

Recognizing Resilience

In 2012, a year after a devastating tornado hit the town of Joplin, Missouri, leaving 161 people dead and leveling Joplin High School and St. John's Hospital, President Obama addressed the graduating seniors:

There are a lot of stories here in Joplin of unthinkable courage and resilience. . . . [People in Joplin] learned that we have the power to grow from these experiences. We can define our lives not by what happens to us, but by how we respond.¹

There are indeed countless stories from Joplin of neighbors helping neighbors, of volunteers arriving by the busloads to lend their hands in rebuilding, and of thousands of trees being planted by community volunteers in an effort to restore and improve the city's tree canopy.

Tragically, social resilience is especially manifest after major disturbances in locales that Tidball and Kransy termed *red zones* (i.e., places characterized as intense, hostile, or dangerous, including those in postdisaster situations caused by natural occurrences, acts of terrorism or war, or longer-term socio-economic degradation).² In the aftermath of a disturbance, ordinary people can accomplish heroic acts. How can social resilience be recognized in its myriad forms, especially when it leads to recovery for traumatized people and devastated places?

RECIPROCITY

Through more than 40 years of research, much of it supported by the US Forest Service's research funding, social scientists have explored connections between environmental and human health. Continued cross-disciplinary research



This photograph of the Hull Street Community Garden in Ocean Hill, Brooklyn, NY, is printed with the permission of GrowNYC, “a hands-on non-profit which improves New York City’s quality of life through environmental programs that transform communities block by block and empower all New Yorkers to secure a clean and healthy environment for future generations” (see <http://www.grownyc.org/about>). Photograph by Lars Chellberg.

identified profound relationships between natural, suburban, and workplace settings and addressing mental fatigue, as access to green space are correlated with significant improvements in mental states.³ Recent research exploring implications from the individual to the societal scales underscores the essential role that trees and natural resources play in creating healthy places for people to live, including relationships between green spaces and enhanced school performance, reduced crime rates, and greater neighborhood livability.⁴⁻⁷

As volunteers and community groups become actively involved in the stewardship of natural resources, their communities exhibit even further gains, including increased civic engagement, neighborhood efficacy, and ecological literacy.⁸⁻¹⁰ Thus, the present research challenge is to move beyond valuing natural

resources as solely physical green spaces and ask instead: how can urban greening, as a human act, be recognized and managed as a critical component of social resilience? At the New York City Urban Field Station, where Forest Service and New York City Parks researchers bring together a network of scientists and urban land managers, social scientists are using environmental stewardship as a lens through which to better understand the collective ability to strengthen social cohesion, build capacity, and respond to rapidly changing—and often disturbed—environments.

ACUTE AND CHRONIC DISTURBANCE

In Spring 2002, just months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, social scientists from the US Forest Service embarked on

a journey to learn more about how communities were channeling the vital power of trees and greening as mechanisms for remembrance and recovery.¹¹ Over the ensuing decade, nearly 700 hundred living memorials were documented; these were green spaces cultivated from a shared intention to leave a legacy and a reminder of the lives that were lost in the 9/11 attacks. These memorials sprang up in towns and municipalities surrounding the crash sites, in areas with high concentrations of family members and friends of the victims, and in places with seemingly no other connection to the sites or the victims beyond the realization that it could have happened in their town or to their loved one. The creators of the living memorials were grieving, and through the process of digging in the soil, they were searching for ways to recover their passion for life and community and to honor what had been lost to them.

The emergence of the 9/11 living memorials may be viewed as part of a social-ecological process of disturbance and resilience, part of a restorative cycle. They represent community acts tied to traditional mourning rituals and beliefs. These spaces became places of profound social meaning and expression of collective efficacy as people responded to this tragic event with a desire to create, beautify, plant, and trust.

Decades before the events of 9/11, a similar pattern emerged in response to a different type of disturbance. Those who were living in New York City; Chicago, Illinois; or Los Angeles, California, in the 1970s may recall first-hand how their communities suffered through a chronic decline in local economies. The fiscal crisis at that time took a devastating toll on urban

infrastructure and residents felt the acute impacts of declining neighborhood resources for police, firefighters, sanitation, housing, and parks. Thousands of residents, often those living in the most devastated places, responded by converting garbage-strewn, vacant lots into thriving community gardens and social spaces.¹² At the time, these gardens were not recognized and celebrated as evidence of social resilience. Indeed, certain elected officials actively fought against the preservation of these spaces, once development values regained a foothold in previously abandoned urban areas.

How might we recognize resilience when it occurs, especially when it is present in an unfamiliar or unexpected form? Preliminary findings from a New York City Urban Field Station social assessment of local waterfront parkland (an investigation in response to the brutal destruction wrought by Hurricane Sandy in October 2012) speak to subtle dimensions in processes of recovery from both extraordinary and everyday stresses. Community members considered their parks to be a refuge that provided them with a buffer when the physical qualities of the city threatened to overwhelm their senses—the noise, traffic, and development—and from social and emotional realities, too. One adolescent reported that a park offered relief from peer pressure and allowed him to stay out of trouble; countless others alluded to stress in their lives and cited local green space as a haven from their worries. Still other residents were engaged in active stewardship of neighborhood parks by planting trees, cleaning up debris, or starting new gardens. Many of those encountered are part of dedicated groups of friends and neighbors who care deeply about their waterfront communities.

These public landscapes are intimately tied to their collective sense of well-being.

These encounters provide evidence that social infrastructure is built not of bricks, mortar, and dirt, but rather from the social actions and practices that restore relationships between and among people and the places they hold dear. The materiality of nature, as represented by a handful of vegetable seeds or a group of volunteers planting saplings, provides both a catalyst and a context for dynamic social experiences that have supported thousands of New Yorkers in need of personal, social, economic, and physical recovery.

In this era of global climate change, landscapes and natural resources are increasingly valued as buffers that protect human populations against untoward effects—great forests keep atmospheric carbon in check and coastal wetlands soften storm surges that threaten nearby communities. But these biophysical processes and characteristics are just one dimension of their worth. In the face of social, political, economic, emotional, and psychological stressors, green spaces also provide safeguards of a very different kind. The social cohesion that emerges from stewardship activities buffers communities against stresses induced by such experiences.

CULTIVATING MEANING

In seeking to synthesize research on the environment and human health, then, nature is cherished not merely as a buffer or a service, but as an integral part of social systems, that is, social infrastructure. The potential for resilience not only resides in physical design and form, but within social relationships. As communities strive

to provide highly efficient green infrastructure that is designed to be resilient to future storms and rising tides, they would do well to also examine and nurture the social meaning in these shared places. The provision of nonprogrammed space in communities creates opportunities for emergent forms of behaviors that reflect a sense of the sacred. These places, which invite access and participation, encourage creativity and interactivity, and require restoration and tending, also afford communities the opportunity to express, support, and—following hard times—heal and inspire. These places are critical not only to the daily lives of community members, but also to the collective spirit of human society.

Local community-based organizations such as environmental groups, fair housing coalitions, and community health providers, serve as bridging and bonding entities with the capacity to respond effectively in times of crisis. These groups exert a powerful impact following disturbances because they have learned to adapt to address multiple vulnerabilities in their communities. How might we sustain this form of community work, while expanding frameworks to address social vulnerabilities in the face of both acute and chronic stressors? One strategy is to prepare for disturbances by harnessing the persistent, trusted, and networked relationships of community-based organizations. Social resilience depends upon the ability to cultivate connectedness and encourage human innovation day-in and day-out. While technology and the built form are often revered, it is the human capacity to absorb shocks, self-organize, learn, and adapt that is also worthy of awe. Human beings own the capacity to create: acts of kindness and love,

organizations that foster respect, communities that attend to emergent and chronic needs, and societies that value social justice. As the life of South African antiapartheid leader Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela (July 18, 1918–December 5, 2013) so eloquently demonstrated, acting out of concern for others brings us closer to a world where well-being and opportunity are shared by all. ^j

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Resurrecting “International” and “Public” in Global Health: Has the Pendulum Swung Too Far?

The fashionable term “global health” seeks to convey that health issues are universal and transcend national boundaries. The term’s focus on *problem* identification within the *problem–solution* framework undermines critical thinking about *solutions* at the national and community levels. Public health is ultimately about responding: promoting, protecting, and enhancing the health of populations, especially that of the poorest and most vulnerable populations. The global health system plays an important role in setting standards and noble goals, but action is ultimately taken at national and community levels. Political boundaries confer authority (and responsibility) to uphold the well-being of a population. While recognizing a world of increased interaction and exposures, it is essential to remain grounded in the practicalities of

the “international” aspect of public health.

Over the past decade or so, we have observed a trend away from the term “international public health” and a movement toward the term “global health.” In a *Lancet* commentary, Koplan et al. distinguished between “international health,” “public health,” and “global health.”¹ Multiple authors responded,^{2–4} but, to our knowledge, none focused on how this semantic shift concentrates on only half of the *problem–solution* framework (i.e., *problem* identification and assessment) and neglects the *solution* aspect of the framework and the central role that nation states play in responding with solutions. While the term “global health” seeks to convey that health issues are universal, that health issues transcend national boundaries, and that diseases can and often

do spread quickly (and often without respect for political boundaries), the term implies more of a focus on the problem than on what must be done about the problem. The term “global health” may be appropriate when referring to health issues, which are increasingly global in nature, but semantics must not cause us to lose our focus on how to address these problems.

The word “public” by definition means “of or concerning the people as a whole.”⁵ While communities or nations comprise individuals, individuals do not exist in isolation; they are part of a larger, interconnected whole. This larger whole (or population) is the focus of public health. There is tremendous heterogeneity across populations in terms of contextual risk factors driving health outcomes, and the nation state may be