Introduction and synthesis of key themes

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'Resilience' is a word on many lips at the moment. It is used in disciplines as diverse as engineering, medicine, ecology, economics, education, defence, business and law. The risk management profession, for example, is currently emphasising organisational resilience as a key component of preparing for future challenges and opportunities. Where 'sustainability' was a prime focus for policy relating to interactions between the environment, society and economies for many years, the concept of resilience is being introduced as a way to ensure that ecological and social systems are able to find their way towards sustainability (whatever societies decide that is, in the future) in the face of potential shocks, some of which can be partly anticipated and some of which will come as surprises. Various chapters in this book comment on the appearance and interpretation of 'resilience' in policies and strategies for the environment, health, welfare, national security, law, education and business, among other areas.

The popularity of this term comes in part from the recognition that attempts to predict and control the future have been largely unsuccessful, in whatever field of human endeavour they have been attempted. There is comfort to many in the idea that they can do something tangible about preparing for the future by building the capacity of people, societies and ecosystems to deal with whatever emerges. This comfortable feeling, however, has led to uncritical application of the term in many fields. In the business literature, for example, it is easy to find lists of actions to take to improve organisational resilience but it is difficult to find empirical or theoretical underpinnings for this advice. Rita Parker (Chapter 4, this volume) explains how it is possible for an organisation to 'tick the resilience boxes' but still not be resilient because it does not understand the intangible aspects of the concept. Similarly, Cork (Chapter 15) points out that although all major environmental strategies developed by Australian governments make resilience a key component of the problem definition and the proposed solutions, few are either explicit about what it means in terms of governance and management or fully apply resilience thinking in implementation plans.

The broad application of the concept of resilience has, however, been questioned by some critics. Some point to a perceived lack of theory associated with the concept or the impression that the concept is being offered as the solution to all of society's problems. Others question how it is different from other concepts (e.g. 'capacity building' or 'adaptability') that have come before it. Advocates of the concept point out that resilience should not be considered a panacea, and that a body of theory is emerging that explicitly addresses how resilience thinking relates to other ways of dealing with current and future challenges and itself questions many of the ill-informed applications of the concept.