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# How to make a society more resilient?

The importance of a Minimum Viable Society



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# The importance of a Minimum Viable Society

Geopolitical tensions, social polarisation and climate change are creating an unstable and unpredictable world. And this as a time when we are living in a world that is hyper-connected. Open economies and societies such as those in the Netherlands are particularly vulnerable, even by developments taking place tens of thousands of kilometres away. As Danny Tinga, Partner Reputation, Crisis & Reputation, notes: “a disruption in one place can rapidly affect other systems. That makes strategic decision-making under pressure much more complex. Moreover, a single-minded focus on efficiency quickly creates a chain of vulnerabilities.” In other words, if our economy and society are not resilient when faced with major, sudden changes the consequences can be disastrous. But what exactly do we mean by ‘resilience’ in the context of society? When is something resilient enough? What are we trying to achieve when we say we want to become a resilient society?

To explore the concept further, Deloitte explores the concept of a Minimum Viable Society (MiViSoc). This is a conceptual framework to help determine what the minimum requirements are for a society to keep functioning in a war or a crisis. The framework is based on the concept of a Minimum Viable Organisation, a concept developed by Deloitte, to support organisations to decide which activities and resources must continue to operate at all times to respond and recover under (extreme) pressure. Unlike a Minimum Viable Organisation, a MiViSoc is not about a single entity, but about the interplay between individuals, neighbourhoods, cities, businesses, critical supply chains and governments. All of which are interdependent. Jurgen Schot, Specialist Leader Resilience, emphasises: “Our society consists of multiple layers that influence each other. What becomes destabilised locally or even individually can have regional or national consequences. That is why a MiViSoc must be seen as something that arises from the interaction between all of those layers.”



**The core question that private and public leaders and policymakers must ask themselves is this: what must continue to function at a minimum so that the Netherlands can stand on its feet when it really matters?**

## What is a Minimum Viable Society?

Working towards a MiViSoc is not only about a physical infrastructure, but about the core of societal continuity: energy, healthcare, communications, governance, security, logistics, food and (digital) networks. NATO set out in 2016 that a resilient society must be able to guarantee continuity of government services and effectively manage unorganised population movements<sup>i</sup>.

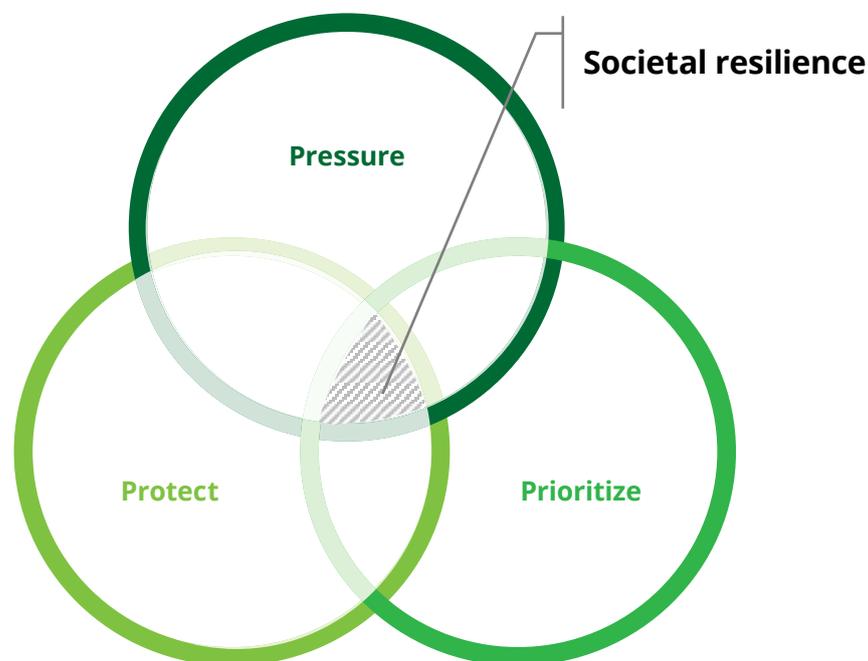
Michel Dückers stresses that the capacity of societies to create stability depends on their socio-economic, political and institutional foundations. Government, business and civil society need one another to absorb shocks<sup>ii</sup>.

That means a MiViSoc goes beyond continuity for individual organisations or people: it forces us to look at the whole and the interdependencies. Although the concept is simple, putting it into practice is complex. As Deloitte has previously put it: “Resilience must be built into every decision, every structure, every layer<sup>iii</sup>.” And that requires difficult choices, which are often avoided during peace time because they are sensitive or politically charged. But as Tinga states: “In a crisis those choices are often made anyway—but then under maximum pressure. It is wiser to make them earlier and deliberately.” So how do we approach this?

# The 3P framework: guidance in uncertainty

In order to make a Minimum Viable Organisation work in practice, Deloitte developed the 3P framework: Prioritise—Protect—Prepare for pressure. It is worth exploring how this can be applied to a MiViSoc.

1. **Prioritise:** which functions are so essential that they must continue to operate under all circumstances?
2. **Protect:** what do those functions need to keep operating? Infrastructure, IT, personnel, agreements, resources.
3. **Pressure:** how does the system respond under pressure? It is important to exercise, test, learn and review how values influence decision-making.



Tinga illustrates the challenge of prioritising choices during times of peace: “If, for example, there is a power outage in multiple cities at the same time, there is an immediate competition for resources. One single mobile generator simply cannot be in two places at once. If we do not prioritise beforehand, chaos will ensue in the event of a disruption under pressure.”

Only once priorities have been set can the focus shift to protecting critical functions. Because only then do you know what to prioritize. Keeping critical functions intact strengthens the ability of communities and organisations to respond effectively to crises and enhances societal safety, cohesion and continuity.

The third element—effective preparation for pressure—is needed to partly mitigate the uncertainty and novelty that arise during a crisis. This uncertainty and novelty bring considerable pressure that can disrupt decision-making, people’s functioning and the quality of service. Recognising and understanding this pressure is essential for effective crisis management, particularly in the areas of communication and coordination.

**Tinga:**

“Under pressure, decision-makers face multiple forces, often simultaneously: psychological stress, physical safety concerns, political interests, insufficient operational capacity and social dynamics. There is a lot of context—beyond the crisis itself—to prepare for.”



Moreover, within organisations the design and governance surrounding decision-making are generally less complex. In society, this is more complex: many entities need to be heard and will exert influence. Consultation is therefore necessary. The 3P framework is a way of connecting values, decision-making and courses of action. Resilience does not arise from isolated measures but from consistent choices and practised decision-making. Schot sees how the framework works in practice: “At a societal level the same principle applies as within organisations, but with more actors and more mutual dependencies.”

## A culture of trust and collaboration

A MiViSoc can only function if all layers of society work together based on a shared sense of ownership. Responsibilities are distributed across ministries, safety regions, municipalities, regulators and sectors. In the Netherlands the cooperation between these societal layers is still fragmented. What is missing, is a collectively constructed picture of what is crucial, created before disaster strikes or when pressure rises. Not having this, in turn, makes it difficult to develop a culture of cooperation under severe pressure.

But Finland demonstrates that such a collaborative culture is possible. There, societal resilience is organised more systemically: citizens have a clearer understanding of their role, public and private parties practise together more often, and decision-making under pressure is clearly defined in advance. In times of tension the Finns know exactly who decides, who executes and how resources are allocated<sup>iv</sup>.

**Tinga:**

“In Finland cooperation is organised much more systematically and there are lessons to be learned from that: bring the top executors of business and government together and establish a structural, joint view of what really matters.” Schot adds: “When parties jointly determine what is essential, both understanding and willingness to share arise. But that requires openness and courage.”



The NCTV also emphasises that resilience can only emerge when trust, collaboration and shared responsibility are at the heart of it.<sup>v</sup>

A MiViSoc therefore cannot rely only on structures, processes or scenarios; it starts with shared values. Norris et al. show that resilience is a process of continuous adaptation, rooted in social connectedness and shared meaning<sup>vi</sup>. This makes having a common view of what is crucial not an abstract concept, but a practical precondition for how societies can reorient under pressure.

Chin & Schubert emphasise that societal resilience essentially comes down to trust: the extent to which people relate to one another determines whether a community unravels under strain or moves forward together<sup>vii</sup>. Without that foundation even well-designed structures become fragile. Under pressure this becomes inevitably apparent. Decisions about scarcity, risk acceptance, continuity or equality are never purely technical. They are about who we want to be as a society. Tinga sees how decisive this moral foundation is: “Organisations that have clear values respond more quickly and consistently. The real test for leaders in a crisis is not only a lack of good information, but a lack of direction. Without explicit values and objectives you become rudderless.”

Leadership is required to make this clear. Schot emphasises the importance of leaders who can both connect and set boundaries: “You need people who can listen and at the same time provide counterbalance. People who stay on course when systems falter.” Strategic leadership is not a soft precondition but the foundation of a MiViSoc. After all, responding to a crisis is a matter of looking ahead.

## From crisis management to strategic leadership

The European non-profit policy research organisation RAND emphasises that societal resilience is only effective when capabilities and processes are built long before a crisis and persist long afterwards<sup>viii</sup>. Yet organisations and governments often act reactively. As Tinga puts it: “We always invest in the latest incident, but true resilience requires us to look ahead and not just back. Whether it is a pandemic, a cyber-attack or a prolonged power outage, it is ultimately about the effects that these threats create. The question of what should not be disturbed must therefore play a more dominant role.”

In addition, organisations are embedded in a web of outsourcing, digital chains and public services. Schot sees daily how that interdependence makes them vulnerable: “We cannot achieve resilience in isolation. Resilience only arises when parties act from shared principles. That means you must create clarity in advance about roles, decision-making and values.” Societal resilience does not emerge spontaneously and cannot be imposed by a single entity. It requires leaders who collaborate and provide direction, even when information is incomplete or when there are conflicting interests. Strategic leadership means you must be able to answer the fundamental question: what must we protect at all costs, and why?

Tinga says: “Asking when something becomes a problem during a disruption gives you the perspective to act. Whoever says ‘this is time-critical’ is also saying what is not time-critical, and that feeds the question of prioritization.” Within organisations this is the basis of Business Continuity Management and this creates opportunities to truly test. Schot explains: “In a Minimum Viable Organisation we switch systems (for example power or IT) off to test the minimal core. That reveals where there are dependencies and which choices are inevitable. We use time-criticality to make organisations more resilient.”

What works in organisations applies equally to society. But with one crucial difference: there are many more stakeholders, interests and values that clash with one other. At a societal level it is often unclear who makes important decisions under pressure, and therefore even more challenging. In this case, strategic leadership is not only technical but above all normative. Which values guide our decision-making? What do we protect first? And how do we ensure that all layers—citizens, businesses, government—act from the same basis?

# Towards a resilient future: why we must deepen the conversation now

There are many excellent initiatives to strengthen the resilience of the Netherlands, but the discussion needs to deepen. The MiViSoc as a starting point forces public and private leaders to conduct that conversation more systematically, so that crucial choices do not have to be made only under maximum pressure. A MiViSoc is not a final destination but an invitation to jointly determine what a society minimally needs to function under all circumstances. That is why a MiViSoc can only arise when society shapes it itself, through a broad dialogue among leaders, sector heads, safety regions, businesses, knowledge institutions and citizens.

**Schot:**



“The first step is simple: acknowledging that we need to have this conversation. Without a shared view of what is essential, no one can act effectively in a society.”



Tinga outlines what that future looks like: “By 2030 I hope that in the Netherlands we know clearly what the baseline is: what must always continue to function and what must not. That we have practised, that the role of the government is clear, and that people naturally help one another.”

Resilience should therefore not be a project but a reflex. A society that continues to function under pressure emerges when:

- practising is normal procedure;
- values are articulated in advance; and
- vital chains take responsibility for their contribution to continuity regardless of the scenario.

Therefore a MiViSoc calls for leaders who start the conversation now, rather than only when things go wrong. The question is not whether the Netherlands will face uncertainty, but how well prepared we are.

Deloitte supports public and private organisations in shaping that preparation systematically and jointly. Assisting organisations in designing, implementing and testing their Minimum Viable Organisation. Building a MiViSoc begins with leaders who dare to take the lead. Without trust, transparency and shared responsibility there can be no sustainable resilience. A MiViSoc begins with building a shared basis of trust, transparency and a shared responsibility where public and private parties share the same understanding. Only then can we—together—anticipate major sudden changes and truly call ourselves a resilient society.

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