Social Innovation, Civic Infrastructure, and Rebuilding New Orleans from the Inside Out

In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey wrote, “There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication.” Indeed, our nation’s shared experience of the Gulf Coast crisis in late August 2005 shaped a new vernacular. The destruction was so vast, the recovery so daunting, and the initial response so lacking that the principal villain and victim of the crisis—a hurricane called Katrina and a city called New Orleans—were imbued with new metaphorical meaning. A “Katrina” is now a cataclysmic event, the recovery from which has been terribly mismanaged. A “New Orleans” is a place or a thing devastated in some fundamental way beyond restoration to its prior state. The use of these expropriated words is widespread today in our popular culture. At the outset of the BP oil spill this year, pundits wondered whether a stuttering federal response to the environmental disaster would become President Obama’s “Katrina.” Interior secretary Ken Salazar recently (and inaptly) described an invasive infestation of pine beetles in his native Colorado as “the Katrina of the West.”

To certain constituencies, however—among them the Rockefeller Foundation—Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans are much more than convenient reference points for calamity, and they represent something far more profound: the integrated, evolving, and critically important challenges we will confront in the 21st century, from the incipient dangers of climate change, to the dramatic urbanization underway in America and around the world, to the need for our institutions to deal more deftly with increasingly complex problems. And while we will never forget the tragedy of Katrina and the ongoing recovery of New Orleans, we must begin to recognize the positive lessons of national and global importance that have emerged as a result of this deeply painful episode.

More than anything, the devastation of New Orleans in 2005 crystallized the relative importance of a demographic trend that came into full force in the last decade and will shape America throughout this century. We are, for the first time,

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a nation of cities. America’s urban centers and their satellite suburbs and exurbs—what Bruce Katz of the Brookings Institution calls “our metros”—cover only 12 percent of the nation’s landmass but currently account for 65 percent of our population. These metros in many ways define America. For one thing, they are growing at twice the rate of the country at large. They also produce an astonishing 75 percent of U.S. economic output. In sum, these sprawling urban networks anchor the country’s workforce and industries, points of commerce and ports of trade, centers of research and crucibles of creativity. In our global economy, these interconnections give America a competitive edge. But they also are the locus of a number of converging economic, social, and environmental factors—as evidenced by the events of 2005, in which a natural disaster quickly became an urban crisis with national ramifications.

Managing the interplay of these factors is perhaps America’s foremost domestic challenge in the year 2010 and beyond. Effectively meeting this challenge is a two-step proposition. We must first consider how to mitigate the potential negative impact of, for instance, a severe heat wave (like those experienced throughout the Northern Hemisphere this summer) on elderly populations in urban centers—a demographic that will grow dramatically in coming years, according to the Brookings Institution. Second, we must determine the best way to leverage responses to the convergence of complex new trends, such as mass urbanization, the rising monetary price and environmental cost of energy, and the crumbling of America’s transportation infrastructure. The policy prescriptions are perhaps clear—public cooling centers and monitoring programs for at-risk seniors in the former scenario, new investment in affordable mass transit in the latter—but the means and mechanisms by which we can achieve positive outcomes are less obvious as the complexity and integration of these factors continue to increase.

The Rockefeller Foundation has long focused on both parts of this equation—mitigation and leverage—particularly with respect to cities. For nearly a century, we have helped to find and fund bold innovations that enable people around the world to confront pressing challenges, and in so doing to lead more productive and resilient lives. To that end, some 50 years ago the Foundation helped to create the field of urban design and theory. One of the initial grants in that effort was to the young author, activist, and urbanist Jane Jacobs, whose life’s work continues to...
shape perspectives on urbanization today. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Foundation directed seed money to prototype and then scale a new experiment, community-based development organizations, and it funded innovations to create affordable and supportive housing in the 1980s and 1990s.

Today, because of the demographic revolution underway, the Rockefeller Foundation is helping to shape a new generation of urban innovations and to address a new generation of urban vulnerabilities and opportunities. In 2009, for instance, we built the Asian Cities Climate Change Resilience Network, an alliance of governments, donors, scientists, academics, planners, health-care workers, and emergency service providers to help cities understand, plan for, survive, recover from, and even thrive in the changing environmental conditions brought on by global warming. The Foundation is also working to innovate and scale best practices throughout the world across a range of urban issues, from air quality to transportation, and from promoting sustainable housing to deploying new uses of information technology in cities.

This long history of urban innovation and our approach to confronting 21st-century change and challenges shaped the Rockefeller Foundation’s approach to the recovery effort in New Orleans. At first, along with many others, the Foundation gave grants for immediate shelter and relief. But we knew from experience that a meaningful recovery effort would require interventions that led to systemic change, which was badly needed in the Crescent City. For one thing, the winds and rain that caused levees to fail and submerged 80 percent of New Orleans also exposed a horrifying degree of entrenched poverty suffered by a population that had long ago been left behind. For another, months went by as city and state authorities failed to pull together a coordinated plan for the city’s redevelopment. By the spring of 2006, the recovery process had run into a terrible logjam caused by a desperate shortage of public resources and trust, a great deal of frustration and uncertainty, too many competing interests, and not enough incentive to compromise. In addition, there was no concerted effort to engage city residents—let...
alone the displaced citizens whose lives and livelihoods had been forever altered—in the rebuilding effort.

It became very clear that the devastation of New Orleans’s physical infrastructure mirrored the state of its civic infrastructure. The city was broken outside and in. A lasting effort to rebuild would require far more than repairing levees and restoring neighborhoods. It would mean a significant investment in social innovation to strengthen the city’s public and private institutions, bolster its human capital, and empower residents to rebuild the organizations, the networks, and the trust that are the lifeblood of healthy, strong, and resilient communities.

Without clean drinking water, waste disposal, and electric service, a city cannot survive. But the importance of civic infrastructure is just as critical, as demonstrated by research that suggests a strong statistical correlation between citizen engagement and long-term communal health and wellness. Matthew R. Lee, a professor of sociology at Louisiana State University, recently analyzed data from some 3,000 U.S. counties and determined that civically active and engaged populations have demonstrably lower rates of mortality. He argues that the economic opportunities strong communities provide help reduce income inequality and poverty, which leads to improved health outcomes. Indeed, engaged communities can lobby for the creation of hospitals, clinics, and specialty care centers, and provide a forum for addressing public health concerns. They can also transfer knowledge of healthy behaviors and activities among citizens more effectively. Furthermore, the camaraderie found in these communities helps boost psychological well-being, thereby helping people live happier, healthier, more satisfying lives.

This is a timely lesson that has relevance far beyond the borders of Orleans Parish. Like New Orleans, America’s civic infrastructure is, by any number of measures, in the midst of decline. In his landmark work, Bowling Alone, Harvard University’s Robert Putnam showed how Americans are increasingly less connected to their families, friends, neighbors, and communities. Today we join fewer organizations that actually hold meetings (signing up for a Facebook group doesn’t count); we vote less and in fewer elections; we see our friends and families less often and for shorter periods of time; and activities we used to do together—watching movies, sitting down to dinner, attending religious services, and yes, even bowling—we increasingly do alone. In short, Putnam found that our involvement in social and communal activities has declined by 50 percent in 25 years. The stock of America’s “social capital”—Putnam’s measure of community engagement and the strength of our civic infrastructure—has fallen dramatically. Our social cohesion, for so long emblematic of American life, has begun to fray.

Along with countless organizations, and in partnership with leaders and innovators throughout the country, the Rockefeller Foundation seeks inventive approaches to repair and rebuild the critical social foundation of American life. With this mission and mindset—and with an appreciation of the historically, empirically, and conceptually positive impact that investments in civic infrastructure can have on a community—we plunged into the fray of post-Katrina New Orleans. During the five years since the floods, the Rockefeller Foundation has...
made 42 grants totaling $22 million to New Orleans civic institutions and organizations, with a special emphasis on enhancing citizen participation and bolstering human capital. Two grants in particular illustrate the impact of these investments and speak to the Foundation’s strategy of seeding social innovation in New Orleans, and around the world.

With respect to citizen engagement, our work began by helping to jumpstart a unified, inclusive, and cooperative planning process for the city’s recovery. Eight months after hurricanes Katrina and Rita, that process had all but stalled, leaving on the table hundreds of million of dollars in federal aid that by law could only be released to the city upon the adoption of a comprehensive regional recovery plan. In April 2006, the Foundation issued a $3.5 million grant to the Greater New Orleans Foundation (GNOF), with whom we worked closely to steer the process of assembling a Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP).

Believing in the power of user-driven innovation, we sought extensive and continuous input from all stakeholders touched by the physical and psychological devastation of the floods, including those displaced in the diaspora communities outside of New Orleans. As one example, we funded the public opinion and engagement organization America Speaks to organize and facilitate UNOP Community Congresses, which gathered input from thousands of residents and displaced citizens. As with all user-driven innovation, new ideas emerged, driving planning experts and politicians to reframe the problems and rethink potential solutions. This innovation process, actively managed, brought together new networks of local partners with different and competing interests, including the mayor and the city council, the governor, the Louisiana Recovery Authority, and representatives of more than 70 neighborhoods throughout the city.

Such networks are inherently powerful and lend themselves to accelerating innovation, according to Andrew Hargadon, a professor and the Director of Technology Management at UC-Davis, and also a veteran engineer and former designer at innovation powerhouses IDEO and Apple. Hargadon argues that, historically, some of the most effective and important technological developments and products—from electric lighting to the graphical user interface of the Windows operating system—were new innovations that leveraged preexisting inventions—what Hargadon terms “recombinant innovations.” He agrees that transformative recombinant innovation often occurs by bridging distant communities and building new communities to form new networks that find and capitalize on invention. Hargadon describes how effective this approach has been when used by private-sector firms, many of whom have learned that the key to pioneering progress lies not in the traditional corporate research model—with major investments in laboratories, scientists, and patents—but in the way in which firms exploit the network structures that connect them internally and to the outside world.

Indeed, by building, reorganizing, and reinvigorating networks of stakeholders and residents, community leaders and elected officials, the Rockefeller Foundation and GNOF helped a broad coalition assemble, give input to, and then adopt...
UNOP, which enabled the city to access $411 million in federal funding for rebuilding once the plan had been approved. The Office of Recovery Management, the Downtown Development District, and the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority all use UNOP as the primary blueprint for their work. UNOP also serves as the basis for the City Planning Commission’s Master Plan. This widespread adoption is a direct consequence of the inclusive process by which the plan was assembled, and an example of the power of networks to achieve not only product innovation, as Hargadon theorizes, but social innovation as well.

Another critical aspect of the Rockefeller Foundation’s work in New Orleans centered on retaining and attracting the human capital needed to spark and sustain social innovation, meanwhile investing with others in rebuilding critical physical infrastructure. To this end, we created the Rockefeller Foundation Redevelopment Fellowship Program, which placed 25 promising early and mid-career professionals in the organizations and government offices most directly responsible for rebuilding New Orleans. The program was designed and executed by the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for Urban Redevelopment Excellence (CUREx), which has pioneered this widely acclaimed community development program across the nation. With a $2.2 million grant from Rockefeller, CUREx recruited regional and national talent, placed redevelopment professionals in leadership positions throughout New Orleans, and supported their work with training sessions and coursework at the University of New Orleans. This innovative program had a palpable impact by creating a new cross-organizational network that transcended preexisting and longstanding problems of communication, execution, and even racial tension throughout the city and its myriad institutions. Interagency dialogue, coordination, and implementation improved considerably. Redevelopment projects were effectively designed and managed by fellows, and many have been implemented successfully. Again, the importance of new networks in fostering social innovation cannot be overstated.

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The Rockefeller Foundation has since built on and institutionalized the success of the Fellowship Program by incentivizing participants to remain in New Orleans, continue to apply their skills, capitalize on the CUREx network and other relationships, and make further contributions to the city’s rebirth. In 2008, the Foundation issued a $1 million grant to create an Urban Innovation Fund through The Idea Village, a nonprofit that promotes entrepreneurship in New Orleans. The new fund offered a competitive venue for CUREx participants to pursue their own projects and interventions, with a focus on housing and community revitalization. As a result, a number of fellows have stayed in New Orleans to start exciting and important projects. One group received an innovation grant to form the Alternative Housing Support Corporation, a nonprofit spearheading the creation and management of new affordable rental properties in struggling communities. Another group was awarded funding to create Sustainable Environmental Enterprises, a for-profit entity with a social purpose: to integrate sustainable energy practices in the low-income housing sector. Given the success of our partnership with The Idea Village, the Rockefeller Foundation will fund a broader urban innovation program in New Orleans this year.

While the recovery effort is ongoing and far from complete, at the five-year mark after Katrina, the UNOP and Fellowship Program case studies provide strong qualitative evidence of what Professor Lee has demonstrated quantitatively: the critical importance of civic infrastructure to the health, vibrancy, and resiliency of communities. Our cohesion as a community, our unity of purpose, and our exchange of ideas and values uniquely enable us to combat society’s ills. We have also reaffirmed that new networks are critical to finding and deploying social innovations with the power to rebuild communities.

This concept was on display prominently in the wake of America’s most recent natural disaster, thanks in part to another urban innovation. Last fall, with support from the Rockefeller Foundation, a group of forward-thinking, bipartisan mayors from across the country founded Cities of Service, a national organization working to create sustained, high-impact service opportunities for citizens, as well as systematic, innovative approaches to harnessing volunteerism. To facilitate this objective, Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Rockefeller Foundation have sponsored the placement of chief service officers in 20 mayors’ offices. In less than a year, we have seen dramatic results, including this past spring, when tremendous flooding in Nashville, Tennessee, killed nearly three dozen people and caused an estimated $1.5 billion in damage. Nashville mayor Karl Dean has attributed a swift emergency response and recovery effort not to FEMA or state authorities, but to a veritable army of 17,000 local residents who were activated by the city to assist in (and even manage particular aspects of) the relief and clean-up efforts. Nashville’s chief service officer coordinated this effort with the help of a comprehensive volunteer service plan that was developed by Nashville as part of its application to the Cities of Service coalition. Today, thanks to Cities of Service, new and intersecting local and national civic networks are emerging, which will undoubted-
edly lead to important social innovations and reinforce the civic infrastructure needed to address mounting and unforeseen urban challenges.

As urbanization progresses (half of the world now lives in cities) and as the international community confronts increasingly integrated challenges—from health pandemics to economic crises to environmental devastation that knows no borders—achieving social innovation by investing in civic infrastructure will be critical to the resilience of humanity in the face of future crises. We cannot predict with any great prescience where the next hurricane will make landfall. We cannot know exactly how climate change will impact the spread of a virus like H1N1. The challenges of tomorrow will unfold and evolve in unpredictable ways. We can, however, continue to search for, promote, and fund innovations that enable communities to mitigate the danger of their impact and leverage the opportunities they present to build a better world. We can and must build strong social levees to hold back the floodwaters of an uncertain future.