

# **Collaborative Innovation Builds Global Social Resilience for Climate Change**

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Can you recall a time when the need for global social resilience against environmental challenges has been greater? Where global communities are more challenged to harness their talent, creativity and passion to preserve and protect what is most dear in nature? Climate change is forcing communities to assess their readiness for confronting the increasingly frequent environmental disruptions that transform sea coasts, consume forests and take human life.

Remarkably, a dozen years have passed since *An Inconvenient Truth* was published and there are many global communities that still lack the leadership, process or infrastructure to successfully combat these imminent environmental catastrophes. Global climate change headlines have been generated from places as far-reaching as Cape Town's drought to Venice's sea-level rise to the lethal forest fire in Paradise, California. Once-a-century events, seemingly, occur multiple times a year.

Why is this? For many communities, it is, simply put, a lack of visionary leadership. Many elected politicians and administrators are too distracted by today's "To Do" list to recognize that sea level rise is about to permanently change their coastline and, in the process, make their roads, hospitals, transportation hubs and commercial businesses inaccessible. Or, a nearby forest has produced a looming swath of combustible kindling - ready to explode. And, in California today, millions of people go without power because of the threat of a spark producing the next record-breaking forest fire. (Can a power black-out for millions really be our best defense against this type of environmental disaster?)

What's a community to do? One proven approach is for the community to tap into the unleashed potential of the community for *collaborative innovation*. Communities in the US and abroad have had great success with processes that facilitate and foster collaborative innovation. These processes tap into a community's latent potential for positive change by harnessing the creativity of individuals to envision breakthrough solutions for the future while spawning fresh solutions

for the present. Using this approach, the community produces a portfolio of climate change innovations, ranging from incremental to breakthrough.

To paraphrase Ted Levitt, former Harvard Professor and Harvard Business Review Editor, *“Just as energy is the basis of life itself, and ideas the source of innovation, so is innovation the vital spark of all sustainable human change, improvement and progress.”*

Another “unfortunate truth” is that people want “progress”, but not “change”! This often results in a social inertia that prevents both “change” and “progress”. Collaborative innovation embraces “change” to achieve a preferred future through new thinking, foresight and future-back planning for effective execution. Policy makers, citizens, experts and implementors are all collaboratively engaged in a process that ensures alignment on action and impact. Indeed, for virtually all environmental challenges, sustainability equals collaborative innovation!

The Dutch are, perhaps, the best example of marrying technical expertise in water management with “*extreme collaboration*” of multiple stakeholders to innovate breakthrough solutions that eliminate the threat of sea level rise. And, in the process, they create new value with public spaces, such as parks, recreational areas and gardens. The Dutch have learned to focus on the “opportunity” which accompanies the threat versus only on the threat. The typical approach of others leans toward react and repair instead of the more proactive Dutch strategy of proactive prevention. Their “Dutch way” has now been introduced in the U.S. in preparation for the next Sandy level Superstorm on parts of the East Coast.

Foresight is key. Tim Brennan, a Massachusetts Regional Planner for four decades, believes that successful planning requires leadership to *“have one foot firmly planted in the present and one foot firmly planted 20 years into the future!”* As with a bi-focal lens, leadership is balancing its attention on today AND tomorrow. With climate change, this is even more critical, since most reports suggest the climate disruptions are happening faster, not slower.

Climate change is relentless and demands more than just solutions to problems, it demands *social resilience* that will continuously innovate to evolving challenges. How resilient will your community be to the imminent disruptions of climate change? Social resilience is the developed capability of a community to envision and realize a preferred future. It blends competent,

passionate leadership with an engaged community working together. The process for collaborative innovation inspires a better future for the environment and the community.

Social resilience developed and sustained through collaborative innovation is a “grassroots” movement to make things better for the community and the environment it inhabits. It is the citizenry owning the future for themselves. Importantly, when it comes to social resilience, people support the future they help to create.

There are a growing number of successful case examples where communities have engaged collaborative innovation to build social resilience with a future focus on climate change. The Bay Area around San Francisco is an excellent case in point. *"Rather than wait for a natural disaster, the San Francisco Bay Area is proactively reimagining a better future by creating a blueprint for resilience that harnesses Bay Area innovation and serves as a model for communities around the world."*

San Francisco and Bay Area leaders created a *“year-long Collaborative Design Challenge bringing together local residents, public officials and local, national and international experts to develop ‘Innovative Community-Based Solutions’ that will strengthen our region’s resilience to sea level rise, severe storms, flooding and earthquakes.”*

Similar to San Francisco and the Bay Area, Norfolk, Virginia has coordinated the efforts of over 40 public policy groups, government agencies, commercial businesses and nonprofits to create a preferred future blueprint for their 244 miles of coastline vulnerable to climate change.

This effort has received the support of the Rockefeller Foundation’s global 100 Resilient Cities Challenge. This program helps a city attract private financing to assist with resilient infrastructure projects. It provides a Chief Resilience Officer and a network across the 100 cities to share information and new ideas - the opportunity for global collaborative innovation to build social resilience for climate change.

From these examples and others, our experience suggests that the basic recipe for harnessing collaborative innovation to build social resilience is blending the “right (diverse) expertise” with the “right (grassroots) stakeholders” in the “right (collaborative) environment” using the “right (innovation) process”.

For communities that commit to developing a capability for collaborative innovation and build social resilience to combat climate change, there is a significant bonus. The same capability and the same social resilience developed for climate change can be the source of new solutions for other social challenges confronting the community. This social innovation engine can also be aimed at affordable housing, job growth, community services, drug addiction, homelessness, poverty and illiteracy. Just imagine what might happen if more people were given the opportunity to create their community's future through collaborative innovation.

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Bob helps his clients pursue innovative growth opportunities and elevate their existing practice for company-wide innovation. For more than 40 years, he has been helping organizations unleash their creativity and innovation to achieve dramatic growth and new vitality. Bob is the author of numerous articles on innovation and the book, *The Power of Strategy Innovation: A New Way of Linking Creativity and Strategic Planning to Discover Great Business Opportunities*, with Doug Bate. He has lectured on innovation at the Harvard Business School, Brown University, Duke's Fuqua School of Business and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and quoted on his work by Fortune, INC., Industry Week, Entrepreneur, the Journal of Creative Behavior, and CIO magazine. He is a past President and Board Chairman of the *Product Development and Management Association* and in 2017 accepted their invitation to rejoin the board. Bob has been inducted into the Creative Education Foundation's Hall of Fame, having served on their board for eight years.

