Resilience-based Governance: Understanding Urban Resilience and Risk Reduction Post-Harvey

Submitted by

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The 2017 hurricane season has reminded coastal residents in the United States and Caribbean of the level of damage and destruction a cyclonic event can inflict upon municipalities. Hurricane Harvey will undoubtedly become the costliest climate disaster in United States history with preliminary estimates of at least 150 to 250 billion USD. According to the Center for American Progress, the United States suffered 53 billion USD in extreme weathers losses.[[1]](#footnote-1) The figures are much higher when one considers the many non-extreme, sub-catastrophic events, such as small, but regular flooding, urban heat and drought, and the effects of sea level rise, whose aggregated effects equal or even surpass the losses from singular, large-scale events. In short, the United States, long considered sufficiently insulated, both in financial and geographic terms, from disasters is becoming a vulnerable state. How then do we start to remedy this vulnerable and reduce disaster risk? The question is both daunting and inspiring at the same time.

In the days and weeks after Hurricane Harvey devastated much of Southern Texas and parts of Louisiana, the public debate has slowly morphed from humanitarian response and disaster management to questions about what could have been prevented, what damage could have been mitigated and why were cities like Houston and Corpus Christi so unprepared for such an event. I believe that the response to these questions lies squarely with how local governments engage (or not engage) in urban resilience. In essence, while the hazards are natural, the tragedy of human and economic asset loss are largely man-made.

Since becoming a buzzword after Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, standard definitions of what urban resilience is have remained somewhat elusive. Various actors, like Rockefeller Foundations 100 Resilient Cities program or the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR), take slightly different approaches. Still, urban resilience typically connotes a municipality’s ability to withstand, accommodate for and bend, ideally without breaking, with the ‘stressors’ that disrupt the regular social and economic activity of an ‘urban system.’ Moreover, there is the necessary quality that municipalities, large or small, must evolve in more innovative and creative ways from disruptive events. Hence, a city’s resilience is not only measured by its capacity to defend itself from catastrophic or sub-catastrophic climate events, but by the ability of elected officials, municipal institutions and civil society and private sector stakeholders to not further contribute to future risk by repeating the same mistakes again or returning to a vulnerable status quo.

American and, for that matter, all global cities can easily begin to reduce vulnerability by first understanding what their risk is. Municipalities must first evaluate their exposure to hazards by locating where the weaknesses lie. One of the most crucial and, in my opinion, greatest weaknesses that directly contributes to global municipalities’ vulnerability is political will. Mayors, municipal council representatives, planning boards and offices of emergency management and civil defense, but also local businesses, schools and hospitals, must embrace resilience in the same ways they deal with other policy areas: public safety, education, transportation, planning, public works and business development. Essentially, I make the case that we will see measurable improvement in climate resilience when local leaders and elected officials begin to engage in what I call ‘resilience-based governance.’

Resilience-based governance makes politically makes good: mayors that innovatively re-design their cities to be more resilient against floods or sea level rise can earn crucial electoral points with voters and other key stakeholders. When risk is reduced, businesses suffer less loses and workers’ access to labor markets is strengthened. Mayors that engage in urban resilience, climate adaptation and sustainability, create greener urban landscapes, contributing to better quality of life, more stable real estate values and a favorable environment for businesses to flourish. While few and far between, we already see such actions taken in places like Hoboken, New Jersey, a municipality devastated by Hurricane Sandy, but whose mayor, Dawn Zimmer, immediately began to secure millions in federal funding. Hoboken is rapidly becoming a model city for how municipalities at or near sea level can adapt to future risk scenarios.

Beyond engaging in resilience-based governance, municipal leaders must learn from one another. International and domestic city-to-city sharing networks are one of the best ways to glean knowledge and best practices from those who have successfully integrated resilience and adapted risk. Here, like Rockefeller’s 100 Resilient Cities, the United Nations “Making Cities Resilient Campaign,” a global exchange platform of over 3600 cities, gives access to any city speak with other officials from across the globe. It is becoming increasingly clear that Bangladesh shares similar risk profiles with municipalities in coastal Louisiana; Copenhagen with Boston; Amsterdam with New York; Belgrade with Houston; and, Istanbul with San Francisco. When local leaders understand their risk, govern with resilience and risk as part of governmental processes and then share their experiences, we can slowly begin to secure cities and reduce human and economic loss. If elected officials continue on the same path, we can expect things to worsen.

1. Miranda Petersen and Cathleen Kelly, “U.S. Communited Clobbered by $53 Billion in Extreme Weather and Climate Disasters in 2016.” Center for American Progress. 17 January 2017. (Online). https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/news/2017/01/19/296860/u-s-communities-clobbered-by-53-billion-in-extreme-weather-and-climate-disasters-in-2016/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)