Fostering resilience in legacy cities – a case study

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Abstract

American legacy cities had an economically successful though not always sustainable past. Some have come back, adapted or transformed in response to sudden shocks, technological changes, and globalization inflicted severe losses of population, environmental quality and other assets. Others were less well equipped to respond to sudden or slow change: they were less resilient. In these cities, the trajectories of several key quality of life indicators has pointed persistently downward. Such is the case for several cities in Northeast Ohio (NEO). We ask whether and how, in general, declining legacy cities can be reset on a sustainable course and stay on it. Northeast Ohio provides a testing ground for our questions because of an (ongoing) participatory effort to revitalize this region: the Vibrant NEO project. This project is relevant to our general question not only because it attempts to respond at a regional scale to the challenges of declining legacy cities, but also because it aims specifically to help the region become sustainable and resilient. It seeks to generate a regional revitalization plan for 12 adjacent counties for the horizon year 2040. Using documents produced by the project, articles in newspaper and on internet sites as well as interviews with some of the direct decision makers, we examine the approach taken to foster a sustainable, resilient region. The lessons to be derived from this case can inform other efforts to build resilience into declining legacy cities. We also derive some practical insights about scenario building techniques, participatory approaches, and factors that can enhance or detract from the chances for plans to be implemented.

A key component of the Vibrant NEO project is the generation of several scenarios to be submitted to public scrutiny. They are the vehicle through which the project participants plan to explore public preferences for the region’s future as well as specific regional and local alternatives for development of several regional systems (transportation, land use, water supply, energy generation, etc.) that also affect the natural environment. We examine the content of the scenarios and the process by which they are presented to the residents of the 12 counties included in the project. We conjecture that both content and process are critical to the likelihood that the resulting plans will be implemented. With respect to the scenarios’ content, we query for example the selected drivers (building forms at various locations in the region). We explore what the consideration of these or other drivers, such as various climate change consequences and their impact can contribute to regional resilience. Regarding the process of involving residents in the planning decisions aiming to enhance regional sustainability and resilience, we evaluate the quality of information obtained, and its contribution to the implementability of the resulting regional plan. Not least, this case can contribute to our understanding of resilience, adaptation and transformation as they apply to public decisions in a regional space.

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