



# **Building Organizational Resilience In The Midst Of The Covid 19 Pandemic**

**Dr. Don-Baridam Letam**

**Department of Management, Faculty of Management Sciences  
Rivers State University, Port Harcourt, Nigeria  
Email- letambaridam@gmail.com**

## **ABSTRACT**

The impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on national economies, most especially, organizations at the meso-level, raises concerns about the underlying implications of adopted macro level response strategies and control directives on the operations and functionality of organization. The need for survival in such a time draws on the organization's own capacity for building resilience through effective response measures which not only advance the continuity of operations but also address the vulnerabilities of organizations across the globe. In view of this concern, this paper addressed the building of organizational resilience in the midst of the COVID 19 pandemic. The paper is theoretical and draws from dominant views and positions on the effectiveness of response strategies and resilience during crisis periods. Discussion of content suggests strong positions on the need for strategic response alignment with organizational context-based factors and features in driving resilience in the operations and functions of the organization. In conclusion, it was therefore affirmed that in building organizational resilience, emphasis should be placed on the development of features such as situation awareness, adaptability and the management of vulnerabilities – all of which should align and echo the fundamental characteristics and features of the organization's own context or environment.

**Keywords:** organizational resilience, COVID 19 pandemic, situation awareness, management of vulnerabilities, adaptability

## **INTRODUCTION**

The advent of the COVID 19 pandemic early this year – 2020; marked a tremendous shift in social and business relationships (Premium Times, 2020). While recent actions by authorities across nations have been directed at controlling and curbing the spread of the virus given its noted mortality impact on human life, related policies and directives in this line have nonetheless have serious repercussions for the functionality of some industries and local economies – especially those within African nations (African Business, 2020). Such negative outcomes owe to the noted adoption of strict lockdown procedures and the closing of interstate borders, which invariably impacted on key industries such as the manufacturing, education, oil and gas as well as transportation. Coombs (2004) argued that one effective way of addressing crisis events is to first identify the unique characteristic of the situation or context, and based on that defining and designing suitable approaches that match the level or severity of the crisis. In as much as the COVID 19 pandemic has been rated a high-level outburst, the travails of most businesses and organizations are unfortunately traced to the poor control approaches adopted by most African nations – one of which is Nigeria.

Reports suggest that most organizations in Nigeria have been significantly affected by the COVID 19 pandemic (Afro WHO, 2020). In the face of inadequate and poorly planned macro level control mechanisms, most organizations have had to modify their structures and functions in ways designed to shield and protect their vulnerabilities while at the same time adapting their systems and operations to match the changes occasioned by the crisis in their environment. From her position, Kemi (2016) opined

that crisis management at the organizational level can be a very sensitive matter. This is because, not only is management expected to sustain operations and control for customer loss during such a period, but effort also has to be channelled towards assuaging the fears and tension linked to possible job loss and organizational restructuring during such a period. This paper addressed the organization's capacity for robustness and for building resilience amidst the COVID 19 pandemic. The key premise of the paper draws on three main interests – (a) discussing the impact of the COVID 19 virus outbreak on organizational functions (b) discussing the implications of government COVID 19 control directives on organizational operations and functionality, and (c) identifying and discussing possible strategic responses suitable for building the resilience of the organization.

## **Literature Review**

### **Theoretical Framework**

Crisis, within the context of organization and management studies, refers to particular disruptions and negating impact of events or factors outside the control of the organization (Coombs, 2007). Crisis could be caused by internal (e.g. fire outbreak due to staff negligence) or external factors (e.g. flooding), yet still, the approach towards addressing and responding to crisis situations is considered key in determining the organizations continuity and survival. This paper, in view of the noted distinctiveness of crisis situations and the need for context-based tailored responses, adopts the Situation Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) as its theoretical framework (Coombs, 2007). The SCCT as advocated by Coombs (2007) presents an approach towards crisis situations primarily concerned with (a) understanding the nature and severity of the crisis situation, (b) identifying possible targets of the crisis and as such, specifying key vulnerability areas, and (c) communicating and tailoring responses in line and in consideration of context-based characteristics. As such, response strategies from the perspective of the SCCT should be designed to not only curb or address crisis situations, but also to protect and accommodate the peculiarities of constituents. This is as Coombs (2007) argued that in most situations, aggravated crisis outcomes may not result from the crisis itself but from the inappropriate measures adopted or engaged in the control of the crisis situation.

### **COVID 19 and the Functionality of Organizations**

The COVID 19 pandemic has in several ways impacted on the functionality and wellbeing of organizations. Reports indicate that more than 500,000 between December 2019 and July 2020, have lost their lives over health complications related to the spread of the virus (Afro WHO, 2020; Punch, 2020). More so, more than 13 million cases have also been confirmed within this same time period (Afro WHO, 2020). This identifies the severity of the COVID 19 as high priority. Its spread has currently deepened concerns over the life and health of organizational members. Reports (Premium Times, 2020; Punch, 2020) suggests increasing concerns about its spread and the continuity of most organizations – especially organizations within primary and secondary sectors concerned with agriculture, manufacturing and production, and which require in most cases, manual and physical interactions in the course of their activities and operations – thus presenting organizational leadership with decisional cross-roads in terms of risking the lives of their workers in a bid to maintain operations or curtail risk on organizational members through the suspension or postponement of some operations.

Armstrong (2006) advised that one of the major responsibilities of organizations is to their employees – ensuring their safety and security. This view is shared by Kemi (2016) who opined that organizations, during crisis situations, are expected to look out and engage in actions geared towards ensuring all members are secure and away from harm's way. These point to the need for work modifications and the altering of functions in a manner that consistent with the preservation of employees. These draw on the ethical values and sense of responsibility of leadership and to a large extent are also relative, especially when also considering employees welfare during operations shut down (James & James, 2008; Umoh & Amah, 2013; Ogido, 2004). One therefore finds that while the spread of the virus has no doubt impacted negatively on the wellbeing of organizations, through the increased uncertainty it presents, the decision of strategic responses in addressing its effect is relative and to a large extent, depends on varied

organizational as well as contextual factors. This is true even as one examines organizational functions, particularly those considered as essential services, and the implications of a shut down for such categories.

### **Government Directives and the Functionality of Organizations**

For this paper, one finds that the SCCT offers the required theoretical foundation in highlighting and explaining the implications of unsuitable and overly generalized crisis response models (especially at the macro-level) in tackling crisis situations across high diverse contexts. As recently observed, while most developed nations adopted strict lockdown protocols which required additional responsibilities for the welfare and wellbeing of the citizenry by the government, steps were taken by authorities at the macro level to ameliorate living conditions through the provision of palliatives and increased security functions (Aljazeera, 2020). At the meso and organizational level, existing infrastructure and highly digitized systems presented the required options and alternatives for shifts towards online stores, education programs with more emphasis placed on knowledge work. Despite these existing infrastructures, alternatives and the noted robustness of industries within most of these developed nations, the impact of the COVID 19 has yet been devastating and with highly disruptive (Aljazeera, 2020). Reports (Aljazeera, 2020) indicate that while most nations have increasingly advanced the lockdown as a suitable, the increasing rate of reported COVID 19 cases during the period suggest its failure as a response, coupled with the extremities of military brutality, economic repression and insecurity associated with the action.

The failure of the lockdown as a response strategy is reflected ironically in reports by WHO (Afro WHO, 2020) which identified a spike in the rise of cases during lockdown periods – where Burkina Faso is reported to have experienced a 253% increase in cases, the US also recorded a rise by 50,000 death cases during the lockdown period with President Trump recently calling for the re-opening of economies and the relaxation of the lockdown (Aljazeera, 2020). While there is a noted reluctance in the admittance of recognized authorities to the error and failure of their strategies, most nations (developed and developing), in line with the US, appear to be reversing their directives – easing their lockdown measures and adopting a more flexible approach which emphasizes more on protective masks and social distancing (Aljazeera, 2020). Also reports by Premium Times (2020) identified the lockdown as not only having minimal to no effect on the spread of the virus, but having an increased record of suicide cases in India, Tokyo, Bangladesh, the US, and with over 800 cases reported in Nepal within three months of the lockdown measure.

Yet, in spite of the noted inconsistencies and as such ineffectiveness of the lockdown directive, most African nations, one of which is Nigeria, also opted in favour of the lockdown protocol. Their adoption as noted followed a series of political and social debates over the lack of availing infrastructure and supportive frameworks for such a directive – dominant amongst these was the issue of the lack of palliatives and the problems associated with corruption in the management of funds (African Business, 2020). Resulting events proved contentions correct as funds were looted, records lost in fire incidences, and a majority of the populace left to their own perils during the lockdown period.

Organizations, nonetheless are considered one of the major casualties of this episode due to government directives for complete shut down and close of operations with cases such as demolition and detainment of business owners over the flouting of government orders reported (African Business, 2020). One of the major industries affected was the oil and gas; given the low patronage of consumers during the lockdown, there was a remarkable drop in oil price with the country losing over 125 billion naira to the COVID 19 pandemic (All Africa, 2020). This same impact was felt in the manufacturing and shipping industry with substantial losses recorded due to closed borders and the sharp drop in demands. Most organizations have been noted to shift focus from traditional exchanges to digital based transactions especially within the Nigerian banking industry (African Business, 2020). This is as most banks have reportedly increased their online service options and updates, given the increase in online transactions and rising online security challenges. Other sectors and industries have also been notably affected by the directives and responses of the government given the noted increase in taxi-booking personal services resulting from the closure of borders and the clamp down of commercial drivers by government enforcement agents.

### **Building Organizational Resilience**

In the previous sections, the gravity of the COVID 19 pandemic was discussed alongside the failed response strategies adopted at the macro level and the implications of such on the functionality and wellbeing of organizations. This section will discuss the concept of organizational resilience and also identify practices or actions which could help drive and enhance the resilience of organizations during the COVID 19 pandemic. Organizational resilience describes organizational forms which are robust and able to sustain operations during difficult and challenging periods or times (Hollnagel, Woods & Leveson, 2006; Hamek & Valikangas, 2003). Resilience is considered an imperative for organizations during crisis events or situations as it ensures the continuity of the business and its survival. The concept of resilience captures not only the robustness of organizational systems and features, but also advances the need for learning and situation awareness (Ahiauzu & Jaja, 2015; Ogunro, 2014). This tallies with and is reinforced by the SCCT approach towards crisis response as it specifies the need for informed decisions in developing and designing strategic responses to crisis situations.

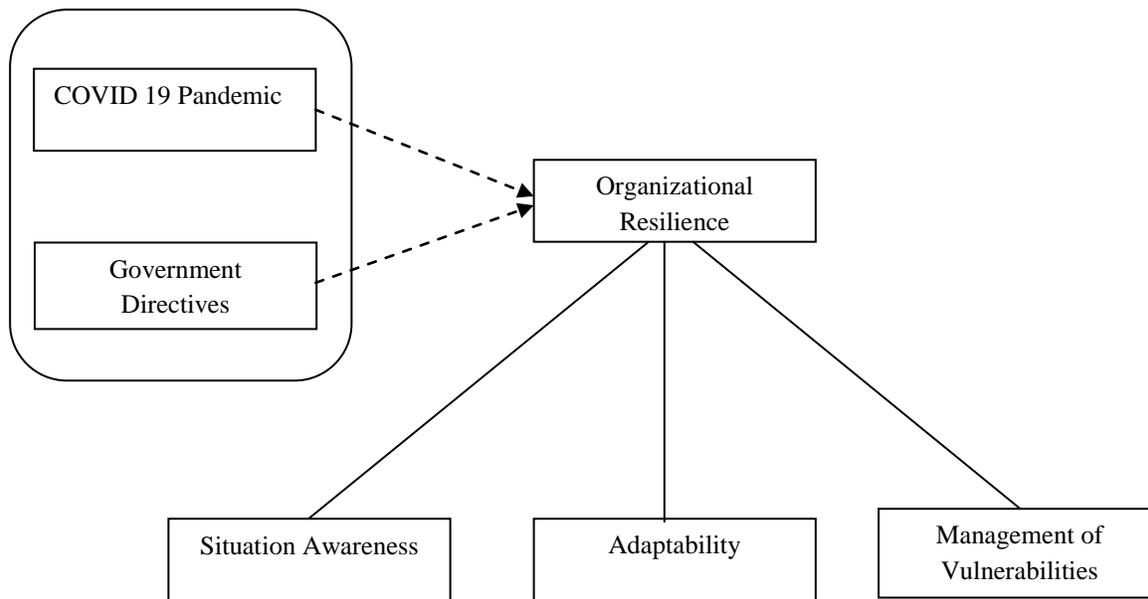
Organizational resilience according to Adriana (2013) is unique in its form and often draws on the distinct actions adapted by the organization in meeting the demands and development within its context. This is as Eketu and Ahiauzu (2015) opined that effective and resilient organizational actions in one context may, in another context, prove to be detrimental. Hence the emphasis on three fundamental factors in the drive for resilience – (a) situation awareness, (b) adaptability, and (c) management of vulnerabilities. These three are considered primary in understanding how the organization is able to learn, advance or incorporate actions or behaviour required for survival while protecting or engaging in actions aimed at preserving and shielding their vulnerable areas or functions (Idemobi & Onyeizugbe, 2011). One finds, that while the conceptualization of these three is relatively applicable in diverse settings, their operationalization requires a more tailored approach – one precise in actions such as ascertaining learning modes and what information is relevant, the determination of what systems or functions to modify and the efficiency and usefulness of such systems in view of the context as well as the assessment of organizational characteristics in determining their strong or weak points.

**Situation awareness** as a primary measure of resilience entails the organization's capacity for knowledge about the dynamics and attributes of their situation. It describes the various steps advanced in learning about the crisis and as such in discerning possible implications of actions or inaction. Umoh and Amah (2013) stated that one of the first prerogatives of effective organizational positioning within its market and environment, whether during or in the absence of crisis situations, is the organization's tendency for openness to information. Organizations that learn and invest in information are always considered a step ahead. This is because prior knowledge or information offers the organization the chance to be pro-active rather than reactive, and also facilitates timely adjustments of policies and functions (Umoh & Amah, 2013). Learning in crises situation begins with the clear perception and understanding of crisis events, their level of severity, implications for the organization, and the distinctiveness of the situation from other related events or prior outcomes (Coombs, 2007). In discussing organizational resilience, reference is usually made to the development of learning networks (e.g. customers, vendors, and other stakeholders), the verification and validation of such information as well as the assessment of its usefulness and applicability in the context of the organization.

**Adaptability** describes the organization's capacity for flexibility and responsiveness towards change or during crisis periods. Adaptability addresses not only the adoption of coping mechanism during crisis, but in the actual conceptualization according to Adriana (2013) measures how much of such mechanisms or modifications are anchored on the context and defining characteristics of the environment of the organization. Hence, effective adaptation does not proceed from organizational expectations to its functionality in the environment; rather it proceeds from the expectations of the environment to a realignment of functions (Hamel & Valikangas, 2003). Thus, effective adaptation does not rely on borrowed or alien models or methods in coping and curbing crisis effects, rather, it draws from the existing conditions of the organization's own environment – and despite the popularity or acclaimed effectiveness of foreign methods or models; it develops its own approach towards crisis – only adapting where necessary, features or attributes of other models where considered or deemed fit (Hamel &

Valikangas, 2003). In this vein, its own model would match its existing expertise, infrastructure, technology and at the same time, function efficiently within the parameters identified within its own social, political and economic framework.

**Management of vulnerabilities** refers to the organization’s recognition of its weaknesses and the actions adopted in protecting and shielding such weaknesses. According to Armstrong (2006), most organizations are noted to be vulnerable especially in the areas where they have their most dominant activities or functions. For example, the source of supplies, market distributions, means of distributions, as well as relationship with stakeholders may also identify as the organization’s vulnerable areas during times of crisis. Reports indicate that most manufacturing firms have been crippled and constrained due to their reliance on raw materials imported from other states; as well as the establishment and dependence on distribution facilities outside the State. Given their lack of availing alternatives and the lack of access across borders, the operations of these organizations were suspended. Armstrong (2006) in his study advised that organizations should secure alternatives and focus on developing a pool of options where it comes to their functions, technologies and operations. The failure or malfunction of a particular system, should not undermine the entirety of an organizations operations or functionality. As such the management of vulnerability could also be viewed from the angle of extended options during times of crisis.



**Figure 1: Conceptual map showing the nexus between resilient organizations and related COVID 19 pandemic factors**

The figure 1 above demonstrates the position of this study in terms of building organizational resilience during times of the COVID 19 pandemic. As noted earlier, these dimensions offer broad conceptualizations of particular actions, practices or behaviour which may differ in terms of specificity to context, nonetheless, they summarize organizational attributes which strengthen their positions and capacity for survival and continuity during times of crisis. The considerations of the paper therefore advance a position on organizational resilience within the context of Nigeria, premised on clarity with regards to the perception and interpretation of crisis situations through information gathering and learning, clarifications on the nature and implications of the crisis situation (situation awareness) and the adoption of strategic responses that are cognizant of the organization’s industry or country’s own unique qualities and attributes – response strategies that emerge and are well aligned with its noted gaps and existing structures (adaptability); and finally the adoption of designs that protect and serve to reinforce as well as sustain its key functions and operations (management of vulnerabilities).

## CONCLUSION

The COVID 19 pandemic presents the imperatives of a redress of organizational functionality especially in terms of building resilience in times of crisis situation. The noted impact of the pandemic has not only highlighted on the shortcomings of most organizations across the globe but has also hinted at the cost of poor decisions and inadequate response strategies. This paper has advanced the importance of strategic responses and adaptability from a view point hardly addressed in organizational research, particularly that which emerges from learning and an alignment of response content and designs with contextual factors. This study therefore identifies effective strategies as those, not premised or defined by their grandiosity, or prevalence of usage, or even effectiveness in times past, but rather those linked to the current contextual (time, demography, technology, politics, culture etc.) factors that define the environment of the organization or society. In conclusion, it is therefore affirmed that in building organizational resilience, emphasis should be placed on the development of features such as situation awareness, adaptability and the management of vulnerabilities – all of which should align and echo the fundamental characteristics and features of the organization’s own context or environment.

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