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Title: Just urban futures? Exploring equity in “100 Resilient Cities”

The United Nations’ SDG 11 describes sustainable cities as “inclusive, safe and resilient”. This definition encourages cities to improve environmental sustainability while working towards inclusivity and equity.

SDG 11 also uses the language of resilience. Several scholars have cautioned that theories of resilience fail to address issues of equity, justice, and power. However, to date we have limited empirical evidence testing these theoretical claims. The US-based Rockefeller Foundation has pioneered 100 Resilient Cities (100RC), a network of cities dedicated to building resilience in urban areas. Critical engagement with the outputs of this program, particularly around how participating cities operationalize concepts of equity and justice, is important and timely given the scale of this global initiative.

Using directed and summative content analysis of 30 100RC “City Resilience Strategies” from 28 countries, we examine the extent to which participating cities focus on social equity and justice in their narratives, and whether these concepts are operationalized in the strategies’ embedded actions. Moreover, we analyze how the 100RC Resilient City Framework conceptualizes justice, and accordingly how the concept is realized in strategies from the global North and South, furthering scholarship on the just city.

Our findings suggest that while many strategies identify supporting vulnerable populations and promoting equity as pillars or goals, comparatively few contain specific actions to redistribute resources or decision-making power to disadvantaged communities. Moreover, many strategies fail to invite vulnerable populations to self-identify their needs and preferences. However, some cities excel at promoting equitable, inclusive actions in their strategies, with regional differences emerging. Overall, our findings suggest that the resilience paradigm has not transformed fundamental planning processes or power relations in cities, and accordingly, that a resilience lens alone is insufficient to promote progress on SDG 11.