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Disaster Recovery and Mitigation Planning: A Comprehensive Approach to Societal and Infrastructural Resilience

In the years since Timmerman (1981) first applied the concept of resilience in the disaster/hazards context, disaster resilience has emerged as an often employed yet rarely defined concept in the hazards and disaster literature. Many definitions draw heavily on perspectives suggested by the Resiliency Alliance¹ which generally holds that resilience is the ability of a system to resist or absorb an impact, organize itself to overcome or recover from the consequences of the impact, and adapt or learn from the experience (Carpenter et al. 2001; Folke et al. 2002; Resilience Alliance 2007). In the disaster context, resilience can be defined as the ability of social systems, along with the bio-physical and infrastructural systems upon which they depend, to resist or absorb the impacts (deaths, damage, losses, social impacts etc.) of natural hazards, to rapidly recover from those impacts and to reduce future vulnerabilities through adaptive learning and strategies.²

With this definition providing context, strategic planning for rapid and organized emergency response, recovery and rebuilding that seeks to promote social and infrastructural resilience must be based on at least three critical dimensions. First, any strategic planning must have as its foundation a comprehensive and detailed understanding of current of social and physical vulnerabilities based upon sound

¹ <http://www.resalliance.org/1.php>

² This definition is a slightly modified version of one proposed by RAVON (Peacock, Kunreuther, Hooke, Cutter, Chang, Berke. 2008) and generally consistent with definition proposed by Mileti 1999; Berke and Campanella 2006; Buckle, Marsh, and Smale 2001; Bruneau, Chang, Eguchi, Lee, O'Rourke, Reinhorn, Schinozuka, Tierney, Wallace, and von Winterfeldt 2003; Godshalk 2003; Walter 2004; UN/ISDR 200.

research, mapping and modeling. In a very real sense it must be based on a comprehensive understand of “place.” Second, strategic planning for rapid and organized response, recovery and rebuilding must not only insure that response efforts minimize the losses associated with impacts because of effective and sound emergency response practices, but just as importantly the recovery and rebuilding activities must not replicate or reproduce preexisting vulnerabilities. This is often the Achilles’ heal of recovery and rebuilding efforts; in an attempt to undertake these activities rapidly, all to often preexisting vulnerabilities are not only reproduced, but sometimes exacerbated (i.e., preexisting social inequalities can be exacerbated). Third, we must stop digging. It is often said that when you are in a hole, the first step toward getting out of the hole, is to stop digging. All to often, particularly in large urban systems, development patterns and trends – as reflect in terms of land use patterns, infrastructure development, and social policies and structures – are continuing to dig an ever deeper and larger hole in that they are generating ever higher levels of social and physical vulnerability. In short, strategic planning for social and infrastructural resilience must, of necessity, incorporate effective mitigation action planning to shape not only tomorrow’s actions following a disaster, but also today’s actions that can reduce social and physical vulnerabilities and enhance a systems ability to resist and absorb a future hazard event.