Climate resilience: how companies turn meaning into action

Companies do not simply 'build' or 'achieve' climate resilience. This study shows that resilience is an ongoing process shaped by how companies understand it, act on it, and work together with others around them. Companies continuously figure out what 'resilience' means for them while acting on it at the same time. This research provides a framework for corporate climate resilience based on how companies themselves understand it. These insights are particularly useful for companies, policymakers, and researchers.

Businesses are increasingly expected to address climate change. Floods, droughts, changing customer preferences, and new regulations can all affect companies. As a result, 'climate resilience' has become a growing issue for businesses. Yet there is no common understanding of what 'climate resilience' means. Organisations use the term in different ways, which can lead to different priorities and actions in practice. This research therefore considered how large manufacturing companies in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg interpret climate resilience and what they themselves view as its most important elements.

The findings show that companies do not simply build or achieve climate resilience. Instead, they constantly give meaning to it in their unique context while acting on it at the same time. Companies understand climate resilience in different ways. Some mainly view it as managing risks and protecting the business. Others see it as a way to remain profitable in the future, to improve products, or to make a broader positive impact on society. Regulations, customers, and climate disasters all shape how businesses think about resilience and how they act on it.

The research further shows that successful climate resilience depends on specific elements. These elements were all put in a framework, based on interviews with representatives from large manufacturing companies and field experts across the Benelux region. Companies highlighted the importance of making resilience a long-term priority within the firm. This can be achieved by awareness, a shared understanding of resilience, willingness to act, and supportive leadership and strategies. Companies also illustrated how they turn resilience into coordinated action. This depends on elements including accurate data, clear responsibilities, agreement on the main risks, and aligning internal efforts. All these elements help companies turn climate resilience from a vague idea into concrete action.

At the same time, resilience extends beyond the boundaries of a single company. Organisations depend on suppliers, customers, governments, and others. This means that climate resilience is not something companies can achieve alone. Cooperation and coordination beyond the firm are therefore essential. Yet this often remains difficult to realise in practice, because companies have limited control over the actions of others.

Several challenges were also identified. Short-term business priorities, limited resources, and lacking means to coordinate actions at an industry- or societal level can all make it harder to build long-term and large-scale resilience. These challenges show that climate resilience is not simply a technical issue, but also one that depends on the broader circumstances within and outside the organisation.

Based on these insights, the research proposes a new way of understanding corporate climate resilience: not as a fixed outcome, but as an ongoing process shaped by how companies understand it, act on it, and work with others around them.