Every city experiences change. For some, change comes quickly: the arrival of an earthquake, the loss of homes and infrastructure after flooding or the aftermath of a violent event. For other cities, change is less immediate: the ever-growing number of people moving into urban areas with the expectation of service provision and access to jobs, the expanding inequality gap and increasing crime, or the slow erosion of our natural resource base. Change can also be positive: an upsurge in community-based action that inspires new policy directions, or the provision of improved transport infrastructure to facilitate movement and urban connectivity. In a rapidly changing world where the future is increasingly unpredictable, how cities prepare themselves both to respond to negative change and to leverage the benefits of positive change will be a critical factor in determining their ability to survive and to thrive. The 100 Resilient Cities Programme provides an important opportunity to explore what these ideas might mean in a city like Durban and to build a resilience story that is relevant within our unique city context.

“Resilience means we are a city that will withstand the change of time … and we will rise above it. People who cannot adapt to change and cities who do not adapt to change or move forward, and people too, will often fragment or fall apart. Or they will move backwards. Our city, our stakeholders and our citizens are resilient to change, saying ‘we are tough, we will cope with change, we will engage with it and move forward’.” - ETHEKWINI MUNICIPALITY OFFICIAL

What has become clear over the last few months is that Durban’s ‘resilience journey’ will need to be an iterative and interactive one that continually draws on new and different perspectives to add depth and insight to the areas that are likely to be part of the city’s Resilience Strategy.
Those involved in the ‘operations’ of the city, whether as municipal employees or as members of business, NGO’s or civil society organisations, added to these ideas by highlighting the service provision challenges associated with the rapid level of urbanisation in Durban in a context where new and efficient technologies (eg. water re-use) do not receive sufficient support. Environmental changes, biodiversity loss, the water provision crisis and climate change were also identified as factors that could undermine the city’s resilience, as are the current financial challenges linked to a shrinking rates base and the absence of multiple income streams to support municipal functioning. Challenges with city politics and governance issues, and the increasing ‘disconnect’ between communities and the Municipality were also raised as concerns that undermine the ability of communities to act independently to enhance their own resilience.

A number of interventions were underscored as being important in building Durban’s ability to respond positively to these changes. Education is seen as an important factor in transitioning the economy to one that offers a broader base of economic activities and employment opportunities for Durban’s citizens. Improved partnerships and collaboration, particularly between communities and government, are recognised as essential in order to build and enhance community resourcefulness, creativity and innovation and to strengthen the involvement and role of communities in decision-making. In this regard, looking carefully at existing political arrangements (which in some cases appear to build dependence on government for solutions) is also important. The need to ensure a functional natural environment that can continue to provide essential services such as water provision and flood attenuation was also identified as critical, as was the role of strong and visionary leadership in navigating an uncertain and challenging future.

At a fundamental level, most of those who were interviewed recognised the need for a ‘change in mindset’ amongst the people and leaders in Durban towards a new path of exploring what it might mean to ‘do things differently’ in response to the challenges being faced.