

We can't have resilience without justice

By Denise Fairchild on 27 Jan 2015 (www.grist.org)

This is the second post in a series about resilience.

Michael Brown. Eric Garner. Tamir Rice. John Crawford III. Levar Jones.

Their deaths — and those of too many others — illuminate the ghastly toll of racism and impunity. It's a toll we can measure in lives lost, and in communities seared by violence.

But here's a casualty you might have missed: trust. When people feel unfairly targeted by the police, when good cops fear reprisal from angry communities, trust — the invisible thread that holds livable communities together — unravels.

If we are going to get real about resilience in an age of climate change and other large-scale disruptions, trust looms large.

Think about it. If people don't trust the authorities, will they pay attention when it's time to evacuate? Will first responders venture into communities of color to rescue the most vulnerable? Will people from different backgrounds and neighborhoods join hands to rebuild?

It's not just about climate-related disaster, either. If an epidemic is raging, will sick people remain quarantined, or will they flee and infect others? (That's what has happened during the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, where people's reasons to distrust the authorities could fill an encyclopedia.)

Here in the U.S., it's easy to trace the roots of distrust — from the original sin of slavery to the structural racism that endures.

But what about the roots of resilience? How can we repair trust, and build communities that can survive and thrive in a disaster-prone world?

I'd say it's about rights, respect, and responsibility for planet, places, and people. It's about building a society that not only protects and improves our environment, but also engages its citizens through a truly just democratic process.

Fairness is key. In a resilient society, both opportunity and risk are shared by all.

Rather than a winner-take-all economy, where the rich get richer and the rest are just getting by (or not), a resilient economy invests in education and opportunity for everyone.

For example, in New Orleans, where more than half of African-American men are out of work, the Emerald Cities Collaborative is working with the mayor's office to employ disadvantaged residents in efforts to build a stronger, more sustainable city. (Bonus: The city's investment is greening and strengthening its water, sewer, and other public

infrastructure to be resilient against extreme weather). A fundamental, unanticipated task, however, is rebuilding residents' trust that this public commitment and community engagement process are authentic and will make a difference in their lives. Building a resilient city requires rebuilding trust, especially in communities that have suffered from broken promises and lives.

And, in a resilient society, the burden of risk is shared equally, whether you live in the Lower Ninth Ward or the Upper East Side. That's not the case in the U.S. today, where low-income people and people of color face disproportionate risks from every kind of environmental problem — from extreme weather events to health impacts from pollution, like asthma. That's a huge problem for frontline communities. But it's also a problem for Americans as a whole, because a society that dumps risks on marginalized people is more likely to ignore those risks — until it's too late. As Naomi Klein has observed, “once decision-makers start rationalizing the sacrificing of some lives, it's awfully hard to stop.”

There are lots of ways to reduce risk in vulnerable communities. We can, for example, invest in urban infrastructure and high-quality affordable housing. We can patch holes in the social safety net, and improve public health. And we can make sure that low-income people and people of color are fully engaged in decision-making at all levels.

Trust is key to resilience in a volatile world. For trust to thrive, we need to know that the police and the courts have our backs. We need to feel like we are all in this together, that we all have a chance to make good, and that when things go wrong, we will face it together. But trust isn't something that can be airlifted in to communities in crisis. It has to be built from the ground up.

Where there is no justice, there is no trust. And where there is no trust, we will not be resilient to the shocks and surprises of the future.

Homework due Monday: Answer the following questions in your journal:

- In the Durango area, where is there a deficit of trust? What kind of development project might remedy this situation? The article provides some examples...
- Of the twelve economic development strategies we've discussed (this list is posted on my DP under student resources), which would Fairchild most approve of?

Also, send me a seminar question related to our readings that you'd like to discuss by Sunday at 9 p.m.