

Large-Scale Citizen Engagement and the Rebuilding of New Orleans

A Case Study

BY CAROLYN J. LUKENSMEYER

Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, leaving hundreds of thousands without homes and dispersing residents across the country. The storm also exposed historic tensions of race and class, and it produced deep mistrust of public officials and institutions. Rebuilding the city has been, and will continue to be, a task of enormous proportions. Yet after a number of unsuccessful attempts, New Orleans is close to approving a blueprint for recovery that finally unites the city behind common priorities.

Through massive and intensive outreach and planning efforts, the Unified New Orleans Plan—developed in just five months—brought thousands of citizens together with planners and officials in an unprecedented effort that engaged the full diversity of the city. The story of the Unified Plan demonstrates the power of large-scale citizen engagement. It shows how citizens and decision makers can work together on matters of complex policy, where resources are inadequate, and come to shared views that establish a viable path forward. It is also the story of how citizen engagement can bring back a devastated community's sense of wholeness and renew its hope.

The national nonprofit organization *AmericaSpeaks* played a central role in securing active and diverse participation in the Unified Plan process. Citizens living in New Orleans and those dispersed by the storm across the country were brought together to participate in a truly citywide conversation. The process ensured the public's role was substantive, representative, and intrinsic to the outcome.

Within the field of civic engagement, the work of the Unified Plan represents an advance in practice on several dimensions. It secured substantial and repre-

sentative participation in a “hardest case” environment, it drew participation on a geographic scale few had previously attempted, and it gave voice to those who had been most disenfranchised.

This case study reviews the challenges in undertaking large-scale citizen engagement in post-Katrina New Orleans, and the extraordinary efforts made to ensure every voice was included in recovery planning. It offers an overview of the methodology used, highlights the impact of the work, and explores implications for the field.

Background

Hurricane Katrina shattered the city of New Orleans, exposing many of the deep racial and economic disparities this nation has long ignored. More than four hundred thousand people fled New Orleans during and after the hurricane, becoming separated from their families, homes, and communities as they were dispersed across the country.

The Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina

Eighteen months after the hurricane, more than half of the city's population still has not returned. The fifty thousand people who remained in the city have struggled to survive. All these citizens of New Orleans have faced, and continue to face, untold challenges in reconstructing their lives.

In addition to the human tragedy, much of the city's infrastructure was decimated by Katrina: more than 70 percent of housing was damaged, with entire neighborhoods virtually destroyed; schools, hospitals, and police stations were shut down; and almost one hundred thousand jobs were lost. New Orleans's outdated water and sewer systems were ravaged by

the storm; the electrical grid incurred \$161 million in damages. The transit authority lost two of its three maintenance facilities, more than 50 percent of its buses, nearly half of its streetcars, two-thirds of its vans, and 60 percent of its workforce. The port, a major source of revenue, had \$164 million in damage. Destruction in every sector combined to create financial and other losses on a scale virtually unimaginable.

In this chaos, decision makers at every level scrambled in crisis mode and quickly found themselves to be in conflict about rebuilding priorities and how to proceed.

Early Struggles to Involve Citizens in Planning

The failure of public officials at all levels to respond quickly and effectively to the hurricane and flooding, as well as the disparities along racial lines in how New Orleanians fared in the immediate aftermath, resulted in intense damage to citizens' trust in government. Furthermore, the central issue in rebuilding was extremely charged. Early discussion of how and where to rebuild, given the new realities of high flood risk, low population, extreme infrastructure damage, and so on, created significant conflict in the community. Many citizens felt threatened by proposals to restrict where rebuilding could take place and openly protested any suggestion that displaced residents not be able to return to their homes.

As a result of these dynamics, early recovery planning efforts were met with suspicion, anger, and protest. One month after the hurricane, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) initiative convened an elite, appointed commission to oversee a team of external planning experts. Without public consultation, the planners proposed not rebuilding many neighborhoods on the basis of flood levels. The BNOB plan faced great public opposition, lost momentum, and could not go forward. Following this, the New Orleans City Council's Lambert Plan, though praised for its

neighborhood-level participation process, did not have the funding necessary to consider the larger, citywide issues. As a result, it was not able to fully respond to the city's recovery needs.

Understanding the Challenges

In the wake of these efforts, the parameters of what it would take to launch and sustain recovery planning in New Orleans became clearer. A successful effort would have to produce a coherent, collective view about citywide (as well as local neighborhood) priorities in a very short time frame. Representative participation of those still living in the city, as well as those dispersed around the country, would have to be secured. Sufficient participation would be possible only by acknowledging and overcoming a number of substantial challenges, among them a local culture unaccustomed to strong public participation, extreme skepticism, fatigue among citizens when it came to planning efforts, and a recently intensified legacy of racial mistrust and socioeconomic division.

Finally, given the urgency of the situation on the ground, any new process would have to move quickly and simultaneously citywide and in planning districts. In the spring of 2006, officials began to conceptualize a strategy for addressing these many challenges.

The Unified New Orleans Plan

That summer, following months of intensive negotiation, the mayor, the city council, the city planning commission, and the Louisiana Recovery Authority (the governor's appointed body) endorsed a new recovery planning process for New Orleans. The foundation-funded Unified New Orleans Plan would be run by the Greater New Orleans Foundation and overseen by the Community Support Organization—an advisory board comprising neighborhood representatives and delegates from the mayor's office, the city council, and the city planning commission.

The Unified Plan would address all citywide systems, tackling infrastructure needs such as housing, flood protection, transportation, and public services. In the process, it would strengthen public awareness and understanding of what recovery involved. Large-scale active participation in the Unified Plan process, it was hoped, would give credibility to the rebuilding priorities that emerged.

The Unified Plan process was to operate simultaneously district by district and citywide. At the district level, eleven planning firms would work with thirteen planning districts on four rounds of meetings aimed at establishing recovery priorities for each of the city's neighborhoods. Three citywide citizen meetings would prioritize action steps on overarching issues such as flood protection, housing, schools, hospitals, utilities infrastructure, etc. The final product would be an amalgam of the recommendations culled from these participatory processes and would also incorporate the results of all previous planning efforts.

The urgent need to revive the city left a remarkably short time frame for this work: the citywide and thirteen district plans were to be completed—with full community participation—in less than five months.

Every Voice Must Count

Recognizing the need to engage the full diversity of the citizenry sufficiently to ensure credibility of results, the foundation overseeing the planning process invited a national nonprofit organization with considerable experience in this area to assist the Unified Plan team. *AmericaSpeaks* would work with planners to fully engage the New Orleans community and use its 21st Century Town Meeting methodology to substantially expand and deepen citizen participation in the process. Because of the compressed time frame, *AmericaSpeaks* was not able to assist with outreach for the first of the three citywide citizens' meetings held on October 28, 2006. Limited outreach for the meeting meant that

only about three hundred attended, and few were from the low-income African American communities that had been disproportionately affected by the storm.

Critical goals, then, for the subsequent citywide citizen deliberations were to bring in a large, demographically representative group of citizens, and also to figure out how to find and authentically engage those New Orleanians evacuated to other places. A strong desire for inclusion of the dispersed was consistently voiced by citizens and leaders alike. This desire, it turned out, was not simply a plea for equity but also an expression of people's deep need for healing, reconciliation, and hope as they faced a long and difficult road ahead.

A Massive Outreach Effort

In preparation for Community Congress II, to be held on December 2, 2006, and Community Congress III, set for January 20, 2007, *AmericaSpeaks* worked in close partnership with more than fifty local organizations to undertake a massive outreach campaign aimed at registering thousands of citizens in New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Houston, Dallas, and Atlanta.

In addition to simply generating large numbers of registrants, outreach efforts were specifically aimed at capturing a demographic that matched, as closely as possible, the pre-Katrina population of New Orleans. African Americans represented about 67 percent of the pre-Katrina population, whites 28 percent, Hispanics 3 percent, and Asians 2 percent. About 37 percent of pre-Katrina New Orleanians had annual income below twenty thousand dollars.

Establishing partnerships with groups and organizations already well known and trusted in the various local communities was a critical first step. Key early partners in New Orleans included ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), All Congregations Together, Jeremiah Group, People's Hurricane Relief Fund, People's

Organizing Committee, Common Ground, Bright Moments, EboNetworks, NOLA Network, Committee for a Better New Orleans, and the Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana. Each organization had been active in both New Orleans and the diaspora cities, and some were able to supply community organizers and outreach workers in more than one location.

In Atlanta, among the active partners were the Urban League, United Way, Project Hope, the Red Cross, Catholic Charities, the Salvation Army, and the Regional Council of Churches of Atlanta. In Houston, partners included the United Way, the Metropolitan Organization, Children’s Defense Fund, Red Cross, and People’s Organizing Committee; in Dallas there were Dallas Area Interfaith, Community Council of Greater Dallas, North Texas Workforce, Central Dallas Ministries, and Catholic Charities.

In addition, myriad neighborhood associations, professional groups, and social service agencies helped reach out to, and register, members of their communities. Outreach work entailed traditional activities such as phone banking, e-mail alerts, newsletter announcements, and door-to-door canvassing in high-concentration areas. In addition, a number of unique—and, as it would turn out, highly successful—strategies were employed:

- In Houston and Atlanta, parties for New Orleanians, featuring food from back home and the New Orleans Saints on TV, drew big crowds.
- In New Orleans, outreach workers attended “First Friday” gatherings (a social networking meeting for young African American professionals) in the month before Community Congress II.
- In New Orleans’s Treme Neighborhood, organizers for the Episcopal Diocese held a parade using the city’s traditional “second-line” format—walking through the streets, playing music, and inviting others to join in behind the band. Organizers marched, distributed information, and registered people as they went.

- Tulane University offered service-learning credits for students who participated in the process. Seventy students took advantage of this offer.
- Public service announcements featuring celebrities, such as Wynton Marsalis, and prerecorded phone messages from Mayor Nagin were also effective. Almost a quarter of the people who received a call from the mayor indicated they wanted to register for Community Congress II.

Regular review of registrant demographics allowed the outreach teams to shift focus as the numbers for any population group lagged. During the event itself, transportation, free meals, child care, and translation into sign-language, Spanish, and Vietnamese enabled many who might otherwise have been left out to sign up and participate.

Simultaneous with participant registration was the need to engage hundreds of volunteer facilitators to lead table discussions in New Orleans, Houston, Atlanta, Dallas, Baton Rouge, and sixteen other cities. To accomplish this, *AmericaSpeaks* drew on its extensive national network of volunteer facilitators and interested organizations. Facilitators were trained in-person or through conference call sessions with an online component. In the end, 350 facilitators supported table discussions at Community Congress II, and 150 at Community Congress III. Many of these facilitators (44 percent at the former and 69 percent at the latter) traveled, on their own expense, from around the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom to volunteer their time and skills.

Elected officials and other key decision makers were also engaged in the outreach process. This proved important for two reasons. Their participation enhanced the credibility of the event, and it gave them co-ownership with citizens of the outcomes that would be critical to ensuring accountability for implementation. The mayor, the city council, and the Unified Plan Community Support Organization provided contacts, lists, and other support to recruit

participants. Throughout the outreach period, decision makers were kept informed of citizen feedback on the planning process so they could publicly respond to concerns and criticisms. For example, many citizens questioned whether Nagin was supportive of the Unified Plan process. In response, the mayor did a public service announcement expressing his support and asking people to come to the community congress.

The Result: Large-Scale Citizen Engagement

The results of these unprecedented outreach efforts were clear and substantial. Despite the fact that most were still living in extreme crisis mode, more than twenty-five hundred current and dispersed residents of New Orleans participated in Community Congress II and nearly thirteen hundred attended Community Congress III. Equally important, when participants were polled to determine who was in the room, they closely approximated the pre-Katrina demographics of New Orleans.

To engage these thousands of people in deliberations about rebuilding priorities, the Community Congresses used the *AmericaSpeaks* 21st Century Town Meeting methodology, which employs technology to link small-group, face-to-face dialogue with large-group decision making. Through a com-

bination of keypad polling, groupware computers, large screen projection, teleconferencing, and other technologies, 21st Century Town Meetings enable people to simultaneously participate in intimate discussions *and* contribute to the collective wisdom of a very large group. In this instance, interactive television connected participants in New Orleans with those in Baton Rouge, Houston, Dallas, and Atlanta. Participants in sixteen other cities viewed the program through a Webcast and submitted their views in real time over the Internet. Public access television viewers in New Orleans were able to follow the programming from their homes.

At the end of each congress, participants’ collective priorities were quickly distilled and supplied in writing to everyone in the room, as well as to key decision makers, stakeholders, and the media. In addition, within two weeks of Community Congress II all registrants received the results of the meeting by mail. The extraordinary efforts at inclusion paid off. As one participant noted: “We raised the bar. We cannot make any more community decisions without including the displaced citizens. That is what I am most happy about. No one can claim to be presenting community decisions without those voices going forward.”

By bringing citizens from across the diaspora together with those still living in New Orleans, showing them that they cared about the same things and giving them a real voice in the decision-making process, the Unified Plan restored a sense of connection and extended community (and, ultimately, hope). In the words of participants themselves:

To see that energy—closest I’ve felt to being in New Orleans since Katrina. Everybody was skeptical at the beginning, no one knew each other before, and at the end everyone was friends and hugging. . . . People saw the other sites. We all know they are out there, but we felt them. We’ve known they were there in our heads, but this time we felt them in our hearts

Community Congress Participation (%) by Demographic Category, Compared to Population of Pre-Katrina New Orleans.	Pre-Katrina	Community	Community
	New Orleans	Congress II	Congress III
African American	67	64	55
White	28	27	34
Asian	2	4	4
Hispanic	3	2	2
Youth (ages 15–19)	7	2	6
Household income below \$20,000	37	25	24
Household income above \$75,000	19	20	22

. . . . Despite some differences . . . we were amazingly the same. . . . Healing? This is healing that's taking place right now, in this room.

Making an Impact on Recovery in New Orleans

The Unified Plan Process, and the two large-scale community congresses in particular, had a substantial impact on recovery in New Orleans in several ways. A large number of citizens established and publicly declared their priorities for rebuilding their city. A credible road map was created that, because it was endorsed by decision makers who had been participating in the process, established a clear route to results. A natural constituency was formed for ongoing participation and for holding decision makers accountable for implementation. Finally, hope was restored in a community that had not only been through a devastating trauma but been left to languish for almost a year and a half without a concrete action plan.

The Unified Plan Process, and the two large-scale community congresses in particular, had a substantial impact on recovery in New Orleans in several ways.

Citizens Come to Shared Views

The Unified Plan process was aimed at giving New Orleanians a chance to deliberate with their fellow citizens about the future of their city and come to shared views about the priorities that state and local governments should pursue. Accessible, neutral background materials produced in conjunction with, or approved by, all of the major stakeholder groups constituted the substantive basis for the discussions at the community congress meetings.

Residents were asked to give input on critical planning issues, make trade-offs, and set priorities; they reviewed preestablished options and created their

own. Among the many issues on the table at Community Congress II, greatest citizen priority was given to flood protection, better schools, health care, low-income housing options, and multiuse community facilities.

Participant interviews after Community Congress II showed they felt their work had sent three clear messages: New Orleanians are united and can work together for the good of the city, they want to come back and rebuild, and they want to be part of the decision making—to be counted and heard.

Community Congress III was the public's collective opportunity to review and give input on the draft Unified New Orleans Plan, which was based on the strongest messages and themes to emerge during Community Congress II. For example, participants strongly supported the idea of voluntary incentives (for example, relocating to clustered neighborhoods, and rebuilding in keeping with safety guidelines). They supported the idea of repairing and rebuilding on the basis of population density, building mixed-income communities to decrease violence, and creating multiuse facilities for public services.

A Credible Road Map Emerges

By design, both citizens and decision makers emerged from the Unified Plan process as co-owners of a concrete action plan.

At the end of the community congresses, individual interviews revealed that a great majority strongly agreed with the leading priorities that were articulated, and 92 percent of participants felt the plan should go forward. This approval rating had instant credibility as representing the collective view of the city's citizenry because, as was noted, participant demographics reflected the makeup of pre-Katrina New Orleans. A foundation representative who participated in Community Congress II observed: "When the numbers came up and it was clear that those people participating mirrored the demographics pretty much of pre-Katrina New Orleans, that

was just a threshold. You could have had two thousand people in the room, five thousand people in the room, but if the demographics weren't right, that would have just tainted the rest of the day. . . . Once that happened everything could flow and we could go on."

Though it was a foundation-funded and independently run process, a full range of public officials responsible for rebuilding New Orleans participated in the Unified Plan. Mayor Nagin spoke at both events; Ed Blakely, a renowned disaster recovery planner and the newly hired "recovery czar," gave closing remarks at Community Congress III; Norman Francis, chair of the Louisiana Recovery Authority, and Vera Triplett, chair of the Community Support Organization, had major speaking roles in both events; and there was broad participation from the city planning commission and the city council.

This level of decision-maker participation was particularly notable in that the lead-up to the Unified Plan and its early phases was marked by limited support among many key officials. State and local turf battles, bruised relationships between various city agencies, and politicians and decision makers' concerns about their role in the process initially inhibited a commitment to participation. As the process went forward, however, leadership support and momentum grew. After Community Congress III, C. Warner of the *Times-Picayune* reported: "New Orleans elected officials are poised to give a friendly reception to a broad recovery plan for city neighborhoods. . . . Directors of the Unified New Orleans Plan . . . say they heard few concerns during informal briefings with City Council members and Mayor Ray Nagin's administration" (p. 1).

In the end, when political leaders saw the scale, representativeness, and execution of the community congresses, they embraced the outcomes. In doing so, they gave the plan the credibility and authority it needed to move forward.

Building a Constituency for Future Action

The Unified Plan process built a citizenry energized to both stay involved and hold officials accountable for the outcomes they had sanctioned. More than half of the participants at Community Congress III had been at Community Congress II, and 93 percent of participants committed to remaining engaged in the process. The final session of Community Congress III was a discussion on the role that citizens could play in implementing the Unified Plan. Participants reviewed preestablished options such as creating neighborhood councils or developing a recovery information clearinghouse; provided feedback; and added new options, such as holding quarterly citizen meetings and an annual community congress, as well as establishing a volunteer center. One or two citizens at each discussion table volunteered to be "captains" who would keep their fellow participants informed about developments on the Unified Plan.

In addition to creating a dedicated constituency for future work, the effort built a large group of citizens ready to hold officials accountable for action. Less than two months after Community Congress III, this was borne out when more than two hundred people came to a City Planning Commission hearing on the recovery plan. *Times-Picayune* reporter B. Egger noted that "dozens of speakers indicated they were concerned about continuing the high level of public participation they said went into the drafting of the citywide plan" (p. 1).

Restoring Hope

In many ways, the Community Congresses were a vehicle for restoring community and therefore hope. Rfuaw Diarra, who worked and participated at both Houston congresses, recounted this story:

In New Orleans people didn't move around that much—you lived in the same neighborhood and people you knew from childhood were really like family. At Community Congress III, I met four of my elementary school friends—my neighbors.

They had been evacuated to Dallas and came to Houston for the meeting. When they walked up I was so excited, I forgot I was working!

You spent all your life with people and then BOOM you didn't know where anyone was or how to find them. There was a lot of that happening. You heard rumors about what happened to people, saw their names on lists of missing people, and then in they walked! It was really wonderful. One lady actually met up with her mother at the meeting in Houston. They were both in Houston and they didn't even know it.

In addition to reuniting members of the same community, the events were deliberately orchestrated to enable diverse groups of New Orleanians to meet each other for the first time and find common ground. One participant reported: "My husband was going to leave at lunch but stayed through to the end. Many people stayed through to the end. Stayed because the way the tables were put together—diversity—everyone really bonded. I think it was that they were mixed up and had time to meet each other at the beginning. They didn't leave early because they didn't want to let their table down. Became loyal to each other. An interesting community phenomenon. That was worth a lot. If there was a way to capture that and do it again. . . ."

A table facilitator said: "A participant that initially was very upset and angry said to me at the end, 'I'm so happy and glad I came. Thank you for hanging in there with me. Don't shake my hand, give me a hug.'"

A member of the Community Support Organization, the citizen and leader liaison board that held open, biweekly sessions throughout the Unified Plan process, summarized it this way: "I think this may be the first time that people of all races, creeds, from various neighborhoods actually had an opportunity to sit down with each other and engage in discussion. . . . The greatest part of

the Unified Plan process so far is that it has broken down barriers that have existed for a long time in New Orleans."

The community congresses represented a pivotal moment in which New Orleanians first came together across the geography of the diaspora to declare that their city was alive and there was hope for the future. Citizens gave a clear message that they were willing to work together to bring back the city they love, and that they want to help make the difficult choices ahead.

What's Next for the Unified Plan?

The Unified New Orleans Plan has been approved by the foundation board that authorized it and the advisory board that oversaw it. The city planning commission, the city council, the mayor and, finally, the Louisiana Recovery Authority will vote on the plan, and all indicators are that they will support it.

The \$14.5 billion plan anticipates spending about \$4 billion in the first two years on infrastructure, utility repairs, schools, and flood protection. The city is preparing for the job. In December 2006, Blakely was hired as "recovery czar" to oversee rebuilding. The city planning commission is also staffing up.

In late March 2007, *AmericaSpeaks* helped facilitate a meeting of seven hundred city employees with Blakely. The meeting allowed employees to hear about the Unified Plan, review their individual and collective responsibilities for implementing it, and provide feedback about how to make it a success. The mayor and the president of the city council participated. The session was also used to roll out the city's new evacuation plan. Nearly half of the attendees volunteered to help in future evacuation efforts—a remarkable commitment. A video from the event, combined with a newly developed workbook on implementation of the Unified Plan, will be used to train the remainder of the city's employees.

Advancing the Practice of Civic Engagement

In the field of civic engagement, the Unified Plan process and its outcomes were groundbreaking in three ways.

First, the process secured substantial and representative participation in a “hardest case” environment. Previous planning processes had struggled; citizens were openly fatigued by these efforts and angry with public institutions, and the majority of the target audience was living in a postdisaster crisis mode. Despite this backdrop, the comprehensiveness of the outreach efforts and the ongoing and deliberate inclusion of decision makers in the process established a framework of validity and a credibility that ultimately resulted in large-scale participation.

Second, the Unified Plan effort drew participation on a geographic scale that few have attempted, bringing citizens together across twenty-one cities simultaneously. Citizens in New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Houston, Dallas, and Atlanta were able to deliberate with each other in real time while also taking into consideration the live reactions of their counterparts in Austin, Charlotte, Chicago, Denver, Detroit, Jackson (Mississippi), Jacksonville, Los Angeles, Memphis, Minneapolis, New York, Princeton (New Jersey), San Antonio, San Francisco, Seattle, and Washington, D.C. Strategic use of advanced technology such as video conferencing, Webcasting, networked laptop computers, and voting keypads clearly demonstrated that dispersed geography need no longer hinder face-to-face participatory processes.

A table facilitator in Seattle described how one of her groups reacted when they saw the themes presented in New Orleans: “‘There’s our comment!’ someone said. It was like magic that their conversation and suggestions would make it from Seattle to New Orleans and get presented for consideration to twenty-five hundred fellow New Orleanians spread around the country.”

Finally, the Unified Plan effort was remarkable in the field of civic engagement in the extent to which it succeeded in giving equal voice to the most disenfranchised. In this case, they clustered in two groups: low-income citizens, African Americans in particular, who were disproportionately represented among the victims of Katrina but largely unheard in early recovery planning processes; and citizens in the diaspora who had been given no opportunity whatsoever to participate.

Interviews with diverse participants in Community Congress II demonstrated the success of the process in giving voice. Interviewees indicated they were “very comfortable” speaking their mind at their tables (96 percent) and “very much” able to express what was most important to them (88 percent). They said people listened to each other “very well” (91 percent).

Targeted and creative outreach and registration efforts such as these; provision of participation supports such as child care, food, and translation; and trained table facilitation were all critical to achievement of this goal.

In addition to advancing the level of practice in the field, the Unified Plan process concretely demonstrated two key tenets of civic engagement work: that average citizens *can* make substantive and worthwhile contributions to complicated policy issues, and that reluctant decision makers *can* be effectively brought into these processes.

Citizens Can Contribute to a Highly Complex Policy Discussion

The early posthurricane planning processes raised questions about the ability of New Orleanians to contribute productively to the work that lay ahead. The slate of issues facing planners was, and is still, almost unimaginably complex. A thoroughly devastated physical infrastructure across multiple sectors, a traumatized community with divergent needs and interests, and a limited amount of financial

resources to apply to the problems created an extraordinarily challenging backdrop on which to apply large-scale citizen involvement in decision making. Under far tamer circumstances, decision makers have tended to discount the ability of the public to grasp policy nuance and offer substantive input, accept necessary trade-offs, and put the common good above their individual needs.

Yet the Unified Plan process concretely demonstrated that, in fact, large numbers of citizens *can* engage with decision makers under the most challenging of circumstances and contribute productively. Community congress participants showed a remarkable degree of sophistication in their responses to planning options. For example, although they rejected the idea of government telling them where they could and could not live, they strongly endorsed the notion of incentives to help people make good choices about whether or where to rebuild; they were willing to take responsibility for reducing flood risk, even if it meant individual sacrifice; and they stood up for traditionally under-represented parts of their communities. Evaluators observed that participants represented a good mix of various parts of the city and different income levels and that their discussions reflected an understanding of the diversity of the city. Furthermore, the concerns citizens raised accurately reflected where there were weaknesses or reasons to be wary about the planning process. Examples are whether there would be adequate funds available; how to transition from a temporary mode to a permanent mode; and how local government could suddenly be successful in areas it had struggled with before the storm, such as reducing urban blight and effectively managing public housing.

Participants' views on the discussion process reveal how this level of substantive productivity was possible. At Community Congress II, 60 percent of participants felt the table conversations were "very thorough," 85 percent were "very satisfied" with the quality, 80 percent said hearing from people in the

other cities made a "big impression" on them, and one in three participants felt their views had actually changed as a result of the table deliberations.

Reluctant Decision Makers Can Be Engaged

The Unified Plan process demonstrated the ability of authentic and large-scale citizen participation to have an impact on local leaders' views as well as their willingness to become involved in, and ultimately be held accountable for, a prescribed set of activities.

In early January 2007 (between the two community congresses), Harvard University researcher Abigail Williamson conducted twenty interviews with a range of New Orleans community leaders to gather their perspectives on the Unified Plan process, and to determine its impact on them. According to Williamson, eight of the twenty informants were so skeptical in the early phases of the Unified Plan process that they had seriously considered not participating at all. However, as it unfolded, the process dramatically shifted these leaders' perceptions and behaviors from skepticism to endorsement and active participation. Williamson reported:

With most political leaders, it is difficult to understand whether a change in support indicates a genuine change of heart or a calculated decision. Whatever the reason, New Orleans political leaders are now publicly supportive of the Unified Plan. Councilmember Arnie Fielkow, for instance, says that Community Congress II "gained credibility" and that "the full Council is in support of the [Unified Plan] process and sees it as a manifestation of the will of the people."

After Community Congress II [planners] saw Councilmember Hedge-Morrell's support for the Unified Plan improve in terms of her articulation of [its] purpose and her responses to constituents at meetings. Whereas before, Council members could get away with denigrating the Unified Plan with off-handed comments that

suggested their lack of interest in the plan . . . after Community Congress II political leaders realized they could not “get away with” that attitude any more [p. 22].

Mayor Nagin was also seen as having been “converted” by the process. Vera Triplett, chair of the Unified Plan Community Support Organization, told Williamson: “I can say that emphatically [Community Congress II] really did increase the credibility [of the Unified Plan]. It increased the momentum. To have the Mayor at Community Congress II—the mayor who had previously been like this to the plan [gestures standoffishly], saying, ‘Well, you know, I’m encouraged by this, to see so many people here and to see all the outreach efforts’ . . . to some that would be not so much, but [it is significant to me] because I know how removed he has tried to be” (p. 23).

“Although the Unified Plan was not designed to provide an absolute blueprint for all of the actions necessary to complete our recovery, it does provide useful data based on a process driven by the people. . . . We are developing a clear path for the recovery of the great city of New Orleans, and the Unified Plan is a critical part of this process.”

—NEW ORLEANS “RECOVERY CZAR,” ED BLAKELY

The ongoing ability of the participatory process to shore up the involvement of key decision makers was still in evidence several months after the community congresses ended. In response to a report issued in early March 2007 that was critical of the Unified Plan, Blakely said: “While the Unified Plan was not designed to provide an absolute blueprint for all of the actions necessary to complete our recovery, it does provide useful data based on a process driven by the people. . . . We are developing a clear path for the recovery of the great city of New Orleans, and the Unified Plan is a critical part of this process.”

Lessons Learned

The citizen engagement work undertaken for the Unified New Orleans Plan has yielded significant on-the-ground lessons about how to work at large scale and across geographic distances, as well as how to conduct targeted outreach under extremely difficult conditions. For example, “robocalls” from prominent people to potential participants turned out to be an extraordinarily effective recruitment and registration technique. Also, seemingly small details such as including traditional New Orleans praline candy in participants’ lunches and carefully selecting music and images that reflected local culture went a long way toward creating the sense of community that was critical to success.

Important lessons were also learned about the impact of an exceptionally tight time frame on the development of discussion materials. For example, both participants and stakeholders in the Unified Plan process raised concerns that substantive information was lacking prior to the meetings. In addition, unintentionally ambiguous wording of a polling question created a storm of concern that event organizers were trying to manipulate outcomes. Trust in the process was recovered by acknowledging the problematic language and agreeing to disregard potentially misleading response data, but the incident demonstrated once again that no matter how multifaceted and complex a process is, every detail matters.

“How to” lessons like these can help advance large-scale citizen engagement efforts across the field. Similarly, in-depth evaluation research conducted during Community Congress II offers a wealth of material that can inform civic engagement efforts in the future. For example, analysis of table discussions at the community congress revealed somewhat unequal participation rates (by race and gender) in comparison to the demographic mix that was present. Specifically, even though African Americans contributed substantially to table discussions, they did not participate as frequently as whites.

Furthermore, women spoke more frequently than men, white women spoke more frequently than black women, and white men spoke more frequently than black men. Participation disparities were more frequent at tables with nearly even numbers of both races. Data such as these raise important questions about how to best design questions and provide facilitation that supports a variety of interactive styles (for instance, narrative versus deliberative).

Finally, analysis of the effort in the context of what happens next in New Orleans will be important. The extent to which the components of the Unified Plan are reflected in actual recovery work, the ability of the public to hold officials accountable for what they agreed to implement, the availability of resources to implement citizens' priorities, and the level of ongoing citizen engagement should all be analyzed. The Unified Plan process already presents important information for the field, but there is substantially more to learn as recovery in New Orleans proceeds.

Moving Forward: Institutionalizing Citizen Engagement and Taking It to Scale

The Unified New Orleans Plan forged a cohesive voice out of chaos. In doing so, it represents a "second generation" of public participation in governance, one that goes beyond the decide-announce-defend model of one-way information flows, beyond the "line-up-behind-the-mike" approach to public comment meetings, beyond public opinion polling or focus groups, and beyond the usual-suspects approach of rounding up key stakeholders to figure things out behind closed doors.

The success of this effort and the extensive network of self-initiating citizens' groups that have emerged from a relatively inert community participation culture in New Orleans mean the moment is ripe there for permanently linking citizen voice to governance. In March 2007, a spokeswoman representing community leaders from each of New Orleans's thirteen

planning districts asked the city planning commission to do just that: "We are here today asking you to let us continue our participation in rebuilding our great city. . . . Work with us to generate an immediate, interim and long-lasting, formal and legal citizen-participation structure."

In other words, there is no reason to go back to business as usual in New Orleans when the city can continue involving its citizens regularly and across a range of issues. Decision makers at the local, city, and state levels who were so intimately involved in the Unified Plan process are well situated to support and create opportunities for this kind of citizen engagement. In doing so, they can routinely act on the will of their constituents, and New Orleans can show the nation how to embed participatory processes and build a more vigorous democracy.

Though vital locally, the work in New Orleans is also a cornerstone of a bigger undertaking. Over the last two years, *AmericaSpeaks* has led two other significant engagement initiatives that explored how to take citizen deliberation to a much larger scale:

- *Voices and Choices* brought together tens of thousands of people from across Northeast Ohio to set an action agenda to revitalize the area's ailing economy. Begun in August 2005, this initiative combined a variety of approaches for mobilizing the region's citizenry: one-on-one interviews, leadership workshops, community-based and online discussion forums, and regional town meetings. In all, twenty-one thousand people were involved. *Voices and Choices* demonstrated how using a mix of engagement methodologies over a period of eighteen months can yield unprecedented participation.
- The *Citizens Health Care Working Group* initiative represented one of the few times a national issue discussion has been formally authorized by the U.S. government. In 2004, Congress mandated that citizens be part of a national debate on health care. The bipartisan engagement process

brought together four thousand people from around the country and returned their recommendations to Congress and the White House. The group demonstrated that, although important, government authorization without adequate resources and institutional support will not ensure scale, credibility of results, and ultimately impact.

The Unified New Orleans Plan, Voices and Choices, and the Citizens Health Care Working Group processes suggest that, as a nation, we are ready to take citizen deliberation to a national scale on issues of critical importance to us all. We have the technological capacity, the on-the-ground knowledge, and a growing cadre of leaders who have seen for themselves both the promise and the practicality of bringing citizen voice into public decision making.

Clearly, there is no shortage of critical policy issues to address: the war in Iraq, our struggling public education system, looming budget deficits of enormous scale. Our nation's challenges are numerous. However, three issues may lend themselves particularly well to a national discussion: climate change, immigration, and health care. In each case, polling data reveal that the public is ready to make far-reaching decisions to solve the problem even though the partisan political process will not allow it.

AmericaSpeaks is actively pursuing the launch of a national discussion in one of these areas in 2009.

Citizens in this country are ready to have their voices regularly brought into public decision making. As we move toward this goal, there is great inspiration to be found in one of America's founding ideals: that above all, we must be a government of the people, by the people and for the people.

References

Eggle, B. "Planning Process OK, Speakers Say Continued Public Participation Urged As Document Is Revised." *Times-Picayune*, Mar. 8, 2007, p. 1.

Warner, C. "Unified N.O. Plan Gaining Steam: Recovery Blueprint Impresses City Officials." *Times-Picayune*, Jan. 27, 2007, p. A1.

Williamson, A. *Citizen Participation in the Unified New Orleans Plan*. Working Paper. Cambridge, Mass.: Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Mar. 2007.

Wilson, P. A., Padgett, J. D., and Wallace, J. *New Orleans Community Congress II: Towards the Next Era of Participatory Democracy*. University of Texas, Austin, and Southern University of New Orleans, 2007 (commissioned by *AmericaSpeaks*).

Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer is the founder and president of AmericaSpeaks.
