# ABCS OF MSD: R IS FOR... A REPOST OF A 'REALIST'S APPROACH TO RESILIENCE'

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*A year ago, we published a blog on a realistic approach to resilience in response to what felt like an impossible overcorrection by MSD funders and implementers to 'make everything more resilient again' in the wake of COVID-19. We were seeing programmes struggle, and struggling ourselves, with either tokenistic and unimplemented risk matrices or an impulse to try and recognise and prevent future unknown shocks. One year on, resilience is still very much de riguer, so we re-post our realist's approach to resilience rather than re-invent the wheel.*

What's Donald Rumsfeld got to do with development? No, I haven't been 'doing my own research' on what personal qualities enabled Rumsfeld to be both the youngest and oldest US Secretary of Defense[1] or how developing an app based on the version of Solitaire that Winston Churchill used to play gave him mental strength in a time of turmoil. But over the past year and a half – like many of you, I imagine – a lot of our work has focused on resilience. And frankly, my own resilience for dealing with what is starting to feel like the 'resilience washing' of everything we do is waning. Desperate times do call for desperate measures, and thus, here I am, trying to make my life and the lives of those I work with easier. Who would have thought that would mean engaging with the works of Donald Rumsfeld?

But the oldest and youngest SoD's words do resonate when thinking about how we, as an MSD community, get practical and realistic about approaching resilience. Let me refresh your memory on what he said, before we think about how this can help us with our day jobs:

> "*There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know.*"

***Known knowns:*** These are things we know will affect what we are trying to do.[2] Let me expound. I spent a good part of a decade looking down toilets – mostly for work, but sometimes for fun. And in all but the remotest areas, it is one of life's simple truths that toilets need to be emptied or they will cease to be of use. A known known, if you will. My grandparents had a septic tank at their house, and you couldn't get into the toilet without passing by a tattered note that said, "*If it's yellow, let it mellow; if it's brown, flush it down.*" Evidence of adaptation – often cited as a key factor in building resilience – in the wild: my grandparents didn't want to pay for the septic tank to be emptied of mostly water used for flushing 'yellow' down, but once it did need to be emptied, they relied on septic tank emptying services. In development terms, this known known means that many people working in the sanitation market system find themselves engaging with the 'emptying' function to support overall toilet market system resilience.

***Known unknowns:*** This is where things get fun.[3] Sometimes, in some sectors, when we intervene to improve incomes or access to services, we end up creating threats to the overall resilience of what we're trying to do. For example, the vulnerability of a key resource might increase as production increases, as with overfishing, overgrazing, excessive water extraction, over visitation, or vulnerability to diseases due to more intensive rearing and movement of animals. It's important to understand what these risks are and determine what functions or rules could mitigate them. The Market Development Facility in Fiji works in the maritime tourism sector to increase visits to remote areas. These areas are regularly affected by cyclones, but their timing and severity is less known. So MDF focused on marina construction and insurance as supporting functions in the maritime tourism sector as a way to mitigate risks and increase resilience.

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[1] Not at the same time, of course. That wouldn't make sense.
[2] Come for the earth-shattering wisdom but stay for the sass.
[3] I warned you, I'm losing my sense of what is normal.

*Unknown unknowns:* Global pandemics. Meteor strikes. Super volcanoes. People much, much smarter than me do actually model and study the potential likelihood and impacts of such events, but they make no claims to accuracy on their predictions within a time frame that is meaningful to the average development programme. To date, I have yet to see meteor strikes make their way into a doughnut. And I would argue that these types of events, COVID-19 included, never should. But what we've seen over the past year and a half, is that many donors and programmes are overcorrecting their resilience responses to try to address unknown unknowns. We've got to adjust and respond as contexts change; to do anything less would be irresponsible and damaging. But let's stop pretending everything we're doing is supersizing resilience and focus on the practical – the tangible known knowns and unknown knowns.

But how? The development sector is not short of methodologies to conceptualise, analyse, and measure resilience,[4] and yet we keep seeing programmes struggling with this. Rather than look for the silver bullet of resilience frameworks, start simpler. Identifying which resources – information, equipment, finance, linkages, enforcement of rules – are needed to sustain the change, whether it's a grandmother's septic tank in rural Wisconsin or marine infrastructure in Fiji. Even better, directing your resilience efforts at these just may give you a fighting chance of addressing the known knowns and unknown knowns. My crystal ball told me so.

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[4] See Simon Levine's fresh take on all of this here: Assessing resilience: why quantification misses the point | ODI: Think change