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A man shines a flashlight on standing water inside the South Ferry 1 subway station in New York, in the wake of Superstorm Sandy. // Craig Ruttle/AP

The Rise, Fall, and Possible Rebirth of 100 Resilient Cities

LAURA BLISS JUNE 12, 2019

Internal communications shed new light on the Rockefeller Foundation's decision to stop funding the global climate nonprofit, and hint at what might come next.

In late April, at a town-hall meeting in New York City, Raj Shah, the president of the Rockefeller Foundation, addressed the staff of 100 Resilient Cities. The nonprofit, launched by the philanthropy in 2013, has helped cities around the world plan for natural disasters and social shocks, especially the ravages of climate change.

Earlier that month, the foundation had abruptly announced plans to shutter the program. Now Shah was explaining why.

"This is not about whether 100 Resilient Cities works," Shah said. "It's a shift in the foundation's focus to delivering measurable results for vulnerable people ... with a budget framework that works."

In a video recording later viewed by CityLab, a few people who dialed in from satellite offices were broadcasted at the bottom of the screen, their expressions grim. By August 1, the organization's 86 employees would be out of a job. In city halls around the globe, officials who'd come to rely on their support wondered how they'd keep climate-prep initiatives afloat, including the hiring of hundreds of "resilience officers."

But now plans are being hatched to advance some of 100RC's work beyond its expiration date. Last week, the nonprofit's president, Michael Berkowitz, told staff that he and a group of soon-to-be-former 100RC officers were preparing to start a new nonprofit with the mission of helping cities implement resilience projects.

What's more, the Rockefeller Foundation has confirmed that it may keep some elements of the 100 Resilient Cities program alive.

These are significant turns of events from just a few weeks ago, when the future of 100RC looked bleak, despite its well-regarded status in climate-planning circles. For local governments, the whiplash may be a reminder of the risks of relying on private dollars to create public policies.

Established in 2013 by the Rockefeller Foundation in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and Superstorm Sandy, 100 Resilient Cities was born out of the idea that local governments needed help planning for disasters and combating persistent social maladies. Across a network of more than 100 global member cities—from New York to New Orleans, Rome to Ramallah, Montevideo to Montréal—the group underwrote salaries for chief resilience officers, shepherded resilience plans, and supplied local leaders with ideas, financing, and technical assistance.

FEMA Administrator Brock Long addresses a plenary session as 100 Resilient Cities President Michael Berkowitz looks on at a meeting of the National Governors Association in July 2017. (Stephan Savoia/AP)

While the nonprofit was best known for climate adaptation plans, its work encompassed much more. For example, in Boston, leaders defined resilience as breaking down structural racism. In Panama City, it was about improving mobility. A city became “resilient” by identifying virtually any social and infrastructural fault line that a shock might expose. Change was measured on a long-term basis. In contrast to other nonprofits that give grants for specific projects, the 100RC model was unusually flexible.

But in April, the Rockefeller Foundation suddenly announced that it would discontinue its funding for 100RC, which had amounted to \$164 million to date. Leaders said that they planned to “transition” the nonprofit’s work by setting up a new office at the foundation focused on economic resilience, and by funding the resilience efforts of the Atlantic Council, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank. Little explanation was given publicly, but foundation leaders later offered staff a two-part rationale: As it existed, 100RC had grown too costly, and its model no longer aligned with Rockefeller’s goals.

That shift was partly due to new leadership. Shah started as president of Rockefeller in 2017, after serving as the chief administrator of the federal U.S. Agency for International Development. It was his predecessor at Rockefeller, Judith Rodin, who helped design the resiliency program and spun it off as a grantee of the foundation. At the meeting in April, Shah told 100RC staff that he had promised the foundation’s board that he would focus on quantifying the impact of Rockefeller’s investments at the level of individual lives.

For example, he said, one of the foundation’s new goals was to save 6 million lives by improving maternal and children’s health through the use of predictive analytics, especially in developing countries. Another target was to bring renewable power and solutions to 200 million people who live in “energy poverty.”

“That was a big pivot for the Rockefeller Foundation, which had been focused on new ways of thinking about finance and resilience and inclusive economies in a more conceptual way,” Shah said. “That is great, but this is a different direction.”

Indeed, 100RC’s open-ended model was at times a weakness, said Carlos Martín, a senior fellow in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute, who authored a series of evaluations of the program. “The value and benefit is that it’s up to the city to decide what the most critical shocks are,” he said in an interview with CityLab in April. “The negative is that you have a gazillion things going on.”

And while academic research supports the theory of building urban resilience through institutional change, it was challenging to measure short-term results directed by the program, Martín found. Emails sent among 100RC staff in February that were viewed by CityLab pointed to the pressure that the nonprofit was under from the Rockefeller Foundation to identify “marketable evidence” of their impact.

But 100RC achieved many points of positive impact, according to Martín's report, and it defined the "urban resilience" movement to date. Many member cities continued to employ a chief resilience officer after their original grant to do so ran out. Leaders described a shift in their way of thinking after engaging with 100 Resilient Cities; they were better able to connect ongoing social challenges to pressing infrastructure needs, the evaluation found. Nearly 80 "resilience strategies" that outline ideas for public-works projects and economic-development strategies reflect this, and more are still being released.

Resilience officers around the world also extol the benefits of having a network of like-minded colleagues. Those relationships were "the most powerful thing that Rockefeller has created," Piero Pelizzaro, the chief resilience officer of Milan, told [CityLab in April](#). "Our daily exchange with other CROs and the mutual learning that went on let us make improvements every day."

More recently, 100RC had also pivoted to [helping implement city plans](#), shepherding projects like reinforcing old masonry in Wellington and building green "oases" in Paris schoolyards.

Apart from their philosophical differences, however, Rockefeller Foundation leaders also had financial concerns about 100RC. At the staff meeting in April, Shah explained that the nonprofit had spent an average of \$30 million to \$40 million annually in recent years, and that the run rate that Rockefeller would have preferred was \$5 million to \$6 million. Starting in late 2018, the foundation had begun to look for outside sponsors to support 100 Resilient Cities, Shah said. But he had judged that the odds of finding adequate funding were slim.

"These decisions were about budget balance, and not about the work that 100RC has done," said Steve VanRoekel, the chief operating officer of the Rockefeller Foundation, who sat next to Shah at the meeting.

But these numbers took senior staff at 100RC by surprise. In emails and slides viewed by CityLab, Rockefeller Foundation officers indicated plans as recently as January to provide another \$50 million in funding over the next several years, and that 100RC had projected lower annual spending into the future.

There was also at least one sign of faith from an outside supporter. According to an email sent from the [Macquarie Group](#) to 100 Resilient Cities and viewed by CityLab, the nonprofit was a semifinalist for a \$10 million (AUS) [philanthropic award](#) from the Australian investment bank, until it was disqualified after Rockefeller's announcement that it would shutter.

If staffers launch a new resilience venture, the idea would be to work on a project-by-project basis, rather than across a network of cities. The proposed nonprofit would also rely on multiple funders, not just one, a resiliency lesson that 100RC learned the hard way. A formal announcement of this venture is expected in July, Berkowitz told staff.

The Rockefeller Foundation, one of the oldest and largest U.S. philanthropies, maintains \$3.7 billion in assets. It has also said it plans to keep “resilience” as part of its portfolio. It is currently [hiring for a new managing director of climate and resilience](#), and has granted the [Atlantic Council](#) with \$30 million to launch the Adrienne Arsht-Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center. Another \$12 million grant will support and transition the members of the 100 Resilient Cities network out of the program, Matt Herrick, who was then the foundation’s director of communications, told CityLab in April.

But now the Rockefeller Foundation is holding out the possibility to maintain the 100RC name and network in some fashion, according to Nick Spence, a communications officer. VanRoekel has been engaged in talks with a group of chief resilience officers from around the world who want to see a future for their collaborative. “As the next phase of our climate and resilience work begins to take shape, we are excited for what lies ahead,” VanRoekel said in an email to CityLab.

The foundation declined to provide further detail.

The potential continuity of 100RC’s work may be reassuring to some of those rocked by the abrupt announcement of its demise. That includes not only its staff, but officials in city halls around the world. Against climate change’s hydra-headed environmental and social catastrophes (and, in some countries including the U.S., the absence of a meaningful national response), local governments on six continents had come to rely on the resources and pull of 100RC to steady themselves.

And few were consulted prior to the Rockefeller Foundation’s decision to pull the plug. As CityLab [reported in April](#), the program’s sudden shuttering may be a sign of the risks of the public sector using private funds to plan for serious threats. The work of readying cities for a profoundly uncertain future is vast, said Marissa Aho, the chief resilience officer of Houston, which joined as the 101st member of 100RC one year after Hurricane Harvey. Aho has been involved in the recent talks with the foundation to help the network of resilience officers survive.

“It is very clear that this work is just beginning globally,” Aho said. “There need to be many, many entities supporting it.”

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