Is the UK water sector becoming resilient to climate change?

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Abstract

The concept of resilience has been increasingly gaining relevance in the climate change policy arena as a compelling discourse. In the UK context, as stated in England’s National Adaptation Programme, titled ”Making the country resilient to a changing climate” (Defra, 2013a), the water sector is at the forefront of the impacts of extreme weather events and climate change. This highly regulated sector is crucial to the functioning of society and the economy. There has consequently been a top-down pressure from the government and regulators to ensure that UK private water and sewerage companies build long-term resilience (Defra, 2013b). The way resilience is negotiated in public discourses influences the strategies and actions that water companies take on the ground. The aim of this paper is to investigate how resilience is being framed and used in the UK water sector and, more importantly, to what extent it is leading to change and transformation in the context of a changing climate. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with climate change and water resources managers, covering 91% of UK water companies. Resilience to climate change in the water industry is understood as the ability to withstand weather or climate impacts and continue providing a reliable service. The interviews reveal that the concept of resilience is helping to communicate climate change issues within the organisations, and contribute to shift them away from a traditional risk-management approach. The analysis identifies different endogenous and exogenous factors that influence the way in which water companies frame and use resilience thinking to make adaptation actions. While resilience is being invoked as a way for companies to face climate change, resilience in practice takes a short-term connotation. The term is being associated with ”low regret solutions” to deal with today’s weather and maintain the level of service. This reinforces the ”status quo”; that is, returning to the same equilibrium. In order to catalyse change and re-think paths that lead to transformations, this might be an inadequate adaptation response. Nevertheless, the analysis shows that the entire institutional setting is driving this sense making process. Moreover, by achieving milestones, companies are building the flexibility and the ability to change and adapt in a ‘more certain future’. Overall, by critically examining how the concept of resilience is being framed and used in practice, this paper contributes to stress the potential that resilience thinking has to help crucial sectors to face short and long-term challenges such as climate change.

Defra (2013b) Updating the General Duties with Respect to the Water Industry to Reflect the UK Government’s Resilience Priorities, April, 2013

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