

Coordinated Disaster Recovery: The National Disaster Recovery Framework in Action

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Building Resilient Urban Sectors

Urban areas are complex, multilayered systems that must carefully balance social and economic interests with built infrastructure, resource flows (energy, water, food, etc.), nonprofit and industry networks, and various levels of government. Each system is part of an overarching sector, which are interconnected and interdependent. Some may be in direct competition due to limited resources (municipal agency budgets), others may have competing goals (property developers versus preservationists) (Meerow 2016). It is the push and pull between diverse sectors that make cities incubators of innovation and progress during “blue sky” periods. This can also be the source of potentially cascading problems following a catastrophic event like a hurricane or other natural disaster. When urban centers achieve dynamic equilibrium between competing sectors, they thrive (Mehmood 2015). However, this natural instability makes returning to a previous state of equilibrium post-disaster unlikely, if not impossible, because each sector will need to redefine their priorities in light of the disruption (Meerow 2016).

Resilience, therefore, cannot be understood simply as returning to the state of predisaster (Mehmood 2015). Resilience is the ability for all urban sectors to respond to and rapidly recover from a disturbance, and to adapt all their systems to better handle future disturbances. A truly disaster-resilient community, broadly speaking, is not simply looking to rebuild homes, roads, and schools. It is looking to find a new dynamic equilibrium between all of its sectors, even those not directly impacted by the event. The relationship between public policy and these unstable interests is at the heart of recovery and resilience planning. Each sector, not just emergency management, has a hand in disaster recovery.

The National Disaster Recovery Framework

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) espouses an “all-hazards” strategy, which establishes the four phases of emergency management—preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery—and is based on the assumption that all nationally significant disasters, be they natural or human-made, require similar response and recovery processes. Each demands coordination between many federal, state, and local agencies with varying specialties, as well as clear and consistent public messaging. Because of this, FEMA has not focused entirely on mitigating specific threats, like hurricanes, but rather on developing tools, protocols, and agreements that can be called upon across the diverse array of threats that communities face (FEMA 2010). Two of the most notable tools are the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and Incident Command Structure (ICS). Both mechanisms provide an

adaptable framework for how the federal government and first responders interface during large and small disasters. NIMS and ICS are tools that help manage a disaster in the short term; they can be employed to help stabilize an incident in the immediate days and weeks after it occurs. It is only within the last decade that a framework was developed to address what comes after this response-and-stabilization phase: long-term recovery.

In 2011, former President Barack Obama released Presidential Policy Directive-8, which called for the development of five new interconnected national planning frameworks. The frameworks—prevention, protection (preparedness), mitigation, response, and recovery—line up closely with the traditional disaster phases employed in emergency management. The recovery framework brought a new set of tools to address post-disaster needs that go beyond “safeguarding life and property” in the short term, the traditional response goals (Box 1).

Box 1. National Disaster Recovery Framework Recovery Support Functions and Lead Agencies

Recovery Support Function (RSF)

Community Planning and Capacity Building
Economic
Health and Social Services
Housing
Infrastructure Systems
Natural and Cultural Resources

Lead Agency

Federal Emergency Management Agency
Dept. of Commerce
Dept. of Health and Human Services
Dept. of Housing and Urban Development
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
Dept. of the Interior

Fema 2011

To institute a flexible structure that could support many different scenarios, the National Disaster Recovery Framework (NDRF) established six recovery support functions (RSFs) organized around familiar urban policy sectors:

1. Housing
2. Economic
3. Infrastructure Systems
4. Health and social services
5. Natural and cultural resources
6. Community planning and capacity building.

Each RSF is led by a federal agency that has both the resources and expertise to advise on recovery and resilience in their designated sector. Each RSF is also active at all times, not just in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. This is an acknowledgment that resilience is not a finite, teleological state, but rather a capacity that can be increased over time through the accumulation of

small actions. It is also an acknowledgement that in order for a community to become truly resilient, it must plan for disasters before they occur.

The NDRF recommends a reorientation of the federal approach to disaster recovery. While professional disaster recovery workers have long known it to be true, the NDRF makes explicit that disaster recovery is always local. The success and speed of recovery depends on how well local organizations and communities can pull together, working in unity for a shared set of goals.

Practically, the NDRF and the national preparedness goal call on communities to develop predisaster recovery plans so they are better prepared to meet the community's needs after a disruption. After a disaster—when there is pressure to act quickly, and many interdependent activities and decisions to be managed—confusion and conflicts can be greatly reduced if a community has already thought about, and outlined, their approach to rebuilding. A good predisaster recovery plan must work in tandem with a community's comprehensive, mitigation, and emergency management plans, outlining priorities, roles, and processes so opportunities are not lost, and decisions are consistent with a community's overall vision for the future.

Hurricane Sandy National Disaster Recovery Support

Making landfall close to the New York City metropolitan area, Hurricane Sandy exposed regional vulnerabilities associated with inadequate shoreline protection, a shortage of affordable housing for displaced persons, and poor protection of vital energy and transportation infrastructure. Nearly all sectors and systems were impacted in both large and small ways.

The NDRF was published only a few months before Sandy hit, allowing federal agencies to put the new framework into action immediately. The work of the Presidential Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Taskforce, chaired by Shaun Donovan, then Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), supported the NDRF. The taskforce produced a recovery strategy that was the engine for a great deal of Sandy recovery work. In the field, the RSFs authorized by the NDRF developed a Recovery Support Strategy to consolidate and unify the activities of many supporting organizations and professionals. Both the recovery support strategy and the taskforce rebuilding strategy offer concrete examples of a change from a top-down, vertical organization to a more horizontal structure based on partnering with local communities. This structure empowers the whole community to take ownership in all aspects of recovery.

Communities recovering from disasters often turn to existing local entities or community-based organizations as rallying points before more

traditional forms of government assistance can be dispatched. In the aftermath of Sandy, community groups such as Occupy Sandy and LES Ready sprung up organically, and more established groups such as the Red Hook Initiative pivoted their missions to provide aid.

The NDRF structure has the flexibility to commit resources to support these community initiatives. The arts and culture community have substantial constituencies that can be engaged to assist communities before, during, and after a disaster to support recovery and rebuilding, both of the physical infrastructure and to assist in restoring the cultural bonds that might have been broken. Recognizing this, the NCR RSF and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs convened a small group of stakeholders in the fall of 2013, nearly a year after Sandy made landfall, to explore how “art responders” could be activated to support long-term recovery and resilience. Over the course of 11 working sessions, 14 prominent New York City-based organizations developed CultureAID. The organizations come together and reorient their regular programming to support their constituencies with post-disaster needs and to help them avoid redundancy in the resources (financial and nonfinancial) they are committing to the recovery effort. CultureAID also offers procedures for assessing post-disaster impacts to arts and cultural organization and provides post-disaster communication tools.

Advanced planning and preparedness is the best way to position a community to recover more quickly from a disaster. Accordingly, one of few explicit recommendations made in the NDRF is the call for communities to develop a predisaster recovery plan (Box 2).

Predisaster recovery planning identifies practices and policies that can expedite recovery after a disaster. By engaging in a robust predisaster recovery planning process, communities are able to take advantage of post-disaster rebuilding funds, and to establish goals that will reduce vulnerability and lead to greater sustainability. Establishing procedures, decision-making structures, and recovery priorities and goals, a community can reduce confusion and accelerate their recovery.

While a community as a whole will be in better shape if they develop such a plan, individual groups or organizations can also prepare themselves. This can be as simple as an organization envisioning how its mission or research could be applied in a post-disaster setting. For example, a workforce development organization could add training on post-disaster construction, a skill that is always in high demand after a disaster. An environmental stewardship group could conduct surveys on what natural resources are most valued by their community, which they could use to lobby for better protections, or to ensure that priority resources are not sacrificed in post-disaster redevelopment.

Box 2. Predisaster Recovery Planning, Key Activities*

1. Define recovery planning team and scope of planning activities
2. Develop and implement a stakeholder and partner engagement strategy
3. Determine the community's risks, impacts, and consequences
4. Assess community's capacity and identify capability targets
5. Determine leadership positions and define operations necessary for post-disaster recovery planning and management efforts
6. Establish processes for post-disaster decision making and policy setting
7. Write the local predisaster recovery plan
8. Approve the predisaster recovery plan and associated regulations
9. Identify and undertake recovery readiness activities

*from FEMA 2017

Communities can use a disaster as an opportunity to influence the design of recovery projects to support predisaster community objectives. After most disasters, communities will rebuild impacted infrastructure. After a large disaster, there may be additional funding available to implement more ambitious plans.

The NDRF also encourages a local recovery planning process. Ideally this would work as a compliment to the predisaster recovery plan and consider the unique impacts of the disaster event. Following Sandy, New York State invested heavily in this idea and funded over 100 local recovery plans using a HUD Community Development Block Grant disaster recovery allocation. The New York Rising Community Reconstruction Zone initiative was supported by the community planning/capacity building RSF, which coordinated data and guidance to New York State and advised local jurisdictions throughout the planning process. In an effort to better connect state and local recovery priorities to future funding and resources at the federal level, each recovery plan took the NDRF sector-based approach to organizing projects. This allowed for a project database to be developed and shared with the federal coordinating agencies, easily communicating local recovery project priorities to federal and state counterparts.

Once that process was underway, FEMA was also able to provide additional support to impacted communities, namely coastal communities of Long Island. These activities demonstrate how a temporary recovery resource (such as FEMA's community planning/capacity building RSF) can work with, or leverage, existing structures to deliver support. During major disasters FEMA has the ability to enter into mission assignments and interagency agreements with other federal agencies to fund long-term recovery efforts out of the Disaster Relief Fund. This gives FEMA the ability to work with other federal agencies to

modify their existing grant programs and technical assistance to provide support tailored specifically to impacted communities. The CPCB RSF was able to use this mechanism in a variety of ways after Sandy including working with the Environmental Protection Agency to fund direct technical assistance and develop trainings and tools around coastal zoning and land use concerns that communities could put to use in their recovery efforts.

By establishing this sector-based approach to recovery and providing tools for identifying and supporting long-term recovery projects, the National Disaster Recovery Framework is encouraging meaningful interdisciplinary coordination between urban sectors. This localized approach to federal recovery bolstered a host of community projects following Sandy and continues to evolve with each new disaster, providing a valuable new model for putting local communities first.

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