University of Delaware Disaster Research Center

FINAL PROJECT REPORT #40

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY. DISASTER RESISTANT COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE: EVALUATION OF THE PILOT PHASE. YEAR 1

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1998

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PROJECT # SAI 97-09-18-04

Prepared for the Federal Emergency Management Agency

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August 24, 1998

ASSESSMENT OF PROJECT IMPACT: YEAR 1

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

In 1995, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) unveiled a new national effort to encourage state and local adoption of mitigation policies and programs in an attempt to reduce escalating disaster relief and recovery costs (FEMA 1995). In 1996, Director James Lee Witt, acknowledging that "all mitigation is local," convened a set of roundtable discussions, which included constituents from outside the traditional emergency management profession, to consider different approaches to local level adoption of mitigation programs.

Out of these discussions came a new program, originally called the Disaster Resistant Community Initiative, now known as Project Impact. The overall goal of Project Impact is "to bring communities together to take actions that prepare for–and protect themselves against–natural disasters in a collaborative effort" (FEMA 1997). Unlike other FEMA grant programs, the mitigation activities and strategies were to be developed by the communities themselves to meet local needs and to reflect local social and political cultures. This was expected to be a "bottom up" approach to mitigation. Guidance to the communities in how to meet this goal was provided in four objectives: to build community partnerships; to identify hazards and community vulnerability; to prioritize risk reduction actions; and to develop communication strategies to educate the public about Project Impact.

Project Impact was launched in the summer of 1997 with the identification of seven pilot communities that would receive "seed money" over a five-year period to implement new local programs and policies to improve their resistence to future disasters. Those communities were: New Hanover County/Wilmington, North Carolina; Deerfield Beach/Broward County, Florida; Pascagoula/ Jackson County, Mississippi; Oakland, California; Seattle/King County, Washington; Allegany County, Maryland; and Tucker and Randolf Counties, West Virginia.

In Fall, 1997, the Disaster Research Center began two-year assessment of these pilot communities' efforts to meet the program's four objectives. Year 1 of this assessment focuses on three issues: (1) identifying the local context within which Project Impact objectives are being approached, that is, providing a social, political, and disaster profile of each community; (2)

documenting the processes within each community related to initiating Project Impact, including intergovernmental relationships; and (3) the initial steps being taken to meet each of Project Impact's four objectives. Due to the wide variation in initiating Project Impact across the seven communities (in terms of the timing of initial contacts inviting the community to participate, signing a memorandum of agreement, and receiving funding), no attempt was made to evaluate outcomes in Year 1.

This Executive Summary focuses on the initial actions of the communities in meeting Project Impact's four objectives. Chapter 1 of this report reviews the history of Project Impact; Chapter 2 provides a description of the methodological approaches used in conduction this assessment. A profile of the communities and a description of their initial introduction to Project Impact are provided in Chapter 3 or the report.

OBJECTIVE 1: BUILDING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

In all communities, there was an a definite understanding that the development of partnerships—with the private sector, other governmental entities, and non-profits—is at the core of the Project Impact (PI) philosophy.

The ways is which local governments sought to incorporate the private sector varied considerably. Some made use of existing business associations or local government committees that included businesses to pull the private sector into PI activities. Others invited high visibility corporations and enterprises to be on task forces or steering committees. In a few cases, local businesses actually took a major role in public outreach activities, donating expertise in mitigation planning (e.g., in conducting loss estimations for the local area), developing self-help programs for community residents (e.g., how to structurally reinforce their own homes), developing low-interest loan programs to help residents reinforce their homes, and providing funding to print public educational materials.

However, our research found a lack of in-depth, consistent involvement by the private sector across almost all of the communities at this early phase. It should be recognized that the private sector is not used to being involved with local jurisdictions in establishing or running governmental programs. In fact, local jurisdictions often must overcome a great deal of hesitancy or resistence before the private sector understands the nature of PI and what role they can play in this effort.

Several problems were identified that PI communities have to resolve before this objective can be fully realized:

1. The private sector does not understand what is expected of them in efforts to mitigate community risks and vulnerability. While some of the larger corporations do understand disaster preparedness and emergency response-and have made great

strides in these areas-they often do not think beyond their own property boundaries. Smaller companies often haven't even taken these steps for their own employees and facilities.

- 2. Because the availability of funding was often delayed for extended periods of time following the signing of the Memoranda of Agreement in several of the communities, momentum was lost and the private sector's interest also dwindled. Without active local coordinators or Steering/Planning Committees with available funding to put programs into place, early enthusiasm waned.
- 3. While one of the strengths in some communities was the existence of local government ties to the private sector, this often resulted in "tapping" the same people to participate in PI activities who were already contributing to the community in other ways. This had two consequences: it limited the development of broader inclusion of the private sector in PI activities; and it raised questions about which activities the corporations should pursue on behalf of the community. Frequently, companies opted for continuing the programs they were already committed to rather than beginning new projects (especially since there were no available models for private sector participation).

OBJECTIVE 2: IDENTIFICATION OF HAZARDS AND COMMUNITY VULNERABILITY

In almost all of the communities, hazard identification efforts are already underway, primarily for the most serious threat to the community.

Hazard identification is clearly an activity that communities believe is fundamental to their ability to reduce their exposure to costly future disaster events. In some cases, these efforts had begun before the initiation of PI; but additional funding has allowed those communities to expand their efforts or to broaden the hazard characterization process. In general, these are not global hazard or vulnerability assessments, but rather focus on a particular threat (such as an earthquake, flood, or landslide), on a specific system (e.g., highways) or on a category of structures (e.g., schools), depending on the priorities established by the individual communities.

In almost all cases of hazard identification activities, communities are making use of partnerships to conduct or expand these efforts. Working agreements have been or are being developed with: the Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Department of Transportation, the U.S. Geological Survey, NOAA's Coastal Services Center, Americorps, universities, and private sector companies, to name a few active partners.

While hazard identification efforts are proceeding well, vulnerability assessments are not. It is clearly early in the process, however, to expect these assessments to be underway since they need to be based on the findings of the hazard analyses. We should anticipate seeing vulnerability assessments initiated in Year 2; but this may be dependent on communities getting more guidance on how to conduct vulnerability assessments that will yield information on which to establish mitigation priorities.

Three problems were identified across the communities with respect to initiating hazard and vulnerability assessments:

- 1. Because of the delays associated with the negotiation and processing of the Statements of Work for Year 1, several of the communities could not begin their planned activities until late in the 1998 fiscal year. Although some of the pilot communities did have other "pots" of available funds they could draw on initially, the provision of funding closer to the signing of the memoranda of agreement (MOAs) would have definitely led to even greater strides in hazards identification/characterization activities in Year 1.
- 2. One major problem that must be resolved is the availability of a standardized geographic information system (GIS) and methodology for the display and analysis of hazard and vulnerability data. Currently, all of the communities are wrestling with the problem of how to integrate different databases (topographical maps, hazard maps, infrastructural maps, zoning maps, building data, and census information, to name a few) to use in developing their vulnerability assessments and establishing mitigation priorities. Although this problem goes beyond merely PI concerns, some leadership and technical advice in this area is needed in order to facilitate the move from Objective 2 to Objective 3.
- 3. While several of the MOAs mention the use of HAZUS as a hazard identification and vulnerability assessment tool that is expected to be used, none of the communities-at this point-have either the expertise to use the program, see a need for the program (since only an earthquake HAZUS program exists), or have rejected the tool in favor of other loss estimation techniques. Unless additional technical assistance is going to be provided to the communities on the use of HAZUS-for earthquakes as well as for other natural hazard agents-it is unlikely that this tool will be used.

OBJECTIVE 3: PRIORITIZING RISK REDUCTION ACTIONS

Although it is early for substantial mitigation efforts to be implemented, some focused mitigation projects did begin in Year 1 that are due specifically to PI funding: the non-structural seismic retrofitting of all facilities in one school district; the elevation of a home as a demonstration project in a flood area; the retrofit of a school in a coastal area to sustain hurricane-force winds. The most frequent types of mitigation-associated activities undertaken by the communities during Year 1 are the initiation or intensification of efforts to develop long-term, community-wide mitigation plans and to outline new building code and land use regulations that will reduce future disaster impacts and losses. These planning activities are crucial for future mitigation efforts to materialize; however

In general, these mitigation projects had been identified by the communities prior to the initiation of PI but had only been initiated when the opportunity of additional funding became available. These are direct reflections of the types of efforts PI was supposed to foster-the use of seed money to implement mitigation projects, often with the involvement of a cross-section of stakeholders from the community. These efforts began in the communities that received their PI funding early in the fiscal year or that had funds available from other sources (e.g., the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program) until PI funds became accessible. We find these early mitigation efforts very encouraging and would expect to see more activities in subsequent years.

OBJECTIVE 4: DEVELOPING COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

By far, the majority of PI activities to date, across the pilot communities, have focused on the development of public education materials on PI, its projects, and do-ityourself mitigation programs for residential retrofitting.

This emphasis on public communication is necessary in order to develop widespread community understanding of the principals of PI, to explain the concept of mitigation to a public that is more familiar with disaster preparedness, to recruit partners for the communities' activities, and to promote participation in local mitigation programs.

In many ways, the activities undertaken for this objective built on the programs that communities were already familiar with-preparedness planning programs for the public-and were often tied to those earlier efforts as an extension. Partners who had previously worked with the local community-businesses, the Red Cross, churches and universities-were used to expand on these earlier efforts and to provide mechanisms for the dissemination of PI information. Similarly, some of the communities had developed working relationships with various media outlets due to previous disaster events and preparedness programs-on radio and television, and in newspapersthrough which they also disseminated information on PI.

Developing and providing educational materials was discovered to be an excellent role for the private sector-it was familiar and unambiguous. Local businesses could appreciate the need to provide information to the public about loss prevention (although they frequently understood this to mean "preparedness" rather than "mitigation"). As a consequence, the private sector and non-profit organizations actively participated in the development of, and provision of resources for: educational videos, information pamphlets, materials on how to retrofit residential structures, display booths at local fairs; and additional disaster-related training for their employees. One problem was identified with respect to this objective: what is the efficacy of these efforts? Concern was voiced in multiple communities concerning the "public relations" aspect of PI as opposed to its instrumental value in actually heightening the level of awareness of and commitment to undertake mitigation measures. This concern was expressed primarily about the media attention focused on the signing ceremony, where local stakeholders felt that the message about mitigation might have gotten lost in the "glare of the spotlight." It is perhaps to early to try to assess whether these efforts have, in fact, resulted in educating the public about the importance of mitigation. However, if the purpose of PI is to change the culture in the United States concerning the need to reduce disaster losses through mitigation programs, a true public education effort focused on changing not only public awareness and knowledge, but providing motivation for changing behavior is required. Public relations efforts aimed only at popularizing the PI name and some activities won't accomplish this change. Guidance should be provided to these communities in how to develop change-oriented, public educational campaigns that will yield future mitigation actions rather than merely dispositions toward the PI program.

GLOBAL ISSUES

In addition to these findings on progress toward meeting PI objectives, four factors related to the PI process, to organizational structure, or to local political climate were identified that produced some impediments for the local communities in their attempts to respond to PI in the most constructive fashion.

- 1. Local Perceptions of Competence and Understanding-In the initial interactions with the local communities, there was a perception by some of the community residents that FEMA representatives did not believe that the locals had an understanding of mitigation or the underlying need for risk and vulnerability assessments, even though many of them had gone through recent disasters, had developed comprehensive mitigation plans, and had participated in the Hazard Mitigation Grant program. On the other hand, FEMA representatives believed that they had to change local community and emergency management culture that almost exclusively dealt with issues of disaster preparedness and response, and that had little experience with disaster-prevention programs that involved more than just the emergency management department. While there is some truth to both perspectives, the lack of a discourse between these two levels of government to discuss the focus and principals of PI over a sustained period of time led to frustration on the part of FEMA employees and anger on the part of local stakeholders.
- 2. Distrust of Federal Initiatives–Historically, federal (and sometimes state) initiatives and programs have often met with skepticism or hostility by local communities, believing that "big government" was trying to intrude into the ways local governments were dealing with political, economic, and social issues. In recent

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years, the "devolution" of federal programs to local governments was seen as both a way of addressing this perceived imposition, but which also carried with it an unexpectedly high price tag for this autonomy. In several of the pilot communities, past experiences with federal programs, including some of FEMA's, predisposed local government representatives as well as the private sector to be wary of the offer of a "no strings attached" program that encouraged communities to develop their own priorities and programs to reduce their disaster vulnerability. This was an especially difficult issue for FEMA representatives–at both the national and regional levels–to diffuse since they had had no previous experience dealing directly with local communities and their constituents. Although FEMA representatives engaged in "good faith" efforts to explain the program and how it would work, a great deal of skepticism still has to be overcome in some of the local communities before smoothly functioning working relationships can be developed between the regional offices and the local communities.

- 3. The Context of Intergovernmental Relationships-Project Impact is a unique, highly innovative program that was being presented, negotiated, and confirmed (through the development of the MOAs) within a set of intergovernmental relationships, some new and others pre-existing. Because of the inexperience of FEMA representatives with local governments (their previous programmatic relationships had been solely with states), an appreciation for the subtle ways in which cities and their counties interacted was often missing. The identification of a city or a county as a "lead" community often had unanticipated, subsequent consequences for the development of PI, in that some jurisdictions refused to participate or were not allowed to by the other local jurisdiction. In some cases, when states were not involved in the process of selecting a PI community (a situation that may now be resolved), they did not actively become involved with supporting the local community's programs. A sensitivity to these sub-national governmental histories and relationships must be incorporated into future PI administrative actions; the "forcing" of a new program onto these old patterns of governmental relationships will not provide the types of supportive partnerships needed by local governments in their coalition-building efforts.
- 4. Changing an Organizational Culture–In a foresightful way, FEMA recognized the need to change the organizational cultures of local communities and their emergency management agencies if losses from future disasters were to be avoided. Project Impact was the vehicle FEMA identified to provide the motivation to make this change. Yet, FEMA–as an organization itself–must also be prepared to change its organizational culture. Certainly, over the past three years or so, the Agency has structurally re-organized itself in order to focus a considerable amount of its resources and personnel on mitigation, especially at the national headquarters. From this analysis, however, two additional changes are needed in order to provide additional support for local-level mitigation to succeed.

First, additional technical expertise must be made available to the PI communities to assist them in undertaking hazard and vulnerability assessments, and in assisting them with regulatory revisions. While "partners" can be called upon to assist in these efforts, it must be recognized that these are volunteers who are donating their time and talents for the benefit of their communities, but who also have other requirements on their time. Technical expertise, especially in the regional offices, would contribute to the sustained efforts of communities to move toward Objective 3. Second, FEMA could become more pro-active in identifying federal resources or partners to assist communities in their various activities. This requires more than identifying liaisons to various federal agencies; it requires the delegation of responsibility for actually matching local needs with federal programs to enhance the ability of communities to realize their objectives.

In summary, we believe that Project Impact can be successful over the coming years, especially if lessons from the pilot phase are taken into account. The local communities are enthusiastic about this new program, although they need to be given the access to the tools and expertise-not just funding-that will allow them to fulfill Project Impact's goal of becoming disaster resistant communities.