

Planning for a More Resilient Future

A Guide to Regional Approaches | Executive Summary

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Brian Dabson
Institute of Public Policy
Harry S Truman School of Public Affairs
University of Missouri



The financial, social, and environmental costs of disasters continue to rise. Regional development organizations (RDOs)¹ are in a unique position to guide and support communities and regions towards greater resilience.

Every year, communities across the United States experience disasters and major disruptions. These can be the result of damaging weather events, such as hurricanes, tornadoes, or floods, or of the decline of a significant industry or closure of a major employer. They can also be caused by the outbreak of infectious diseases, acts of terrorism, technological mishaps, or financial meltdowns. The financial, social, and environmental costs of these disasters continue to rise, and represent substantial drains on governments, businesses, communities, and the nation as a whole.

Resilience is the capacity to prepare for such disruptions, recover from shocks and stresses, and adapt and grow from a disruptive experience.² There are many variations on this definition, but one of the most direct comes from the Economic Development Administration (EDA): resilience is “the ability to recover quickly from a shock, the ability to withstand a shock, and the ability to avoid the shock altogether.”³ The inclusion of “economic resilience” in the content guidelines for EDA’s Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) is one indicator of the growing importance attached by the federal government and others to building resilience in communities and regions.

10 WAYS

in which regional development organizations can improve regional resilience:

- 1 As regional leaders that cross governmental and function boundaries
- 2 As experienced practitioners with strong networks and deep knowledge of federal funding opportunities
- 3 As coordinators and managers of external funding streams
- 4 As planners
- 5 As sources of technical expertise
- 6 As communicators
- 7 As conveners
- 8 As networkers
- 9 As a means of reaching out to vulnerable populations
- 10 As additional staff capacity

The Role of Regional Development Organizations

Some RDOs have already demonstrated that they have the capabilities to be key players in promoting and enhancing community and regional resilience. Case studies prepared by the NADO Research Foundation show how RDOs from Virginia to Florida, Iowa to Louisiana, and Texas to North Carolina have assumed important roles in anticipating, mitigating, responding to, and recovering from a range of major natural and economic disasters.⁴

But, no part of the country is immune to disasters, and regional development organizations everywhere have the potential, if not the responsibility, to step up and be the agents of resilience in their communities and regions. Here are ten ways in which they can, and do, make a difference.

1 As regional leaders that cross governmental and functional boundaries

By definition, RDOs are multi-jurisdictional entities representing the interests of counties and cities across a variety of urban, suburban, and rural settings. Their strength is their ability to bring a broader, regional perspective on a range of issues that cross county and city lines and which can best be addressed when all the affected local governments are at the table together. Most RDOs have a range of functions for which they are responsible, such as comprehensive economic development planning, transportation planning, business development finance services, public infrastructure improvements, aging services, affordable housing, and emergency preparedness, among others. This breadth of focus areas places RDOs in a strong position to provide regional leadership, an asset particularly important before, during, and after disasters.

2 As experienced practitioners with strong networks and deep knowledge of federal funding opportunities

Most RDOs have long-established relationships with federal agencies, particularly with the Economic Development Administration, but also with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Transportation, the Small Business Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Department of Agriculture (Rural Development). This means that they have strong personal networks with government officials both in Washington DC and regional offices, as well as the knowledge to help local governments, businesses, and others navigate access to federal funding opportunities, before and after disasters.

3 As coordinators and managers of external funding streams

Because of their funding experience, RDOs can be called upon to guide homeowners and local businesses through the processes of applying for federal and state assistance, help prioritize the

allocation of funds within a region, and track and report on the use of external funds. Some RDOs have established revolving loan funds to provide loans to businesses impacted by disasters in order to speed their recovery.

4 As planners

A major function of RDOs that are also EDA-designated economic development districts is to prepare and regularly update the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). With economic resilience officially regarded as a vital component of regional economic development strategies, there is the opportunity for integration with other planning processes that contribute to the enhancement of resilience. For instance, hazard mitigation planning, which brings regional planners together with emergency managers and utility companies, helps to integrate short-term response planning with longer-term strategic planning.

5 As sources of technical expertise

RDOs, because of their planning responsibilities, act as centers of demographic, economic, and hazard vulnerability data, with expertise in geographic information systems and statistical analysis. This enables them to conduct initial disaster impact assessments, longer-term economic and environmental impact analyses, and asset mapping, and to develop indicators for measuring resilience and vulnerability.

6 As communicators

The flow of information across governments, businesses, and communities represents a major challenge particularly during a disaster, but also in the days and months afterwards. A RDO's relationships with all sectors of its region and constituent communities, its networks with federal agencies, and its data and analytical functions place it in a position to be a communications hub. To do this effectively, it will need to be proficient in all forms of media, and particularly social media, to reach households and businesses within its region.

7 As networkers

Close connections with the business community – employers large and small – and with the philanthropic, nonprofit and volunteer communities need to be cultivated, not just after a disaster but at all times, so that lines of communication and high levels of trust are well-established. The strength of social capital will be as important as any other aspect of resilience in the face of disaster. In addition, a RDO's networks with neighboring regions, through both state associations and the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO), are important for sharing resources, experiences, and expertise.

8 As conveners

Decisions on the allocation of scarce public resources in anticipation of a disaster and on strategies for recovery and rebuilding after a disaster are almost always contentious. Forging a vision for a more resilient community often requires trade-offs that may adversely affect some neighborhoods and groups. But, resilience requires all stakeholders to be brought into the process to improve the chances of finding win-win outcomes. RDOs can provide a safe space for difficult conversations, and act as neutral conveners.

9 As a means of reaching out to vulnerable populations

In any community, there are populations who typically are not engaged with the processes of governance and whose interests are often overlooked. These may be minority populations, low-income residents, the elderly, and people in institutions. Regional planners can use their networks of partners to ensure that vulnerable populations are engaged and supported by the appropriate people and organizations.

10 As additional staff capacity

The reality of many rural regions is that there is very limited capacity in local government to carry out the functions required to build resilience. Even engaging volunteers requires institutional capacity and many funding sources are contingent on local matches beyond the reach of some rural communities. RDOs may be in a position to provide technical and organizational staff support to fill gaps at the local level, and can and do supplement emergency management capacity in times of disaster.

¹ The term “regional development organization” or RDO refers to the multi-jurisdictional regional planning and development organizations that exist throughout the country and are known by various names in different states, including: councils of government, regional councils, economic development districts, local development districts, and planning and development councils. These public-based entities play an invaluable role in fostering intergovernmental collaboration among federal, state, and local officials; deliver and manage federal and state programs; and work to solve area-wide issues and to address the fundamental building blocks required for competitive and sustainable communities and economies.

² Rodin, J. (2014) *The Resilience Dividend: Being Strong in a World Where Things Go Wrong*. New York: Public Affairs.

³ U.S. Economic Development Administration. (2015) *Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) Content Guidelines*. Washington, DC.

⁴ NADO Research Foundation. (2014 & 2015) *Lessons from the Storm: Case Studies on Economic Recovery and Resilience and Regional Approaches to Resilience: A Tour of Resilience Work around the Country*. Washington, DC.



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Planning for Resilience: SUMMARY

Planning for a More Resilient Future: A Guide to Regional Approaches summarizes the rapidly-growing body of research on resilience, describing the main ideas that are driving policy and practice across the country, and examining current thinking on regional and economic resilience. It is accompanied by an online guide to resources on the practice of resilience, both of which are available at www.nado.org. The guide includes examples of ways to approach planning for resilience, a primer on the expansive federal policy framework which determines the priorities for funding resilience initiatives, and describes the current state of philanthropic engagement in resilience efforts.

Key Takeaways:

- **On resilience and regional development organizations.** The financial, social, and environmental costs of disasters continue to rise. RDOs are in a unique position to guide and support communities and regions towards greater resilience.
- **On understanding resilience.** It is vital that RDOs understand what resilience means for the communities they serve. Resilience (or lack thereof) is a complex and dynamic feature of communities and regions. It is both a process and an outcome. It requires communities to anticipate threats, reduce their vulnerabilities, mobilize their resources and assets, and plan for a better future.
- **On the regional dimensions of resilience.** Disasters do not respect jurisdictional boundaries. Resilience at the community level has to be matched by resilience at the regional level. RDOs are well-positioned as bridges between local needs and regional and national resources. For rural communities they have a pivotal role as conveners, planners, coordinators, and connectors, especially where formal government capacity is weak.
- **On economic resilience.** RDOs can play a key role in enhancing economic resilience at two levels. First, they can work with businesses to help increase their ability to rapidly return to normal functioning after a disaster, and second, they can pursue a broad range of economic development strategies and initiatives to improve long-term regional competitiveness.
- **On measuring resilience.** Measuring resilience presents communities and regions with the opportunity to think about their future options and create meaningful, actionable resilience plans. Community support for resilience-building initiatives will almost certainly result if residents, businesses, and communities have the data to correctly prioritize how they improve the quality of their preparedness; if they can demonstrate their successes; and if they can measure the benefits of increasing resilience.
- **On planning for improved resilience.** Most RDOs are already engaged in a number of planning processes for their communities. Incorporating resilience into these efforts should be the goal. New practices are becoming available and merit consideration.
- **On the national policy framework.** An extensive federal policy framework has been created to substantially improve preparedness and resilience at all levels in the face of hazards and disasters of all types. RDOs should be familiar with this framework as it determines the priorities, funding, and activities of the Department of Homeland Security and FEMA as well as other federal departments and agencies such as HUD, EPA, and EDA.
- **On philanthropic engagement.** There is increasing interest by philanthropic foundations to provide resources to communities and individuals impacted by disasters and to help them build resilience to future disruptions. These foundations are increasingly becoming important partners for RDOs.



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