terribly important. (Interviewee #5)*

As mentioned earlier, diversification of revenue is perceived as building resilience. In addition, the commercialization of activities was sometimes used as a coping mechanism to manage a crisis period. Interviewees described themselves as being “forced”

by the situation to seek funds and apply for commercial projects, as well as starting to charge for services previously done as voluntary work:

*We are working in an organized manner on trying to diversify our revenues; it is hard, but we realize that it is this vulnerability that makes us do it. And we are succeeding in some way, but we are still not in a position to endure a crisis for a long time. (Interviewee #2)*

Lastly, resilience is also conceptualized through strategic planning that focuses on creating more space for flexibility in the organization, work efficiency and again, the commercialization of activities:

*Much of the planning had been devoted to this new structure and the issue of how to strengthen the resilience of the organization, where to find new opportunities, and how to commercialize work. We started working on a new work structure to increase efficacy. (Interviewee #1)*

#### **4.4. Future accounts**

In a theoretical framing, future accounts – in the sense of anticipating and planning for crisis in a deductive manner – are important for social resilience (Lorenz, 2013), and so interviewees were asked how they see the future for their organization's role and for society as a whole. The most frequent description was a “return” to assuming a corrective role in relation to state bodies. This kind of watchdog role was perceived as a form of downgrading for the environmental NGO sector, as it drains their energy and redirects NGOs away from constructing new developmental solutions for society:

*We realized that now, and at the whole European level, we as NGOs will now have to put much more energy into preventing these [environmentally] harmful projects in the coming years. (Interviewee #6)*

*We will not be able to focus on new things and new solutions; instead we will be preventing these negative projects that have resurfaced from 30 years ago, and investors now think that because it [the current period] is an emergency, they will be able to skip every procedure. (Interviewee #1)*

This again situates the pandemic influence within the multiple future accounts that interviewees shared: negative developmental decisions made by a policymaker (in the future, but this had already started), future uncertainty with regard to organization, future (but this had already started) resource pressure, and the future role of environmental NGOs in framing intersecting crises. Because of a shifting focus on the dissolution of the pandemic and the pandemic's consequences (on the economy),

monitoring the implementation of measures to mitigate climate change is perceived as a challenge that environmental NGOs will have to face in the future. One associated issue is the growing resource pressure that is perceived as already ongoing, and that is expected to continue in the future because of the expected financial crisis:

*I expect that there will be pressure on the exploitation of natural resources because the state will definitely experience a financial setback, which is already obvious, and then one of the easiest ways to procure financial resources is through the exploitation of resources. (Interviewee #3)*

One consequence associated with the expected financial crisis in the country is financial uncertainty for environmental NGOs linked to the reduced or in most cases complete withdrawal of state support (the co-funding of projects). Future financial insecurity and changes made to funding schemes are perceived to be the most detrimental for small civic associations:

*We expect in the future, especially for the co-financing we receive through the Environmental Protection Fund and the Office for Associations, that there may be problems given the whole economic situation. We completed a mini survey within the Green Forum and found that smaller associations are threatened greatly. (Interviewee #1)*

Lastly, there was an emphasis on NGOs' efforts to further raise awareness of the interconnectedness of multiple crises in our time, namely multiple environmental crises, a public-health crisis, an economic crisis, and rising social disparities:

*If we look at it from the perspective of nature protection, we really feel that we have to communicate the importance and interconnectedness of everything and we believe that if people become more aware of that, then they will become... now it's a little pathetic... but better people. But yes, we also know that while people are digging through the trash, they really don't care if there are still eagles in Croatia or not. (Interviewee #1)*

## 5. Discussion

The pandemic has certainly had a negative effect on environmental non-governmental organizations, but least so with regard to the reorganization of work within each organization –work with members (or with the public) and internally. On the contrary, big environmental associations in Croatia have been able to adapt successfully to a new way of work, to reorganize planned activities, and to readjust their budgets to meet their obligations with less financial support. The negative effects of the pandemic relate mostly to interactions between the state and NGOs, marked by a lack of communication, information, and support from the state toward NGOs, which interviewees described as a “marginalization of associations.” These were predomi-

nantly existing problems that the pandemic only made worst. In addition to the latter, financial difficulties due to healthcare priorities were perceived as adding to the vulnerability of organizations. A dependence on a supra-system (the state) for (financial) support, as well as a lack of nonfinancial support (information flows, education, and flexibility) from the state were also perceived as adding to organizations' vulnerability. However, environmentalists emphasize that the pandemic had a negative influence on the civil sector as a whole, yet also on the state of environmental policy; in both cases the pandemic has been used as an excuse for state malpractices. The pandemic is perceived to have also been "fighting" with environmental issues for media and public attention, in addition to what has been termed as crisis competition within environmentalism (typically between climate change and biodiversity loss). Regarding the influence of the pandemic on environmental NGOs and perceived vulnerability, resilience is viewed as an organization's ability to adapt and be flexible. In that sense, adaptation is a function of resilience and not the other way around, as in some theoretical conceptualizations (Fath et al., 2015). Building resilience is mediated by self-organization and networking, and by diversification of revenue. The complexity of the subsystem (in this case environmental NGOs) is not perceived as lessening resilience, as is anticipated in some theoretical accounts (Davidson, 2013). On the contrary, the size of the organization and the building of multiple networks (both national and international) was perceived as helpful in the crisis period. However, the flexibility of the subsystem has proven to be important for interviewees in line with Fath et al.'s (2015) thesis. Since vulnerability is often described in terms of financial difficulties, it is expected that diversification of revenue and commercialization of activities are perceived as building resilience for the organization. In theoretical conceptualizations (Lorenz, 2013) reducing a dependence on a supra-system is also expected to increase resilience. Nevertheless, I find that in this case of non-governmental institutions, the commercialization of activities in order to build resilience has complex implications. Not just because one dependence (on the state) is replaced by another (on the market), but that this kind of institutional behavior can sooner be expected from business entities than from NGOs. Non-governmental organizations indeed have completely different missions and goals, and implementing business-like behavior can compromise those missions and goals in the long run. This renders NGOs, paradoxically, more vulnerable while trying to build resilience (for more on market-based solutions and their implications on resilience see Fougère and Meriläinen, 2021).

In line with theoretical accounts, the anticipation of crisis can reduce resilience if trying to prepare for specific hazards, and a deductive approach is favored (Lorenz, 2013). The results from this research complement this thesis since what interviewees have described through strategic planning points to building social cohesion within the organization and increasing the scope of flexibility.

This research has shown that the pandemic did not only affect the environmental movement on an organizational level, but it also added complexity to how problems

are framed within the movement. Up to now the environmental movement has succeeded in finding a way of framing the complex interrelation between environmental protection and social justice, and an intersectional approach within environmental protection and climate change. Now it stands before yet another complex interaction between human systems and the environment that needs to be clearly framed within the limited space of public and media attention (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988).

Intersecting crises that stem from the complex relationship between human systems and natural systems assign environmentalism the role of increasing public awareness through its problem framing and playing an active role in monitoring and creating policy. The resilience of environmental NGOs therefore, at least partially, translates to the resilience of society as a whole. The scientific contribution of this research lies not in measuring the resilience of environmental associations, but in case-specific conceptualizations of resilience. In that sense, environmentalists' conceptualization of resilience follows theoretical contributions in matching up with aspects such as flexibility, self-organization, and participatory capacity. However, contrary to theoretical accounts, it sees adaptation as a function of resilience, and not the other way around.

The main limitation of this research is the limited variability of the sample. Since the sample was quite homogenous with respect to organization size and type, the results lack different perspectives that could have emerged from smaller organizations, informal ones, or even from different areas in the non-governmental sector. Maximum variability in the sample would provide better grounds for comparative analysis, and also for the generalization of the results. This is something that is left for further research into conceptualizations of resilience and intersecting crises that require adequate problem framing across the whole non-governmental sector.

## **6. Conclusion**

The pandemic has had a multiple influence on the environmental movement. It has increased vulnerability within NGOs, within the environmental NGO sector, and within their areas of interest, especially regarding state relations toward the environment, state relations toward environmental NGOs, and increased pressure on resources.

To date, research on the resilience of social systems has pointed to the need for case-specific research that can bring together all important aspects of resilience. The results of this research point to the conclusion that resilience is defined by the adaptability of an organization, flexibility, inner social cohesion, and the capacity to self-organize with an emphasis on networking. The pandemic has also compelled NGOs to diversify their revenue; however, I question the strategy of increased orientation toward market solutions regarding the long-term resilience of environmental NGOs.



Resilience is questioned not just from the perspective of organization or sector, but from the perspective of society as a whole, where increased resource pressure and the need for a stronger corrective role for environmental NGOs are perceived as consequences of the pandemic. With this in mind, finding a frame for intersecting crises is another important role for environmentalists during and after the pandemic.

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## **Kako se environmentalisti nose s (još jednom) globalnom krizom: otpornost, ranjivost i intersekcijske krize**

**Jelena Puđak**

Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, Zagreb, Hrvatska

e-mail: jelena.pudjak@pilar.hr

### **Sažetak**

Pandemija Covid-19 mnogostruko je utjecala na društvene sustave, kao još jedna od kriza koja, uz one uslijed klimatskih promjena i gubitka bioraznolikosti, proizlazi iz složene interakcije čovjeka i prirode. U tom smislu, stvaranje otpornosti na trenutnu i buduće krize postala je zajednička referentna točka, kako u javnom, tako i u znanstvenom diskursu. U kontekstu izgradnje otpornosti, civilni sektor ima važnu društvenu ulogu u promoviranju javnog interesa i jačanju uloge građana u demokratskim društvima, omogućujući im na taj način sudjelovanje u razvoju društva. Pokret za okoliš, kao jedan od najuspješnijih društvenih pokreta, spaja pitanja zaštite okoliša s konceptima socijalne pravde i ekonomskog razvoja, izgrađujući tako otpornost društva u cjelini. Istraživačka pitanja bila su: kako je pandemija Covid-19 utjecala na nevladine organizacije iz područja zaštite okoliša te koje strategije su primijenili da bi se nosili s novom situacijom i prilagodili joj se. Kako aktivisti za okoliš opisuju koncepte ranjivosti i otpornosti unutar nevladina sektora? Koja su im očekivanja od budućih trendova u polju na koje se njihov aktivizam odnosi? Rezultati ovog istraživanja upućuju na zaključak da je otpornost definirana kao organizacijska prilagodljivost, fleksibilnost, unutrašnja socijalna kohezija, te kapacitet za samoorganizaciju, s naglaskom na umrežavanje. Intersekcijske krize koje proizlaze iz složenog odnosa čovjeka i prirode postavljaju izazov traženja i pronalaženja učinkovitog okvira za smještanje problema unutar pokreta te ponovno uspostavljanje korektivne uloge u društvu.

*Ključne riječi:* intersekcijaska kriza, otpornost, ranjivost, nevladine organizacije za zaštitu okoliša, pandemija.