Rebuilding for the Community in New Orleans

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OECD Centre for Effective Learning Environments
(formerly OECD Programme on Educational Building)

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Five years after hurricane Katrina, the City of New Orleans is now implementing a far-reaching plan for the systemic renovation and rebuilding of community programmes and infrastructure. A total of USD 3 billion has now been allocated to public building projects.

With the student population down to nearly half of pre-storm totals, a recently completed school facilities master plan will finance the rebuilding of some 85 schools. At a minimum, each of these school sites will become a community school, with gymnasiums, auditoriums and school libraries open to the community at nights and on weekends. Furthermore, many of the school sites will also become community "nexus" centres where parks, community gardens, parenting centres, healthy grocery stores, farmer's markets and other community-centred programmes and facilities will be co-located.

The new plan will also be more environmentally and socially sustainable. A nexus site will be located within a short walking distance of all housing areas in the city. Since 29% of New Orleans residents do not have access to private transportation, this means that owning an automobile will no longer be a pre-requisite for equitable access to a nexus of educational and community services. And even for those citizens fortunate enough to have private transport, this approach provides for more walkable, healthy and environmentally sustainable neighbourhood development.

More than 10 000 citizens were engaged in developing the plan for rebuilding New Orleans. To help sustain the process, an evolving partnership between the Louisiana Public Health Institute, the Neighborhoods Partnership Network (NPN) and Concordia LLC was formed. It is working with city and school officials, social service providers and neighbourhood groups to define nexus implementation guidelines, explore governance options and create a dashboard of community indicators through which the new centres will operate.

Big decisions: New Orleans wanted to be heard – and was

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THE SIX DOMAINS OF COMMUNITY LIFE WHICH UNDERLIE NEXUS PLANNING

Creating a community nexus requires careful planning around a wide variety of assets and needs, which are generally organised into six domains of community life.

The first of these is the **physical** domain, which encompasses all of the community's built and natural resources: buildings, bridges, highways and electronic communications infrastructure. The physical domain also includes natural resources like parks and recreation areas.

A second category of community needs falls within the **cultural** domain. Included here are programmes and artifacts related to individual and collective values, including ethnic, religious and aesthetic diversity.

The third domain incorporates a wide range of the community's **social** needs. This includes all aspects of well being, including programmes related to health and human services.

A fourth element encompasses the **economic** domain that includes programmes, activities and initiatives that maintain a healthy balance between financial, human and environmental capital.

A fifth domain addresses all of the community's **organisational** programmes and services. These include everything from families to clubs, city and county school boards and councils and special interest groups, as well as political parties and other private and civic entities. This domain also includes facilities for deliberating and implementing community issues.

The sixth domain of the community nexus incorporates its **educational** assets, which include everything from early childhood to primary, secondary, community college, university, adult education and workforce training programmes and services. All of these physical, cultural, social, economic, organisational and educational domains of community life incorporate and define the community's most vital life support systems.

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Nexus planning: where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts

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A CALL TO CONVERGENCE

There is now a global demand for new ways to deliver efficient and effective community programmes and services – and preferably at lower costs. One of the most important lessons from the New Orleans rebuilding process is the need to create more integrated and systemic solutions. But we cannot depend on historic natural disasters to create these kinds of changes. In order to move forward with systemic planning and reform we will need to:

1. Identify and embrace the current research and apply the best practices in systems-based planning and design. This research can be best implemented through innovative collaborations across disciplines and knowledge bases.

2. Develop advanced relational tools to analyse and manage complex data interactions towards predictable outcomes.

3. Revise public policies to support more integrative models of planning and governance that operate from the principles of collaborative and self-organising systems.

4. Engage community stakeholders to create, document and continuously improve the principles and practices of stakeholder engagement. Facilitators and mediators with the skills and know-how to support this critical planning element can be found in the growing field of organisational development.

5. Develop more collaborative models of funding and finance, including more effective alignments between public, private and philanthropic resources. In New Orleans, for example, the foundation-funded Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP) is an example of how philanthropy can work with local government leaders to expedite the planning process and assure that authentic community engagement goals are met.

As communities continue to grapple with the challenges of antiquated planning strategies, we are learning that more transformational change is needed. We can no longer afford the social, financial and environmental costs associated with planning cities, villages and neighbourhoods through isolated and inefficient silo thinking. Urban designers, architects, educational facilities planners and engineers must now work together with educational, cultural and social service providers to more effectively organise the people, places and programmes that drive community health and well-being. Through a more systemic approach to community development, a more collaborative approach to management and a more integrated approach to public policy, significant progress can be realised in the cost-effectiveness and quality of environments that support community life.

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