

Institutionalization

Institutionalization is about remembering and codifying the lessons learned through the disaster.

By empowering and equipping communities to force the act of remembering and hold leaders accountable, and by adjusting or developing policies and governance structures that address pre-crisis issues and support more just and resilient communities.



The key challenge for leaders in the institutionalization phase is to ensure that the lessons learned through the first three phases—including the importance of leadership, cohesion, and prioritizing a Just and Resilient Recovery—are not lost, but instead operationalized.

Disasters like pandemics and hurricanes affect wide swaths of people through extraordinary and extreme ways, where public awareness and response is understandably heightened. But crises are not limited to point-in-time disasters—many communities are afflicted by a lack of access to basic needs on a regular basis. Local governments must retain their memory of and focus on preparing for future acute and society-wide ramifications, while working to address long-standing societal inequities.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

What inequities has your community confronted during the recovery process that it might lose focus on over time?

How will you ensure that official record of what happened during, and as a result of, the disaster includes the experiences of marginalized and vulnerable populations?

What new governance structures will need to be enacted to increase accessibility for those who are marginalized and vulnerable and establish accountability for those traditionally in power?

Which changes in local government programs and policies improved the ability to serve marginalized and vulnerable communities and should be made permanent?

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Memorialize lessons learned into long-term community plans and strategies.

Tell the story of what happened, through a diversity of voices. The impacts of the disaster must be understood not just in terms of mainstream experiences, but with a close understanding of how a variety of communities were affected. Local governments must leverage the relationships built through the recovery process to ensure the experiences of marginalized and vulnerable communities are captured and understood widely.

Focus on understanding and addressing underlying inequities. Some issues were unique to the disaster; others were simply revealed by it. Local governments and community leaders should make a concerted pivot towards talking about and addressing the underlying conditions—poverty, public health, inequality, marginalization—that posed the greatest risks for past disasters and will continue to for future ones.

Document and publicize the lessons learned, so that they can be referenced in future times of need. This documentation could be funded in partnership with philanthropy, and take the form of an official report, an exhibit, and/or a monument to signal the importance and increase its longevity. It is important that the documentation be accessible a decade or further into the future when local administrations and staff have turned over reducing institutional memory.

The New Orleans Index was a project undertaken between the Brookings Institution and the Data Center to create a yearly “index” measuring New Orleans’ recovery from Hurricane Katrina. The index began as a tracker focused specifically on recovery from Katrina, and it eventually became a broader measure of the city’s wellbeing and resilience as multiple subsequent storms (such as Rita) compounded the city’s need to document recovery. Each report’s title contained the number of years that had passed since Katrina (e.g. “the New Orleans Index at Six” was published in 2010), a naming construct that built in a constant reference to and reminder of the watershed moment that Katrina represented. After the tenth report, the index became a biennial production.⁹¹

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2

Codify and operationalize community planning processes inside and outside of government to make permanent community memory and institutional knowledge.

Use community-generated data and input to set community goals and priorities. As local governments create or update long-range strategic plans and set budget priorities, they must adopt a process that uses community-generated data and input to first help set community priorities, and then to track and advance progress towards these priorities.

Make metrics public and accessible to a diversity of communities, to use them as a point of conversation and as a mechanism for accountability. Metrics should serve the important role of an accountability measure. They form a starting point for inviting community input, and they allow those outside of government, such as community-based organizations and advocates, to monitor public progress.

Plan for consistency of community values and visions between administrations. Even as leadership and administrations change, the fundamental needs and goals of a community do not. Establishing the role of community-based organizations and advocates in setting goals and monitoring progress against goals can help to increase consistency.

After Hurricane Harvey, Houston committed to the “Resilient Houston” plan. For a city, whose first ever comprehensive plan was created in 2014, the Resilient Houston plan represented a milestone in the city’s resilience-building efforts, after being hit by six federally declared flooding disasters in a span of five years. The engagement strategy for this resilience plan involved hundreds of partners engaged through workshops and working groups.⁹²

New York City has implemented a Talking Transition engagement strategy at a mayoral transition, to convene the public in informing the agenda of the incoming mayor. Talking Transition drew comments from nearly 70,000 people on government-influenced quality of life issues, which were briefed to the incoming administration to inform policymaking. The program was funded by a range of philanthropic partners (including the Ford Foundation, Atlantic Philanthropies, the New York Women’s Foundation, and others).⁹³

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3

Permanently remove unnecessary barriers to accessing aid.

Local governments must create more flexible approaches to public assistance that first, meet communities where they are while in crisis, and second, maintain those approaches that made the social safety net more effective. Large-scale disasters grip the consciousness of an entire society, but, the symptoms of disaster—housing instability, a lack of food access, and health crises—afflict our most marginalized and vulnerable populations day to day.

Reduce burdens of proof. Local governments should commit to providing base levels of assistance without a need for burdensome documentation. For example, governments agencies could increase the flow of data between agencies and with some private actors such as insurance agencies, to ease the application process for vulnerable households who may have lost access to or documentation of administrative information such as tax returns. Such measures must not neglect to place privacy and security concerns of marginalized and vulnerable populations front and center.

Shift the burden of navigating bureaucratic systems away from marginalized and vulnerable households. Nobody should be prevented from receiving full public support because they do not have the time, literacy, or support to fill out complex paperwork and navigate multiple administrative systems. Local governments could establish community-based intake centers that allow for a single point of entry into the system. Agencies should also be evaluated on their ability to disburse money, and not on measures of “efficiency” that disincentivize helping the most people with as many resources as possible.

Relax use restrictions for funding. Recipients of aid should be trusted to use funding in a way that best serves their needs. By directing public assistance into use-restricted programs, governments are essentially shaping household budget allocations—which is inevitably less efficient and uniquely responsive to idiosyncratic needs than allowing households to make these allocation decisions themselves.

New York City's Human Resources Administration launched the ACCESS HRA app and website in 2017, to allow New Yorkers to receive public assistance and manage benefits without needing to physically visit an HRA SNAP center or job center. This institutionalized tool has proven to be a vital service in the City's response to COVID-19, which effectively requires people to have the option to access their benefits safely and virtually.⁹⁴

Maryland's BEACON One-Stop Application allows all types of unemployment insurance claims to be filed entirely online through a single application. These include applications to the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program and the Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation program. Having such networks already in place allows disaster-period funding processes to be directly incorporated into an existing consolidated system. Previously, the state required applicants to file by phone.

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Shift policies, regulations, and practices to address longstanding inequities.

Create programs and policies that formalize an equitable disaster response. The equitable means of disaster response that have been outlined in this document should be formally established through local programs, if not already: from engaging emergency interpreters and developing disaster preparation materials in multiple languages, to designating community-based organizations and leaders to be points of contact for future events.

Advance policies that address long-term inequities. Local governments should target the underlying stressors and inequities within communities, by pursuing policies that—in the long term—mitigate the short-term pains induced by crisis. Philanthropic engagement and funding play a key role in lead long-term reform, through partnership with local government and advocates.

Emergency measures...

should translate to long-term policies.

Emergency housing assistance

Funding for long-term supportive housing

Decarceration (jails, prisons, juvenile justice centers)

Mandatory long-term reentry and rehousing plans

COVID sick leave policies

Mandatory employer-paid sick leave

Eviction stays

Special tenant-landlord mediation courts

Expanded testing capacity

Expanded clinics and emergency care to underserved communities

Outreach to those without Internet access

Treatment of broadband as an essential utility that all households must have cheap access to

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Expand and formalize pathways that connect with and serve marginalized communities.

Reorganize departments, teams, and partnerships around priorities established with communities. Local governments must update governance structure, staff, and skills, by revisiting the institutional implications of governance structures such as the compositions of boards and voting parameters for organizations, such that they are inclusive of community voices. Numerous cities have established resilience departments in the past decade, and the efficacy of such departments can be undermined by a lack of staff or coordination between departments. It is therefore crucial to both empower departments to be effective, while structuring them to be responsible and held accountable to the community.

Establish formal relationships with community-based organizations. Partnerships with community-based organizations, including informal ones pursued during disaster recovery, should become a norm. To formalize these relationships, “state and local governments should support the creation of land trusts, co-ops, and other legal entities that will allow communities to interact directly with federal grants as communities, and not just as collections of individuals.”⁹⁵ Doing so will expand both the reach and cultural competency of local governments, ensuring that they can effectively hear from and speak to marginalized and vulnerable communities.

Establish institutionalized partnerships between state and local government, in the form of inter-governmental agreements and entities. Establish avenues for higher levels of government to work collaboratively to address inequities.

A direct outcome of the Resilient Houston strategy was to create a Department Resilience Officer (DRO) position within every city department. This directive, issued through a mayoral executive order, helped to institutionalize the importance and relevance of resilience planning across all municipal functions.⁹⁶

After Hurricane Maria, the Mayor Exchange was created as a peer exchange and technical assistance program to support Puerto Rico’s mayors in building their capacity and resources, including their capacities to understand community priorities.⁹⁷

The Neighborhood Participation Program for Land Use Actions (NPP) was created through a city charter change to establish a formal channel of communication between the City Planning Commission and residents. The NPP provides “timely notification of any proposed land use action affecting a neighborhood” and provides “the opportunity for meaningful neighborhood review of and comment on such proposals.”⁹⁸