

NS LIVE CASE SERIES 2017: THE VEJLE RESILIENCE STRATEGY

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NEW SYNTHESIS OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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Published by Public Governance International (PGI)

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August, 2017

ISBN 978-1-927441-77-0

The Context

In 2016, the City of Vejle, Denmark, launched Europe's first urban resilience strategy.¹ The strategy will see more than 100 city-wide initiatives ranging from a holistic wastewater plan to an open data initiative implemented over the next four years leading to 2020.² Developed as part of the Rockefeller Foundation's 100 Resilient Cities (100RC) Initiative, Vejle's Resilience Strategy provides a comprehensive blueprint for tackling intractable problems and developing the city's adaptability to future challenges.

Vejle's Resilience Strategy stemmed from an opportunity for change in a period of uncertainty. In 2008, Vejle, like many other cities, was feeling the effects of the global financial crisis. However, unlike other cities, Vejle viewed the crisis, and the responses needed, as an opportunity to invest in its future.

The focus on Vejle's long-term prosperity at a time of crisis is not insignificant. It marked the beginning of a shift in thinking that would eventually lead Vejle to become a 'resilient' city. In the years that followed, Vejle continued to shift its focus from the actions needed to address today's challenges to the actions needed to create a cohesive, robust and sustainable city for tomorrow.

It is in this context, that Vejle's Resilience Strategy emerged.

The 100 Resilient Cities Network

In 2013, Vejle was selected to join the Rockefeller Foundation's 100 Resilient Cities (100RC) global network (a network of cities from around the world who are developing a resilience roadmap and sharing best practices to tackle the physical, social and economic challenges facing the 21st century).³ The city had applied to become a member, and was enrolled among the first generation of cities. Along with membership, the city was provided with access to knowledge, methodologies and tools, and granted the funding for a "Chief Resilience Officer" to lead the local resilience initiative, and to take part in the global community and network.

Membership in 100 RC catalyzed a strategic focus on resilience as a lens to help the city address new complex challenges and provided the platform for working across departments and sectors to develop a resilience strategy to be fit for the future. Introducing resilience as a strategic approach for the future of the city and societal development marked a turning point for Vejle.

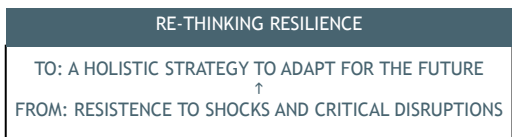
1 Athlyn Cathcart-Keays. 2016, May 19. "More than just a flood defence: How Vejle built a blueprint for resilience". *The Guardian*, May 19, 2016, accessed February 24, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/may/19/flood-defence-vejle-denmark-resilience>

2 Ibid.

3 Vejle Kommune, *Vejle's Resilience Strategy* (Denmark: Vejle Kommune and The Rockefeller Foundation, 2016)

“Vejle’s understanding of resilience [was] shaped by the City Resilience Framework (CRF) developed by the Rockefeller Foundation and Arup (2014), and used by 100 Resilient Cities (100RC) as the foundation of a holistic approach to city resilience.”⁴

At first, resilience was understood to be the development of an approach to resist shocks and critical disruptions. For Vejle, a particular focus was on dealing with the impact of climate change. Flooding was seen as the major potential shock. Using the CRF, Vejle reframed its approach from ‘resistance to shocks and critical disruptions’ to ‘developing a holistic strategy and plan of action to adapt to the future’.



Resilience came to be viewed as the qualities a city and a community require to deal with shocks and critical disruptions like

climate change, but also other long-term stresses that weaken the physical, social and economic structures from day-to-day. These could be high unemployment, inefficient transport systems, or a lack of sustainable water, energy and food systems that increases the pressure on the environment and vulnerable social groups. It refers to both the social capacity of local communities to adapt, as well as biological eco-systems.

One of the key challenges faced at this stage concerned the relative newness of the term ‘resilience’ in the Danish language. During the work with resilience it became clear that there were very not many other public organizations in Denmark with an explicit and strategic focus on resilience besides Vejle Municipality. This both created a momentum but also a difficult situation due to the lack of a common reference point. Unfolding of the concept as a holistic term made it even more complex, and thus difficult to communicate. To reach out to citizens, the city therefore would focus more on collaborating on the specific societal challenges. The biggest threat to realizing the resilience efforts was seen to be “a lack of dialogue about the future vision, a lack of leadership and people who care and a lack of community.”⁵ With this approach it would be possible to open the process and to enroll the contribution of others and achieve shared results.

As the city became more engaged in the concept of resilience, its original definition slowly expanded from a functional definition focused on weathering potential shocks, to a more evolutionary understanding that included innovation, sustainability and learning, with a particular focus on vulnerable groups in society. As the concept was unpacked within the local context, and through collaboration with researchers and local stakeholders, it came to refer to the collective capacity and ability to change through a joint learning process, when facing both chronic and acute stressors such as floods, disasters, utility failure, violence and social unrest.

4 Ibid., p. 57.

5 Ibid., p. 37, quoting Finn Thorbjørn Hansen.

Co-creating Vejle's Resilience Strategy

After digesting the framework provided by 100 RC, Vejle city leaders, working with other partners, began to shape Vejle's Resilience Strategy to the city's own needs and circumstances. Vejle's Resilience Strategy would need to be built on the "city's strengths, weaknesses, shocks and stresses... [while] bolstering the foundation of a city so that it can respond to new, unforeseen events, and plan for the unknown."⁶

The biggest threat to realizing the resilience efforts was seen to be "a lack of dialogue about the future vision, a lack of leadership and people who care and a lack of community."⁷ To reach out to citizens and build community support, the city focused on collaborating on specific societal challenges. Through this approach, it was possible to open the process and to enroll the contribution of others to achieve shared results.

One of the key challenges faced at this stage was the relative newness of the term 'resilience' in the Danish language. It became clear that there were not many other public organizations in Denmark with an explicit and strategic focus on resilience besides Vejle. This created momentum but also a difficult situation due to the lack of a common reference point. Unfolding of the concept as a holistic term made it even more complex, and thus difficult to communicate.

Phase I

In the first phase, the city began by communicating the resilience agenda to local professionals and stakeholders.

Over the coming months, workshops with a broad selection of stakeholders such as local communities, business and housing associations, were organized to build an awareness of future shocks and stresses that the city would be facing. In preparing for this exercise, the city mapped out its socio-economic profile, especially for the vulnerable population, critical assets were identified and the perception and concerns of citizens and businesses were collected.

Besides the well-known risk of flooding, the early stakeholder consultations identified the importance of social cohesion and stakeholder empowerment to the development of a resilient and sustainable society. "Cohesive communities" and "empowerment of stakeholders" were seen to be social challenges that could adversely impact the quality of life and welfare in the city.⁸ There was concern that "the increased risk of polarization, which can happen to more vulnerable groups at a time of increased immigration" and the "challenges facing the youth of Vejle"⁹ could lead to a loss of social cohesion and sense of community. At a time when "a number of cutbacks to existing initiatives are expected, which means the apparent good

6 Ibid., p. 7.

7 Ibid., p. 37, quoting Finn Thorbjørn Hansen.

8 Ibid., p. 58.

9 Ibid., p. 21.

10 Ibid., p. 58.

performance of the past is not expected to continue”¹⁰, promoting social cohesion and empowering citizens to build resilient communities became a key concern for stakeholders.

Through many months of research, stakeholder engagement, self-assessment, reflection and analysis, a roadmap began to take shape. *The Vejle Resilience Strategy* would be built around four pillars:

- Co-creation: creating a resilient city through productive partnerships across public and private sectors;
- Climate Resilience: using water and climate change as drivers for the development of the city;
- Social Cohesion: increasing social and economic cohesion and creating the best conditions for future generations; and
- Smart City: a city that acts intelligently in creating opportunities and in responding to shocks and stresses by embracing new technologies, co-creation, efficiency, outreach and inclusivity.

Phase II

Following Phase I, the city reviewed its current and future plans, projects and aspirations against the results of the analysis and workshops. With the help of the 100RC methodology, the city was able to identify gaps and new opportunities to strengthen their future approach to resilience.

In part, this was achieved through workshops with stakeholders that focused on highlighting opportunities, goals and actions for the future. In essence, this phase was about building emergent solutions to support resiliency efforts.

Employees and businesses were engaged through a series of open events, meetings and conferences. Professionals were invited to participate in the process and an open call invited communities of interest to present their best ideas and initiatives to build resilience, which were later integrated into the final strategy.

Through the strategy process, the city council, department directors and city managers were deeply involved, looking at ways to integrate the results of cross-departmental collaboration and collaboration with citizens and communities around key challenges. This led to an important discovery; that future societal challenges could not be solved without rethinking the organizational eco-system and role of local government and public administration in the future. Creating a resilient society capable of adapting to future challenges requires community involvement; resilience could be achieved by government working alone.



While membership in the 100RC network and continued stakeholder engagement raised awareness of the importance of resilience and built support for Vejle's Resilience Strategy, making progress towards developing a more resilient city not only required public support, but active and ongoing civic engagement to help the city achieve its vision. The Resilience Strategy recognized the importance of engaging citizens as public value creators. Rather than providing services to citizens in all situations, citizens would be encouraged to make changes themselves with support from the municipality. People "need to take action themselves rather than action being taken on their behalf." The city would work with citizens and communities to co-create solutions. "The public sector will no longer be a welfare services enterprise, but rather will function as a democratically run community of active, responsible and resourceful citizens, business and institutions." It was believed that this would contribute to social cohesion.

With resilience, the city has empowered new leadership roles, cross-sectoral cooperation and the inclusion of many stakeholders. Over time, resilience thinking has not only become part of the common language, but a common goal and platform for collaboration both across municipal departments, and among government, citizens and society as a whole.

Institutionalizing Resilience: Towards a Resilient Future

"In Vejle, we believe that strategies become reality because there is political will and action behind them." (Mayor Arne Sigtenbjernbjerggaard)¹¹

Throughout the process of building Vejle's Resilience Strategy, the City Council became the unifying and leading body for the development of broad public support. While the Council engaged in a number of efforts to build political support, such as showcasing existing resilience activities and presenting select case studies at Council meetings, perhaps the most important driver of public support was the new narrative surrounding resilience, which made resilience and the pursuit of Vejle's Resilience Strategy a key part of the city's positive agenda for change designed "to make Vejle the resilient city of tomorrow and secure a prosperous future."¹²

Today, the city has institutionalized resilience; it is embedded across departments and in collaboration with stakeholders as a holistic and inclusive approach to identify the interdependencies between societal risks, and linking them to opportunities to stimulate innovative solutions and investment.

The Resilience Strategy was approved by the City Council in 2016 and is being implemented with partners in the business, education and housing sectors to address climate, economic and social challenges through new partnerships and innovative approaches that require collaboration across organizations.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 54.

¹² Ibid., p. 13.

While the Resilience Strategy will be implemented over the next few years, Vejle’s work on resilience has, so far, led to a few main outcomes.

A key outcome of Vejle’s work on resilience has been the framing of a common future and approach for how to collaborate in the years to come, and has also provided a common language for communicating the systemic and interdependent nature of the societal challenges. This led to an increased awareness of the value of cross-departmental and integrated collaboration, and resulted in new types of public services and city solutions. The resilience lens, with its holistic perspective, underlined the need for more multi-purpose solutions.



In part, Vejle’s successful resilience framing was built on an approach that viewed societal challenges as opportunities for change. Viewing society’s challenges as opportunities for the future changed the conversation from addressing current challenges, to designing a city capable of mitigating chronic challenges while building a city that is capable of thriving in the future. This framing provided scope for a range of actors beyond the municipal government to contribute to building a resilient Vejle, offering new opportunities for businesses, social enterprises and civil society to work together in support of a common goal and collective future.

Moreover, shifting from addressing immediate to longer-term social and city development created a basis for prioritizing longer-term, and in some cases risky, investments that may previously have been politically untenable. Focusing on the future and achieving the long-term vision became a political, as well as social priority.

The Way Forward – The Power of A Dynamic System

Despite such progress, realizing a resilient future will require continued effort to implement reforms,

encourage collaboration, and drive momentum towards a Vejle’s resilience vision. While Vejle’s Resilience Strategy provides a new way of thinking about Vejle’s future, and how the municipality thinks about and responds to current and emerging challenges, this new way of thinking may also require a new way of doing things. The conventional approaches of the past, driven by “new public management” and a reliance on hierarchical structures with clear boundaries and internal controls within each department, were not designed to facilitate the levels of collaboration needed to realize Vejle’s resilience vision. A new approach is needed to support the realization of Vejle’s resilience vision.



On the compliance side, resilience thinking may require new guidelines and procedures for working with others in support of the common resilience agenda. This may call for a re-thinking of the current compliance framework to facilitate experimentation, innovation and calculated risk-taking to advance the resilience strategy.

Similarly, the institutionalization of resilience for the municipal government and society alike may re-cast how performance is both understood and achieved. Vejle's Resilience Strategy marks a shift from responsive actions to imminent or current problems (things that government 'need to do') to focusing on efforts to support the long-term resilience of the Municipality (things that would be 'nice to do' to ensure a better future). From a performance perspective, this shift changes how 'good performance' is understood.

Indeed, the City of Vejle has already begun engaging with questions of compliance and performance after the release of its resilience strategy, when the city faced a difficult question: When are we actually a resilient city? What indicators can we use to monitor and document our development and progress? How do we design for resilience? Case studies from other resilient cities also draw attention to several design paradoxes. How do we secure our city, manage stress and disaster risk reduction without limiting freedom, mobility or constraining community living and quality of life? At the same time, the definition of resilience can either be inscribed as the quality of an infrastructure, or characterize a community's ability to mobilize collective capacity, compassion and the power to transform during turbulent times. In both cases resilience is an emerging quality that challenge today's demand for impact and accountability. In this context, traditional tools for measurement seem insufficient and obsolete; the question is how to describe the value of resilience, evaluate progress and embed learning?

By re-thinking compliance and performance from the perspective of what is needed to achieve Vejle's resilience strategy, new space for emergent and innovation actions may further support efforts to co-create solutions for a better future, and further enhance Vejle's long-term resilience. By bringing together multiple factors in a dynamic system, Vejle's resilience strategy can pave the way to a resilient future.

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