

LEVERAGING COMMUNITY CULTURAL RESILIENCE TOWARD A NEW LOUISIANA WAY OF LIFE

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Reconstructing Louisiana, Reconstructing Who We Are

The people of Louisiana have a well-documented history of multicultural communities. Whether American and French, African and French, American and Indian, Vietnamese and American, Spanish and American, African and Indian, these mixtures conjure the reality of Louisiana from the indigenous peoples of the Louisiana Territories to the written codes of Napoleon, the influx of African and Afro-Caribbean workforce to the modern world of mainstream America. As we reconstruct Louisiana, it requires all of us to look deeply into the multicultural customs that impact our decisions, our political framework, our economy, our social capital.

There has been a constant culture of resistance toward mainstream America in Louisiana. This code of resistance is what made the region a cultural icon and a tourist attraction, as well as what created a bevy of horrific statistics that defined our quality of life. Katrina and Rita revealed Louisiana's harsh realities. Despite this, transformation has begun. The challenge in reconstructing Louisiana is reconstructing who we are. What is our vision of community as well as an inclusive civic culture? What is our new multicultural existence in mainstream America after a long period of economic dependence? How do we move from marginal, deteriorating systems and neighborhoods to rebuilding communities of opportunity? With pressures from globalization and the knowledge economy increasing, how do we leverage the resilient essence of the people of Louisiana toward an intracommunity and intercommunity model of community economic development?

Resilience as a Community Economic Development Strategy

"A resilient community is one that takes intentional action to enhance the personal and collective capacity of its citizens and institutions to respond to and influence the course of social and economic change"

—*The Community Resilience Manual*

Leveraging a resilient Louisiana requires putting theory into action. Success is contingent upon acknowledging the presence and worth of all citizens. Implementation requires that

no available resource is overlooked to create a spirit of hope. We must not shy away from the historical complexities of the old South, which led to multigenerational, institutional poverty. These issues must be addressed directly with clear purpose and intent. All governmental, institutional, and philanthropic resources must be coordinated and deployed. This region generously gave the nation a buffet of unique cultural spices, sounds, and customs. The rhythm of social capital is this community's bass line. The lives of individuals and the collective soul of the community require commitment to leveraging resilience as a community development strategy.

Building Blocks for a Resilient Louisiana

"Today we can invoke the same logic to declare that extreme poverty can be ended not in the time of our grandchildren, but in our time....Will we have good judgment...to end the suffering of those still trapped in poverty, and to forge a common bond of humanity, security, shared purpose across cultures and regions." – Jeffrey D. Sachs, *The End of Poverty*

Building communities of opportunity in Louisiana can be overwhelming from any viewpoint. Where do we start? The true reality is complexity. We must construct a model utilizing people's resilience while simultaneously acknowledging and leveraging the available assets, organizations, and systems.

The present challenge is how to invest in people in ways that respect their traditions. How we eradicate poverty, embrace literacy, increase high school graduation, and train people toward self-sustainability. A reconstructed Louisiana can instill the spirit of choice, offer an opportunity for all citizens to live, work, play, and learn. Louisiana must reconnect the diaspora to healthy neighborhoods while building communities of opportunity. We must merge culturally based traditional learning with modern access to information to build a citizenry capable of participating in and competing with the emergent global economy.

It is essential for civil society in Louisiana to face the reality of a troubled economy prior to the disaster. The reality Louisiana faces is growing past the economies of the past. We must build a robust economy by investing in innovation that bridges the abundance of creativity and intuitive intelligence in the region's citizenry with the needs of the public- and private-sector marketplaces. We must encourage partnership with existing institutions and

organizations to tap indigenous knowledge and leadership abilities, transfer new knowledge, and build capacity to address multidimensional economic and workforce challenges to eradicate poverty. We must engage in multidisciplinary research and advocacy to explore policy development initiatives, consultations, and convenings that focus on the disparities in the Gulf region and promote and catalyze innovative community development. We have to move past linear thinking to really look at cultural paradigms and resilience to reshape more equitable communities. We have to look at removal of silos between advocate, civic, political, and elected leadership.

Philanthropy has to embrace public policy and do systemic analysis to uncover the weak implementation and connectivity of many organizations. They must dig deeper or what will be written ten years from today will be about wasted opportunity. It must be about tough love, facing race, equity, and moving beyond supporting parochial organizations.

It is imperative in reconstructing Louisiana that we all create systems that enable asset accumulation to sustain healthy, neighborhoods communities and families and improve the lives of those in poverty as well as their neighbors of all incomes Implementing proven community development financing models will provide access to needed capital in devastated neighborhoods in the region by the development vehicles for economic development and entrepreneurship.

Louisiana is a culture where intuition and rituals mattered more than anything written on any piece of paper. The African American community has never seen itself as having choices. This is a first time many folk at all levels will participate in political and civic culture. They must be able to see themselves in the big picture. When historically oppressed, it's hard to see past the walls. We cannot be too busy to work through these issues. This is the chance to build the great authentic society of our lifetime.

Restoration of relationships is critical to reconstructing Louisiana. These social relationships serve the needs of the whole population. There is room for us to reconstruct with a sense of balance, knowledge, and equity. However, we must support a paradigm shift to return a collective sense of pride to civic duty and responsibility. It is imperative that we refocus distressed and fragmented resources toward building a region governed responsibly for all citizens and visitors alike.

Closing

Leveraging community cultural resilience requires an investment in people, organizations, systems, and civic culture. One without the other will stifle the reconstruction of Louisiana. There are success stories, mechanisms, equitable policy, and initiative to make this happen. Feeding a starved community with this transfer of knowledge and hope is paramount in building communities of opportunity.

In hurricane season, what sits at the front of every man, woman, or child's mind is whether a named storm becomes evil at landfall and will wipe away the already broken memories of youth. Yet, on every day in which hope and healing occurs, there is possibility. This is the one community of opportunity to test all theories, best practices, right the wrong, temper greed for the greater good, come to grips with privilege and race, while building a community where everyone has the possibility to safely live, work, play, and learn.

The reality is that as we reconstruct Louisiana we enter into a new code of participation through engagement and building resilience for all its citizens, for all sectors of community for the first time. It is a platform to dramatically improve the lives of all citizens. It will take some time, have some bumps and bruises along the way, but there is no turning back. This is Louisiana: a culture, a custom, a way of life.