

Advancing approaches for promoting community resilience

In 2015 The Rockefeller Foundation partnered with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to launch the National Disaster Resilience Competition (NDRC) Resilience Academies. Recognizing the salient need to infuse resilience thinking into HUD's NDRC, these Academies were established to expose state and local governments to new approaches for protecting and promoting the long-term well-being and safety of their communities. A recent independent evaluation of the Academies has provided instructive insights about what works in efforts to build innovative resilience capacity.

Sharing lessons

Important lessons about what works for strengthening resilience thinking and practice have emerged from an independent evaluation of the NDRC Resilience Academies conducted by The Rockefeller Foundation's Monitoring and Evaluation grantee, the Urban Institute. As a capacity building program - particularly one which emphasizes long-term infrastructure development projects that take time to plan and implement - the true impacts of the Academies may not be fully realized for many years. Thus, in order to provide timely lessons to the Foundation, this evaluation focused on assessing knowledge transfer and behavior change as proxies for longer-term impact. These emergent lessons will help shape the Foundation's scaling strategy for its resilience capacity building work and may also be of interest to governments and funders with a stake in advancing resilience practice globally.



Defining Resilience

Resilience is the capacity of individuals, communities and systems to survive, adapt, and grow in the face of stress and shocks, and even transform when conditions require it. Building resilience is about making people, communities and systems better prepared to withstand catastrophic events—both natural and manmade—and able to bounce back more quickly and emerge stronger from these shocks and stresses.

Context

Building on its longstanding commitment to building resilience and proven success in this field, The Rockefeller Foundation partnered with HUD in 2015 to launch the NDRC. The competition invited 50 eligible states, districts, and territorial governments, and 17 local governments to compete for nearly \$1 billion in funding for disaster recovery and long-term resilience-building initiatives.

The Foundation then funded the Resilience Academies to support NDRC applicants in developing their strategies and projects for building or strengthening resilience. The Academies' curriculum and workshops introduced resilience concepts to participating jurisdictions through exercises aimed at advancing their approaches for

protecting the long-term well-being and safety of their communities.

The Academies encouraged jurisdictions to move beyond the traditional rebuilding approaches that focus primarily on disaster recovery and preparedness, and instead to work towards more adaptive and holistic reduction of risks, and the introduction of new benefits to communities. To achieve this, the Foundation sought to improve the resilience planning capacity of leaders and governments and to raise community awareness of the innovation, broad commitment, and multi-faceted approaches required to build toward a more resilient future. Successful projects work toward securing the livelihoods of vulnerable populations, improving economic opportunity in cities and towns, and protecting natural ecosystems in areas throughout the United States.

What have we learned?

Jurisdictions' capacities and prior experiences varied widely

Participating state and local governments entered the Academies with their own unique experiences and history with natural disasters. Jurisdictions also varied in terms of government size and structure, leadership support, technical skill sets, and familiarity with resilience concepts such as planning and preparation. Jurisdictions' different contexts impacted their level of knowledge acquisition and ability to apply new concepts into their resilience building projects.



Baseline familiarity with resilience concepts proved beneficial for participants

Participating jurisdictions that entered the program with some pre-existing ideas about resilience were most likely to experience changes in their knowledge, attitudes, and practices. The Academies were found to be least effective for jurisdictions that were not previously familiar with the concept of resilience and therefore had not incorporated holistic approaches into their work processes and arrangements. Overall, 82 percent of those surveyed indicated that their NDRC proposals were “significantly stronger” after participating in the Academies.

Resilience is more than a buzzword

Prior to participating in the program, some Academies participants shared that resilience seemed like a buzzword, similar to concepts such as sustainability and mitigation. Engaging in the Academies helped participants to develop a more holistic understanding of resilience by presenting a clear definition of the term and providing guidance on how to operationalize it. Following their participation in the Academies, almost half of the participants self-reported an improved understanding of their own technical assistance needs. This, in turn, stimulated their interest in identifying tangible resilience outcomes and metrics for measuring resilience capacity.

Resilience “champions” helped translate knowledge to action

Jurisdictions often appointed – either explicitly or implicitly – a resilience “champion.” These champions were committed to resilience as a concept, could participate actively in the Academies, and often assumed responsibility for anchoring their jurisdictions’ NDRC submissions and future resilience-related plans. Having a point person helped ensure that lessons from the Academies were carried forward, including into NDRC applications. In some cases, champions committed to joining new networks and to taking on new resilience-strengthening work, irrespective of whether their NDRC applications were successful.

Participants appreciated applied and peer-to-peer learning

Feedback on the Academies’ curriculum was largely positive, particularly those sessions that focused on

operationalizing resilience capacities and implementing resilience strategies and plans. Participants also noted the need to take into account the wide range of contextual issues they must consider in planning and implementing resilience efforts—including local leadership support, political issues, experience with past disasters, and government structure and size. Several jurisdictions expressed their interest in more instruction and examples around resilience governance – that is, examples of day-to-day processes that highlight what implementation of resilience looks like in reality.

“De-siloing” began taking root

After learning about resilience concepts and processes, many jurisdictions began working to break down traditional institutional barriers that prevent internal and external collaboration. According to self-reported data, 56 percent of those who attended the Academies have considered new inter-agency working groups, while 81 percent reported having launched regional collaborations. Some jurisdictions have also forged new partnerships with governmental and non-governmental organizations that have similar stakes in resilience building.

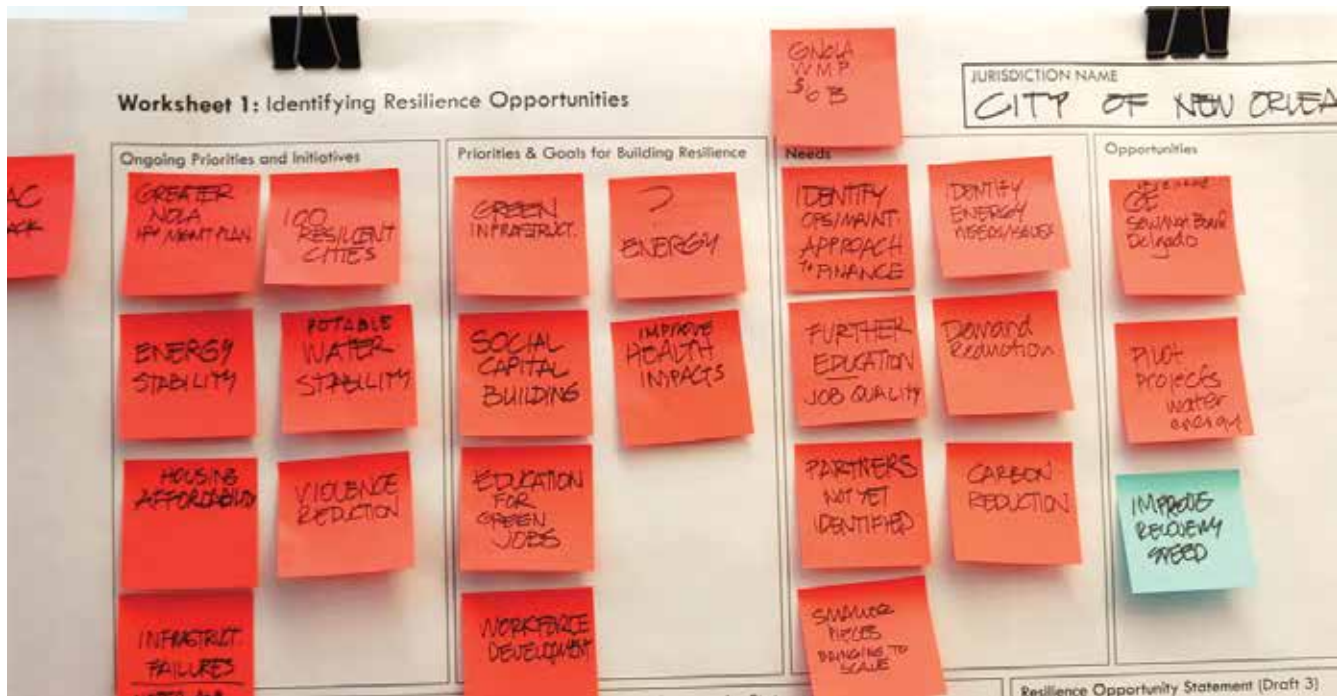
Experiential learning and hands-on exercises work best

Academies participants found team exercises and discussions with subject-matter experts (SME) to be especially helpful components of the program. The Academies process — consisting of exercises, SME engagement, feedback, and group critique — enabled participants to better understand resilience as a capacities concept, and apply their knowledge through the NDRC application process.

Moving forward: Lessons for the resilience capacity building field

Develop an explicit targeting approach

Given that those with baseline knowledge benefit most from resilience training and capacity building programs, funders – including The Rockefeller Foundation – should decide whether to provide remedial support to lower-capacity jurisdictions, or to target higher-capacity jurisdictions, which are more likely to demonstrate near-term change.



Leverage resilience “champions”

Champions can play an important role in translating training efforts into real change. Deliberately identifying and appointing a resilience champion as part of a capacity building program may provide an opportunity to strengthen the impact of the program.

Emphasize diversity and practical examples

The Resilience Academies’ curriculum covered a range of topics in a number of different learning formats such as panel sessions, working groups, and peer reviews. Virtually all participants described team exercises and discussions facilitated by SMEs as helpful in orienting their projects and operationalizing theory into work practices. Participants also appreciate diversity among speakers, facilitators, and SMEs.

Take a pragmatic approach to capacity building

The need for depth should be balanced against recognition of communities’ competing priorities. Curricula must be sufficiently comprehensive, without being onerous. Resilience capacity building efforts are most likely to translate into behavior change when followed by opportunities to apply new knowledge – as was the case with the NDRC Resilience Academies. After participating in the Academies, jurisdictions used the

content to support their NDRC applications and develop strategies and plans, thus helping to retain and recall new knowledge.

The complete evaluation report on which this brief is based can be accessed through The Rockefeller Foundation website. For more information, please contact The Rockefeller Foundation’s Monitoring and Evaluation Office at: rfevaluation@rockfound.org

Monitoring and Evaluation at The Rockefeller Foundation

Committed to supporting learning, accountability and performance improvements, the Foundation’s Monitoring and Evaluation Team works with staff, grantees and partners to monitor and evaluate the Foundation’s pathways to impact in the short- and long-term, and to capture lessons about what works and what doesn’t across the Foundation’s diverse portfolio.

