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BUILDING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS TOWARD A
NATIONAL MITIGATION EFFORT: INTER-
ORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATION IN THE
PROJECT IMPACT INITIATIVE

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Building Community Partnerships Toward a National Mitigation Effort: Inter-Organizational Collaboration in the Project Impact Initiative¹

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Abstract

In 1997, the Federal Emergency Management Agency implemented a national disaster mitigation program in seven pilot communities across the United States. This initiative, Project Impact, was soon expanded to over two hundred city, county, and regional designations. Its objectives include 1) to build community partnerships; 2) to identify hazards and community vulnerability; 3) to prioritize and complete risk reduction actions; and 4) to develop communication strategies to educate the public about Project Impact. Based on an analysis of one hundred thirty-seven in-depth telephone and face-to-face interviews, community sites visits, seven focus groups, and an extensive analysis of documentary material compiled as part of an ongoing, independent assessment of the initiative's implementation process, this paper closely examines the first objective – community partnership building – and discusses the issues and challenges involved in establishing such relationships under this program.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In 1995, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) announced the development of a National Mitigation Strategy. This national effort was designed to encourage state and local adoption of mitigation policies and programs in an attempt to reduce the escalating economic and social costs of natural disasters evident in recent events including: the Loma Prieta Earthquake and Hurricane Hugo in 1989; Hurricane Andrew in 1992; the Midwest Floods of 1993, and the Northridge Earthquake in 1994. One year later, Director James Lee Witt convened a set of roundtable discussions that included constituents from outside the traditional emergency management profession such as representatives from local government, national associations, the insurance industry, and the businesses. As a result of these discussions, FEMA launched a new mitigation program in communities across the United States. The program, originally called the Disaster Resistant Communities initiative but better known today as Project Impact, has four major objectives:

1. To build community partnerships
2. To identify hazards and community vulnerability
3. To prioritize and complete risk reduction actions
4. To develop communication strategies to educate the public about the importance of reducing disaster losses.

Project Impact began with seven pilot communities and has since grown to almost two hundred and fifty cities, counties, and regional designations across the United States with promises by the federal government of hundreds more to be named by 2002. The hazards faced by these communities are diverse. For some, earthquakes or

landslides constitute the area's greatest threats while for others floods, hurricanes, tornados, or fires are deemed more hazardous. Project Impact communities vary in geographic location and size, as well as in their demographic characteristics, the degree to which the area is rural or urban, the political tendencies of the institutions and the citizenry, as well as the local culture, attitudes, and behaviors. Indeed, researchers and practitioners from other countries – including New Zealand, Canada, and Turkey – have expressed interest in whether or not the ideas and strategies of Project Impact can be implemented within their own borders.

In some ways, the over-arching goal of Project Impact is not unlike other programs implemented in the United States in recent years. Similar to Project Impact, for example, the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, the Flood Mitigation Grant Program, Water and Waste Disposal Loans and Grants, and Earthquake Mitigation Grant Program all list in their mandate provisions for planning and funding projects that include mitigation activities such as acquisitions, relocations, elevations, structural and non-structural retrofits, and infrastructure improvements. Project Impact, however, endorses additional aspects of the disaster resistance process. In addition to helping communities follow through on actions to make their homes, institutions, and businesses resistant to disaster, this initiative also advocates risk assessment, public education on hazard mitigation, and building partnerships with local government agencies, non-profit organizations, and the private sector. While prioritizing and completing mitigation projects are seen as the cornerstones of building disaster resistant communities, the program's aims are even more ambitious: to “change the

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way [communities] think about disasters" (FEMA 2000). This particular program attempts to shift the focus from *response and recovery* to disaster prevention and mitigation; it strives to change the disaster culture and sub-cultures of communities; and it proposes changes in the way communities organize to deal with disasters and more specifically with disaster mitigation issues. As Associate Director of Mitigation Michael Armstrong explains, FEMA uses Project Impact to encourage communities to "engage local stakeholders on the issues of hazard risk and vulnerability, and gain consensus and support to implement mitigation measures to reduce losses from future disasters. Through public awareness and education, the American public will want – in fact, demand – disaster-resistant communities." (FEMA, 2000). Indeed, public awareness of local hazards, risks, and disaster and how these issues affect each person's safety and security is commonly conceptualized as one of the first steps toward building more resilient communities (Mileti, 1999). Just as good land-use planning combines public education with regulative activities (see Burby & May, 1997, May et al., 1996), it follows that successful mitigation strategies should not divorce their structural and non-structural mitigation efforts from educating the public but instead use education as a means of creating public demand for swift and sound action.

The partnerships component of Project Impact involves a two-pronged strategy. First, communities are encouraged to involve in activity decision-making and planning not just those who are traditionally involved in emergency management issues but rather citizens and organizations from all segments of the city, county, or region. The initiative was designed to serve as a forum to bridge the gap between agencies and improve communication and coordination on mitigation issues. Project Impact is touted by FEMA as a bottom-up mitigation program. Unlike the other federal programs mentioned above, the mitigation strategies and activities are to be developed at the local community level to reflect local needs as well as each community's unique social and political culture (Nigg, et al, 1998).

Second, although FEMA provides seed money – the amount varies from between one hundred thousand dollars to as much as one million dollars – and other resources to designated communities, local participants must meet leveraging guidelines that are outlined by the federal agency; that is, communities must match the funds and resources provided by FEMA with alternative sources of funding. In the case of Project Impact, FEMA does not simply distribute financial grants but instead mandates communities to leverage support from public and private sector partners. This latter objective is rooted in the belief that communities will initially be better able to access local mitigation support if they have federal financial support and eventually, by tapping new funding sources, will find long-term local support for mitigation actions.

The rhetoric of Project Impact holds that through community-based participation in the planning and implementation of mitigation activities, the community as a

whole will become more committed to the idea of disaster resistance, realize and be given voice to express their vested interests in reducing hazardous threats, develop innovative mitigation activities and strategies to educate others in their neighborhoods, and ultimately raise their collective level of expectation regarding their community's ability to minimize and resist its hazards.

This paper takes a closer look at the partnership objective of the Project Impact initiative by outlining the successes and challenges Project Impact communities have faced as well as the recommendations that have emerged for how communities new to the program can better form mitigation alliances within their own jurisdictions. Presented below is a distillation of practical lessons that suggest how best to organize diverse segments of the community around disaster mitigation goals.

2. METHODOLOGY

In Fall, 1997, and with funding from FEMA, the Disaster Research Center (DRC) began an ongoing, independent assessment of Project Impact. Initially, the DRC focused on the seven pilot communities and their efforts to meet the program's objectives. This approach included: (1) identifying the local context within which Project Impact objectives were being addressed; that is, providing a social, political, and disaster profile for each community; (2) documenting the processes within each community initiative, including intergovernmental relationships; and (3) assessing the initial steps being taken to meet each of Project Impact's four objectives.

In 1998 researchers from the DRC interviewed one hundred thirteen key Project Impact participants representing local, state, and federal government, non-profit organizations, and local business and industry. The Center also conducted an extensive collection of Project Impact document material.

In the first year of the assessment, many of the pilot communities were still in the very early stages of developing their action plans, receiving funding, and reaching out to local partners. The information gathered during this first year allowed for the construction of community profiles and provided baseline measures against which we could determine change over subsequent years. Clearly, however, the assessment was concerned with more than the accomplishment of mitigation outcomes; DRC researchers were also interested in Project Impact's implementation process at the local community level. The infancy of the program called for an approach that would be open to newly emerging issues, and, as a result, we decided upon a grounded theory methodology (for a more detailed discussion of grounded theory, see Strauss & Corbin, 1990 and Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Contrary to other approaches that often impose preconceived notions of what is happening onto a social setting, the grounded theory method has the decided advantage of allowing the researcher to discover meaning in a particular setting as social interactions continually change and unfold. The questions researchers asked respondents during the face-to-face interviews were

open-ended and allowed the interviewer the flexibility to explore with the respondent emerging issues. DRC researchers used information gathered from observations, analysis of documents, and conversations with key participants to both construct categories related to the fundamental implementation issues communities faced and integrate new questions based on these emerging issues into subsequent interviews.

In the summer of 1999, the DRC conducted in-depth follow-up interviews with twenty-four key stakeholders in the seven pilot communities in order to track their progress on Project Impact activities, establish whether or not the implementation issues we learned about in the first year of the assessment persisted in second year, and reveal any new challenges in carrying out the initiative. Respondents were asked questions on the following topics: changes in the community 'climate' (e.g., changes in economics, elected political officials and their priorities, and disaster events); changes from Year 1 baseline information; modifications of Year 1 Project Impact activities; partnership statuses (e.g., continuing involvement of Year 1 partners, strategies for new partnership development, partnership momentum), assessment of the integration of Project Impact into community activities; organizational structure of Project Impact; creative ideas; lessons learned; major highlights and challenges; available resources; and future needs. In addition to the in-depth interviews, site visits were made to each pilot community during which DRC staff engaged in further document research and held less formal interviews with those who were especially knowledgeable about Project Impact activities.

At the request of the Director of Project Impact, the Disaster Research Center also conducted focus group interviews in December 1998 and 1999 at the First and Second Annual Project Impact Summit in Washington, DC. For each of the seven focus groups, the DRC assembled between four and nine representatives from communities that had been added to the program since the pilot community designations. In total, forty-five Project Impact stakeholders participated. These focus groups allowed for comparisons of change across non-pilot communities and against pilot community in-depth interviews to determine whether new issues had emerged, whether old issues had been resolved, whether understandings of the Project Impact philosophy had changed, and whether new creative program activities were underway.

From a list of Summit participants made available to DRC by FEMA national staff, focus group participants were selected using a stratified sampling procedure in order to create diversity within each group. The respondents were stratified on the following dimensions: their functional position in the community; the length of time their community had been involved in Project Impact; the type of hazard their community faced; the size of their community; the FEMA regional location of the community; and whether their community was urban or rural. According to Kruger (1998; 1994) a focus group is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perspectives on a defined area of interest

in a non-threatening environment. Instead of attempting to problem-solve or come to a consensus, members of the group are encouraged to express their ideas, feelings, and assessments of the topical areas being considered. Participants were provided with a list of questions prior to their arrival for the groups and asked to share their opinions – be they positive or negative – on various aspects of Project Impact from their own personal perspective.

Discussed below are key findings from the first and second year of the DRC's assessment of Project Impact.² A more detailed discussion of these findings can be found in the project reports prepared by the DRC for FEMA (see Nigg, Riad, Wachtendorf, Tweedy, & Reshaur, 1998; Tierney, 2000; Nigg, Riad, Wachtendorf, & Tierney, 2000; and Wachtendorf, Riad, & Tierney, 2000).

3. RESULTS: BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

3.1 Building Local Partnerships

During the first year of the assessment, the DRC generated partner lists from the Memoranda of Agreement that communities were required to develop, as well as through the extensive community interviews in the pilot communities. In the assessment's second year, these same lists were presented to our interviewees, who were asked to add the names of new partners, delete those who were no longer involved in the initiative, and indicate which partners they considered active in Project Impact activities.

Almost all pilot communities saw a marked increase in partnership participation in Project Impact. The increase was most substantial for local partner involvement.

Local governments employed a variety of approaches to build partnerships with organizations and businesses that had not previously been involved in disaster management. Some communities used existing business associations, local government committees, and consortiums formed to deal with issues other than mitigation as a means to solicit

² In 2000, the third year of the assessment, the DRC continued its follow-up with the pilot communities and expanded its research to look in greater detail at other communities that had enlisted in Project Impact. Researchers visited ten Project Impact sites around the county – one in each federal region – had long discussions with thirty-four of the most active participants in these communities, and toured several project areas where Project Impact mitigation activities had been completed or were currently underway. Four focus groups were held in November 2000 at the Third Annual Project Impact Summit. At the third summit, the DRC used the focus groups as an opportunity to discuss in greater detail some of the important issues that had emerged from previous community interviews and past focus groups. As of January 2001, the DRC was still analyzing data from the assessment's third year. Although anecdotal information from research conducted in 2000 is included in this paper, this article is primarily based on data from the assessment's first and second year.

participation on Project Impact activities. Other communities invited highly visible corporations and enterprises to serve on Project Impact task forces or sub-committees. Several of the community representatives we spoke with reported that local businesses in their areas actually played a major role in coordinating public outreach activities, donating their expertise in mitigation planning and assessments, developing programs to facilitate self-help mitigation projects for local residents (e.g., how to use structural and non-structural methods to reinforce their own homes), developing low-interest loan programs for home retrofit, and providing money to print public education materials. Respondents' partnership expectations included promoting mitigation within these organizations, leveraging resources, and building networks that would promote a common message of disaster resistance.

Some communities tapped into existing associations for ideas about how to expand the initiative and attract partners from all segments of the community. Others decided to focus their attention strictly on business partners. Another strategy communities drew upon was to take an all-hazards approach and diversify the types of activities they undertook – the intention being that different activities would spark an interest for different stakeholders.

Although soliciting participation from existing networks typically helped communities progress through the early stages of the initiative, potential partners that were not in those networks frequently were either not invited or chose not to participate. This was particularly evident in the first year of the assessment. Many of these same respondents revealed they experienced difficulty communicating to their private sector partners about what was expected of them in terms of mitigating community risks and vulnerability. While some of the larger corporations did understand disaster preparedness and emergency response, they did not necessarily understand the concept of mitigation, and, when they were experienced in this area, they often did not think beyond the boundaries of their own properties. In contrast, smaller businesses often had not even taken mitigation steps for their own employees and families and did not have sufficient resources to expend on the Project Impact initiative.

In the second year of the study, participants were more likely to identify other federal agencies such as Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Small Business Administration (SBA), neighboring communities with shared hazards, non-traditional businesses, small businesses, surrounding rural constituents, and historic preservation groups as potential partners with which they wanted to connect. In 1999, respondents stressed the importance of establishing diversity in project committees in an effort to broaden mitigation efforts and address the needs of the whole community. Communities were still struggling with how best to achieve this goal.

Respondents interviewed in the assessment's second year placed greater emphasis on the need to reach vulnerable populations in the community, although this recognition of excluded groups was still not pervasive in the interviews.

Several respondents did, however, stress not only that vulnerable segments of the community should be helped by Project Impact, but also that representatives from these segments of the population should be involved in deciding the direction of the community's Project Impact program. Participants pointed out that despite the need to reach those who are most vulnerable, these members of the community are difficult to engage in activities because vulnerable groups often have other more immediate problems to address. Communities need to make the added effort to develop strategies to attract these vulnerable segments of the population to the initiative and to devise ways to support their participation and presence. As these respondents explained:

When I called around to ask for Project Impact communities to talk to, I talked to only fifty-year-old white males, and when you look around the table at us we're all close, excuse me, all but two of us are close to that category, and I'm going to question that a little bit, only from the standpoint of if we reflect our communities in our planning boards and groups.

One way to spread the message is to conduct some sort of resource inventory...[of the population]. For instance, the part of our community that speaks Spanish is not involved and it needs to be. We have some black members [in Project Impact], but not enough. [We need representation from] the elderly, people who have handicaps, people who can't hear. To me, all of those people should be involved and knowledgeable [about Project Impact] if the program is really to work.

Participants pointed to the importance of reaching out to neighborhood associations as a way of increasing partner diversity. Partners need to be shown how they connect to each other and how working together benefits themselves as well as the community at large. Sometimes, this will involve embracing the different approaches used by the private and the public sector. Other times, community conflict and racial or class-based tensions will have to be overcome. Many of focus group participants felt that the partners currently involved with Project Impact do not adequately represent their communities and that those active in Project Impact need to make a greater effort to reach non-traditional partners. More than a few of the respondents were sensitive to community diversity and were genuinely looking for ways to overcome divisions within their communities.

Community informants reported that making presentations on Project Impact at regular meetings held by local organizations – perhaps taking a half hour of their monthly meetings – was frequently more effective than waiting for potential partners to come to Project Impact meetings or events. One community representative also

suggested a mild “carrot-and-stick” approach to attracting partners:

Developing partnerships is easy for us. I issue permits, big open permits for the city’s offices, and to get the permits out of our office you have to initiate the Project Impact partnership form...We found that very useful. We invite them [permit applicants] to sit down and to at least hear, you know, our Project Impact coordinator’s pitch, and before they leave, normally the permit is complete and they’ve signed up.

Furthermore, underscoring the concept of partnerships, as opposed to regulation and oversight seemed to be an effective strategy to attract businesses to Project Impact. Instead of government departments dictating structural and land-use regulations to the private sector, some Project Impact committees were successful in building partnerships by explaining to businesses that by attending meetings, learning about the risks in the area, and contributing to mitigation decisions, the public and private sectors could work together in a mutually supportive way to make the community more disaster resistant

Holding Project Impact “expos” and “disaster days” was another strategy that was used to engage multiple partners. These events attract media attention, provide businesses with publicity, and are enjoyable events in which partners can participate. Media support is typically instrumental in attracting local partners to the initiative. Expos give partners business and publicity. At the same time, they can be a source of income for the community mitigation initiatives. Several communities charged their partners and contractors to set up booths at these events and used the funds raised to leverage against FEMA’s seed money.

A common perception in discussions about drawing in partners is that many businesses will only become involved in an endeavor such as Project Impact if they find a way that they can benefit from participation. Communities must be effective in pointing out how taking part in Project Impact can provide profits, how mitigating hazards in the community ultimately helps their own interests, or in stressing the value of other benefits, such as publicity and having a positive image in the community.

In both years of the assessment, participants asserted that the partnerships they had developed between schools and local government agencies had strengthened the initiative in their communities. Some communities developed emergency management curricula and individual classes at the universities and college level, while others hired graduate student interns to help on specific activities such as mapping, web page and educational material design, and promotion.

Leadership was a fundamental component of building relationships with partners. In smaller communities, the town mayor or a proactive small business owner commonly proved the best personal contact to elicit a response in the community. For larger cities, a representative from a large

corporation sometimes made a significant contribution. According to our respondents, it was essential to establish key project leadership outside of the city or county government that is willing to aggressively rally community support.

Our study found that the person providing project leadership does not necessarily need to serve as the project coordinator. Indeed, interviews revealed that, in order to successfully implement an ambitious program such as Project Impact, communities needed to hire a full-time coordinator to keep activities moving forward. In communities where the coordinator role was added onto an existing position, we found that this person often was overburdened and experienced difficulty maintaining project momentum. As this respondent clarified:

The work involved in getting the initiative up and running, that is a full-time job, and so to just add this to someone else’s duties doesn’t work out very well. And we struggled with that, passed the ball around to a couple [of] different people trying to get the initiative up and going and finally wised up and hired a full-time coordinator.

A passionate and energetic Project Impact coordinator is important to the initiative’s success; however, the coordinator must be able to delegate responsibilities and tasks to committee chairs, sub-committees, and other partners. Without such delegation, partners see limited involvement, and the long-term viability of the program becomes jeopardized. The coordinator needs skills to facilitate the resolution of inter-agency differences, manage the grant aspects of the program, and match partnership resources with appropriate activities. Moreover, the coordinator needs access to the executive decision-makers of the community in order to garner long-term political support for the initiative. For this reason, it seems that Project Impact is best located in a department other than emergency management such as planning or community development.

Respondents stated that Project Impact communities must identify people within partner organizations who have particular interests, and then connect them with a relevant project or make use of their special skills. Partnerships are more successful, they said, when the partners themselves have a sense of personal involvement, as they will then place Project Impact participation as a priority in their already busy lives. Additionally, the project meetings and activities need to be fun in order to motivate people to remain active. Respondents suggested minimizing the time commitment involved for partners. Subcommittees are one way to encourage broad involvement while minimizing time commitments.

3.2 Building State, Federal, and National Partnerships

Project Impact’s community partnership objective includes building relationships with state, federal, and national

partners in addition to local alliances. The stakeholders we spoke with were concerned about the lack of knowledge many state departments, federal agencies, and national partners seemed to have about Project Impact activities.

When Project Impact was first instituted, FEMA bypassed the state emergency management offices and directly approached the local communities about participation. Although most local communities responded favorably to the direct contact with FEMA, state agencies were isolated in the process. Presently, Project Impact is reconsidering the role of states in the designation and implementation process, but whether or not state governments adopt a more active position, state agencies do have mitigation resources to offer their cities and counties. Federal agencies – such as the Environmental Protection Agency, Housing and Urban Development, and the United States Geological Survey – can also provide resources to communities for mitigation efforts. Local representatives complained, however, that in the early years of the initiative many of these potential state and federal partners were unaware of Project Impact. Often, when communities contacted these partners, the people they spoke with had either never heard of Project Impact or were unable or unwilling to offer assistance. Also problematic was a lack of standardized funding, permitting, and implementation regulations between agencies and programs which created challenges in following through on some mitigation activities. In response to this seeming lack of interest and coordination in the program, communities called for better communication from national head offices to their regional or local representatives and for more information to be distributed on what tangible resources these partners are willing to provide to local communities.

As part of the initiative, FEMA solicited national private sector partners including corporations in the credit, building supply, consulting, computer, and telecommunications industries. Respondents reported that local offices of these national partners are not aware of Project Impact. By the end of the assessment's second year the Project Impact message had not trickled down through national partner agencies to personnel within organizations with which local communities interact. Communities did not know whom to contact within these organizations and also needed information about what national partners were able to contribute at the local level. These five observations contain examples of the problems local Project Impact participants experienced:

We have several national sponsors, but we're trying to get the local part of the national sponsors to play. It's an entirely different game. They don't want to play.

You call them up, they don't know what you're talking about--'Project what?' FEMA needs to do a better job if they're going to negotiate these partnerships at the national level to ensure that the agency understands completely what it is

that we're, that FEMA is asking them to do and what types of support the communities may be looking for and then get that down through the ranks."

FEMA quite often lists the number of national partners that they have. What do these national partners do? They don't help us. Are they helping [other communities]? Are they giving FEMA money? I don't know what they are doing. And the local people... they don't want to play.

Shortly after we were approved for assistance and were told there was another federal agency we could go to for assistance, I called them up and the guy said '...[This project is] not in our budget and, therefore, we can't do it for you.' [In] terms of interagency cooperation [FEMA] could send the word down: 'When you get requests from Project Impact communities for assistance you will do what you need to do to move your money around to give them the assistance, within reason.'

FEMA says 'Oh yeah...we now have [100] national-level partners.' All I have is a list of 100 partners. There's nothing to tell me, except in isolated cases, what [their commitment is]? What can they do for us? What can they do for the community and the initiative? There's no sharing of that information.

3.3 Building Regional Partnerships

In both years of the assessment respondents expressed a desire for regional-level partnerships of various kinds. Activities to address regional hazards that were mentioned by respondents included fostering partnerships with regional organizations, with other Project Impact or non-Project Impact communities in their state, and with neighboring communities.

Many Project Impact communities span more than one political jurisdiction and several actually share a regional designation. When multiple jurisdictions must coordinate on disaster issues, inconsistencies in standardization can cause problems (Wachtendorf, 2000b). Several of the communities visited by DRC researchers had different land-use and building code regulations throughout the Project Impact designated region. For example, a county may have had more lenient structural codes than some of its cities and the land-use regulations in some cities may have been more stringent than other cities within the same Project Impact region. These standardization inconsistencies posed problems between partners because areas within the same region may have already accomplished different levels of mitigation and therefore have different needs. The partners representing similar agencies but from different jurisdictions sometimes utilized very diverse approaches to the same

problem. This respondent explained:

[In the regional communities] they're very independent and are kind of semi-competitive and our biggest problem is working together.

Yet, naming several jurisdictions as one community seems sensible because disasters rarely respect political boundaries and the hazards faced by one area are intricately connected to the planning and decision-making in connecting jurisdictions (Wachtendorf, 2000a). Furthermore, changes at one level of government impact other levels (Waugh & Sylves, 1996). In 1999, many of those interviewed demonstrated a genuine resolve to rise above the competitiveness that often exists within regions, and they saw how Project Impact might actually help this process. Communities who have taken a regional approach reported that because the initiative was not run in a particular city or county – that, in fact, it was a movement that transcended those jurisdictions – agencies were able to overcome some of their historical competitiveness which in turn, hoped these respondents, might spill over to more cooperative interaction on other issues.

Finally, the regional approach was a strategy used by some communities as an effort to include larger corporations in the initiative. In cities where the industry and large businesses lay outside its perimeter in the county, this tactic was particularly beneficial.

3.4 Building Partnerships with other Project Impact Communities

Community representatives felt they needed more information and contact with other Project Impact communities. They believed had not learnt enough from communities that had already been through the Project Impact start-up process. Although some did recognize that FEMA was making an effort to collect and distribute Project Impact success stories, they also argued that much of the distributed information either was primarily for public relations purposes rather than for transferring program development knowledge or the information did not address the complexities of program implementation. Those involved with programs in newer Project Impact communities seemed almost desperate for information about how to develop programs that succeeded, and they expressed frustration about how difficult it was to obtain that information:

We are all reinventing the wheel.

A consultant gave me the brochure from [another community]...I said, 'Whoa, look at that. We just did a lame brochure. I wish I'd had this. It would have been a nice one [to have.]' If FEMA said, 'You've done a brochure, send us 200 of them,' and then distributed them to other communities [that would have been helpful].

But there doesn't seem to be a strategy to share, to make this much more effective instead of every community kind of doing they're own thing. I'm not saying that communities are cookie cutters, because they're not, but there has to be some [basic] information that's the same.

Although FEMA had introduced mentoring programs, distributed tool kits for starting community initiatives, and held sessions at the annual summit where experienced Project Impact communities could share their experiences with those new to the initiative, the stakeholders interviewed by the DRC were still calling for greater information transfer between communities in ways easy to access throughout the year.

3.5 Building Partner Activity Levels

In 1998, respondents reported devoting a great deal of time and energy to attracting partners to the initiative. By 1999, however, they were more concerned with retaining partners and increasing their level of involvement. Communities found that they must seek out partners who will provide useful resources and who want to be actively involved in the program. Respondents noted that it was not productive to have a plethora of partners if most are inactive. If partnering is to have an effect, it must consist of much more than token support for program goals. As these two respondents elaborated:

We have well over two hundred, two hundred fifty partners, people who have signed up. But so much of it is people that have signed up and you don't ever see them again. I mean, how can you not sign up? You have to believe in this but then it's kind of like, how do you get them back?

I thought there was a little competition there among some of the officials in the communities to see who could get the most partners signed on and I have to tell you that it is quality not quantity...I had to say to them, 'No, no, you don't understand the concept here. It's not just to go out and talk to every John Doe you meet on the street and have him sign a piece of paper that he or she wants to be a Project Impact partner.' My God, you know, you've got to be looking somewhat toward people who can contribute somehow to the success of this initiative.

Activities must also be in place in which partners can become immediately involved. Stakeholders we spoke with warned that if the a Project Impact organizing committee does not have an activity or task for partners to contribute to once they are signed, then partners are likely to drop out of the program. When partners are approached to participate in

activities on specific dates, to lend out their facilities, to give discounts, or other concrete contributions, it appears that communities are better able to sustain partnership involvement. Meetings must also have a clear purpose, show progress, delegate tasks for partners to undertake, and set timelines for the completion of those activities.

Group members stressed that it was important for the Project Impact coordinator and the steering committee to know which person within partner organizations they should contact after the signing ceremony. Often an upper-level executive signed the Memorandum of Agreement, but that individual was not necessarily the individual who was responsible for carrying out partnership activities. Overall, respondents revealed the importance of establishing meaningful partnerships with organizations that are truly willing to make a commitment to the program.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, Project Impact communities are finding success in their endeavors to build relationships and partnerships on mitigation issues. The number of Project Impact partners in communities is growing, and partners are often playing an active role serving on committees, leveraging resources, and providing expertise and innovative ideas. Respondents reported a "synergy" associated with the Project Impact; that the program is a useful mechanism with which to mobilize people, resources, and energy. Communities, however, continue to struggle to sustain active involvement from signed partners, bridge the differences in approaches and perspectives often inherent in public/private sector, multi-level government, and interagency collaboration, and engage representatives from agencies not traditionally involved in disaster issues and organizations representing vulnerable or often excluded segments of the community.

Expanding partnerships also has an impact beyond the mitigation initiative in the community. The disaster literature tells us that informal relationships clearly influence the interaction that emerges following a disaster event. Nigg (1997), in her examination of intergovernmental coordination following the 1994 Northridge earthquake, found that instead of following lines of communication outlined in disaster response and assistance plans, governments frequently relied on existing formal and informal relationships developed prior to the emergency. Other researchers found that actual response structuring frequently represents interpersonal ties formed in routine emergencies and pre-event activities more so than it does formal planning for the event itself. (Drabek et al., 1991; Hightower & Coutu, 1996). In fact, the trust, camaraderie, and cooperation formed through interaction during routine periods and serving on interagency boards and committees – even those that focus on non-disaster related issues – can increase the effectiveness of measures and facilitate smooth communication during an emergency (Wachtendorf 1999, Wachtendorf 2000c, Gillespie, 1991). It follows that the partnerships developed under the Project Impact initiative, if sustained, will likely lead to smoother interaction during a disaster.

We should be cautious, however, with our optimism for comprehensive change and collaboration. Although Project Impact strives toward consensus, we should remember that conflict is not uncommon to disaster issues. Indeed, natural disasters are inherently contentious and political (Stallings, 1988). These conflicts or disagreements should not be dismissed nor should they be skirted. As communities work toward agreement on issues, inevitably the interests of some will stand in contrast against the interest of others. How participants balance interests and equities will influence who participates in the initiative in the future, who supports the initiative, and which parts of the community are truly disaster resistant and which are not.

Research on American communities exemplifies the importance of the local culture and social, economic, and political context. The strategies used in some communities are not always successful in others. As more Project Impact communities are named in the United States and, more notably, as other countries begin to use this initiative as mitigation model, local organizers should remember that the strategies they use to solicit and form lasting relationships with partners will largely depend on their own community context.

Finally, Project Impact is now in its fourth year of implementation, although most communities have only participated for a few years. The ambitious goal of Director Witt and FEMA – to change the way we think about disasters – will not be achieved a short period of time. Disaster resistance and sustaining long-term mitigation partnership demands an enduring commitment.

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