

Miami Convening on Habitat III

Miami, Florida

June 13, 2016

The Miami Convening on Habitat III took place at the University of Miami on June 13th, 2016. The event was sponsored by the AARP Foundation and was attended by 100 people who participated in discussions on building resilient communities, in urban settings across the globe. The main areas of discussion involved the following topics: Responding to Change and Building Resilience; Securing Housing Options for All; Turning High School Neighborhoods into Resilient Communities (a panel composed of local high school students); and finally, Investing in People and Communities for Upward Mobility. Here are the recurring themes that emerged from the discussions:

Session Highlights

- *Mitigate or adapt but do not deny or ignore:* The clear and supreme challenge to Florida with regard to building physical resilience is the projected sea level rise. The porous nature of our land makes building sea walls and levees a relatively fruitless enterprise. The seeping salt water from the ocean and gulf which threaten our fresh water system (so reliant on the Everglades) poses engineering puzzles which are difficult to solve. The water also bubbles up from the ground making inland flooding a major concern as well, particularly during the times of the year where we suffer King Tides. Efforts are underway to mitigate these effects, and models being developed and implemented by Miami Dade County and the City of Miami Beach were discussed by several experts on the panel. The flooding also poses many challenges for developers constructing buildings as many geographic areas in south Florida will be impacted by sea level rise that heretofore have considered themselves safe because they are located “inland”. This is especially acute for affordable housing developers who struggle to finance construction that will remain affordable to its residents, and also accessible for the disabled and elderly populations. It is also often difficult and costly to be compliant with local zoning requirements while attempting to design and construct facilities that are physically resilient. Competing local priorities complicate local resource allocation decisions; often times creating unintended obstacles and barriers which add time and cost to the development process that must be ameliorated with sound decisions. As an example, building codes and zoning requirements established to provide protections and resilience in the event of catastrophic events such as hurricanes, may create financial stresses to the economics of providing affordable housing opportunities for all.
- *Educate, educate, educate:* This theme was highlighted especially by the high school student panelists who focused attention on the behaviors of humans which exacerbate the impact of our natural resource abuse. Their contention was passionately delivered and reinforced by research indicating how the United States in particular wastes some of the planets most precious resources; such as fresh water. It is their firm belief that we must find ways to better inform the public, young and old, of the effect their accepted and normal behaviors have on their living environment. Raw data will only help change behaviors if that data is presented in a manner graphic enough that the stark destination at the end of the road upon which we are travelling is understandable to people, including to

those elected officials making decisions about how we spend our money and enacting laws which govern our behaviors. Panelists also stressed that people in the general population need to be educated about how important green spaces are to the ecology, and simultaneously also to residents of communities as well. Biking and walking trails contained within open green spaces and parks enhance the quality of life for everyone. One of our panelists described this education process as convincing our leaders to embrace the “Urgency of Now” into the entire discussion of building resiliency.

- *Engage the voices of the voiceless:* Almost every panel indicated the need to include as a key element of successful local strategic planning, input from the local experts; otherwise known as existing residents and stakeholders of neighborhoods and communities. A unique aspect of the Miami convening was to include high school students in our deliberations in a way that provided a venue and opportunity for their voices to be heard and incorporated into the information provided to the Secretary, who is scheduled to lead the U.S. Delegation in Quito. As the world looks forward to the year 2050 in what the Secretary refers to as the Century of Cities, those of high school age today will be the decision makers of tomorrow. Engaging them and inspiring them to believe they can make a difference in shaping their future world is an important piece of the puzzle. A puzzle that we hope will be solved by people of their generation. The students were engaged first in a charrette hosted and sponsored by the same generous entities that made the convening possible, and included 80 high school students in a full school day session on the UM campus. The students and other panelists stressed that even in a data driven society, local participation that helps to inform the data, turning it into usable knowledge is a vitally important piece of solving that puzzle. An environment that values community participation and engagement, is an empowering element that leads to more accurate problem identification, and produces more impactful results. The people who know best are often those who are impacted directly by the conditions under which they are living; and they are often not included in the conversations that inform decision makers about potential options for mitigation and/or adaptation.
- *Equitable distribution of assets and opportunities is a must:* While the provision of affordable housing options for all was universally expressed as a baseline requirement of resiliency, it was also emphatically stressed that housing alone is not sufficient. Truly resilient communities have to provide opportunities for upward mobility for its residents. Strategies for developing mixed-income housing opportunities were discussed and best practices were shared with regard to building in adaptive ways to account for the present and projected environment. The realities of the costs associated with building in that fashion were also shared and solutions such as the inclusionary zoning ordinance being considered by Miami Dade County were raised as well. The key to being successful in resiliency efforts however, as expressed by several panelists, is for policy makers and resource allocators to place the word “equitable” in front of every desired outcome and objective. So localities should think in terms of equitable housing and community development; equitable access to jobs and health care; equitable consideration of transportation options and their connectivity to general affordability and essential services; equitable distribution of available assets for those populations that are most vulnerable, including the elderly; equitable access to technology and information; and

most of all, equitable access to the process of decision making regarding the futures of the communities in which people reside.

Many more topics were discussed throughout the day but these themes were the ones that seemed to resonate the most with the assembly. The message to everyone, as expressed by the President of the AARP Foundation, was that we should strive to become Agents of Opportunity; in words and deeds!