



The Next Leadership Challenge: Advancing the Resiliency Agenda

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The tragedy and sorrow associated with the recent disaster in Japan and the pattern of disasters that have occurred over the past few years in the Gulf of Mexico, Haiti, Indonesia and other countries around the world dramatically underscores the importance of fashioning a new resiliency agenda.

A central challenge of the 21st Century is to develop strategies that can help us bounce back from potentially disastrous events. If we are to have regrets, let us do so by coming to terms with the reality that the human condition can never be free of risk, but at least let us not regret our inaction.

Like *globalization* and *sustainability* before it, resilience is the most just for a forward thinking world facing numerous multidimensional threats, hazards and disasters. Resilience is not just the right descriptive word, it is the right paradigm, requiring foresight and broad societal understanding and support. The concept of resilience is especially suitable in a world more interconnected, more urbanized, more complex, and yet more fragile than ever.

Just as the protean dimensions around the concept of sustainability were examined in depth in the early 1980s, resiliency will go through a similar evolution, gaining conceptual clarity and scope, generating new agendas and policy perspectives, and mobilizing a new generation of leadership. This agenda is the urgent work before us, but is also the work of the generation to come. It is a fundamental task of civilization.

The risk or vulnerability arises from adverse climate change impacts, earthquakes, hurricanes, extreme weather events and security threats. It arises in a manifold of ways that can stress communities, cities and entire countries to the breaking point. We need to be ready, not surprised. We must continuously look over the horizon to see what plans are on the table, what preparations need to be made and what assets are in place to handle the foreseeable and unforeseeable crises. And when these tragedies do occur, we need to deploy the resources and assistance to help these communities recover.

So our leaders will need to be able to understand and address the complex range of issues that arise in any full event-cycle analysis. We need strategies to prevent and mitigate disasters to the extent possible, plans and preparations for the inevitable events that will come, and appropriate tools and resources to rebound smarter, greener and better. **We cannot have a sustainable future unless we build the policy structures for resiliency along with critical levels of appropriate investment.**

At the U.S. Green Building Council, we're working on an in-depth study with the University of Michigan that looks to identify and assess the linkages between green building strategies and resilience. We believe that sustainable building practices can be a powerful vehicle to help advance stronger, more resilient communities, and that an integrated design approach can cost-effectively help improve these structures and mitigate the impact of disasters.

The Institute of Business and Home Safety (IBHS), under the leadership of Julie Rochman, has made the important point that a more resilient building is a more sustainable building. In the wake of the hurricanes in the Gulf Coast, green building expert Alex Wilson championed *passive survivability*, a term he used to "describe a building's ability to maintain critical life-support conditions in the event of extended loss of power, heating fuel, or water." To make the Navy more resilient, Secretary Ray Mabus has been leading the execution of an ambitious sustainability plan, making its facilities, fleet and operations less reliant on fossil fuels, and therefore enhancing national security.

At a recent event earlier this month on [Mitigating Disaster through Design and Construction](#), Dr. Sandra Knight, the Deputy Federal Insurance & Mitigation Administrator at FEMA commented about the need to invest in the repair and maintenance of the built environment – our buildings, highways, bridges, dams and levees, and other built infrastructure. "This is what I lose sleep over," said Knight. "We've got to get serious. We've got to be able to communicate risk."

When a city, town or neighborhood has been struck by disaster, we must meet the moral challenge to rebuild and recover smarter, greener and more resilient, lifting these communities up as exemplary models for the world to see and emulate. Take the example of Greensburg, Kansas. Amid despair and devastation after a tornado ravaged the town in 2007, the people themselves drew toughness and resiliency from the hope of a bold vision: to rebuild on the foundation of a green, sustainable future. Their goal was to seize their namesake – *Greensburg* – and become a shining light, a new and sustainable city on the hill. Taking this path, the town achieved new heights in sustainability and national acclaim, creating a resilient national model for rebuilding.

From the White House to the State Houses, City Halls to community leaders, the private sector to the civil society organizations, multilateral development institutions to society at large, we need to set new standards for resilience. The resiliency agenda will require a deep and profound reassessment of our priorities. The sooner this agenda is debated, developed and implemented, the better. Starting today and in the decades to come, we need to do all in our power to lessen the impact of cataclysmic events.



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1 comment

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1 year 23 weeks ago

Excellent article. Thanks for sharing the USGBC's perspective on why it's so important to do all within our power to lessen the impact of cataclysmic events.

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