

FAIR AND ACCOUNTABLE ADAPTATION PLANNING

5 key roles for co-governance

Findings from 32 cases of climate adaptation action described as successful by their communities.



Resilient Coastal Communities Project

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Fair and Accountable Adaptation Planning: 5 roles for co-governance

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THE RESILIENT COASTAL COMMUNITIES PROJECT

The urgent need to address the growing risk of storm- and sea level rise-driven flooding led Columbia Climate School to create the [Resilient Coastal Communities Project](#) (RCCP), under the auspices of the Center for Sustainable Urban Development (CSUD), in partnership with the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance. RCCP's principal goal is to foster collaboration between practitioners and researchers on actionable, fundable, and equitable solutions to flood risks that also deliver complementary benefits, like habitat restoration, job creation and greater community cohesion, and to help advance the Climate School's [commitment to fairness, social justice, and anti-racism](#).

NEW YORK CITY ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ALLIANCE

Founded in 1991, the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance (NYC-EJA) is a non-profit, 501(c)3 citywide membership network linking grassroots organizations from low-income neighborhoods and communities of color in their struggle for environmental justice. NYC-EJA empowers its member organizations to advocate for improved environmental conditions and against inequitable environmental burdens. Through its efforts, member organizations coalesce around specific common issues that threaten the ability for low-income communities of color to thrive.

Introduction: new ways of working are urgent

Flooding and other climate-related disaster risk has reached crisis proportions, necessitating bold, immediate, and equitable action. Frontline communities demand and deserve complete protection, restorative justice for past harms, and support for the strengths and characteristics that make them vibrant places to live, work, and flourish. This white paper examines the key roles individuals and organizations play in supporting successful community-centered coastal resiliency plans—and how these roles interweave to foster future successful community-led flood adaptation planning.

Funding, investment and planning processes need to be changed—now. Frontline, environmental justice, and other historically underserved communities continue to be excluded from planning and decision-making processes aimed at mitigating flood vulnerability. The Resilient Coastal Communities Project (RCCP)'s work and research in NYC and NJ underscored how communities are deeply dissatisfied with their resilience planning experiences, despite facing increasingly severe climate and environmental threats. The sources of this dissatisfaction are clear: a lack of public funding, low public investment, and reliance on opaque planning processes that fail to address community needs, concerns, and lived experiences.

Change isn't easy. Addressing unsatisfactory resilience planning processes and outcomes requires learning from and lifting up resilience initiatives that have broken the mold.

To better understand planning processes across the US that truly and collaboratively address community needs, RCCP studied the conditions that facilitate just, equitable, and effective resilience planning and succeed in creating what we call 'fair and accountable spaces'. We, and our collaborators, are curious: what factors powered adaptation projects seen as successful by their own communities?

After several months of collaboratively workshopping questions and a research plan, the RCCP team conducted 22 in-depth nationwide interviews, from July to December 2024. Community leaders, academics, non-profit practitioners, and government officials were selected as interviewees through triangulated and purposive sampling of individuals with work and/or life experience on coastal resilience or flooding, in particular on projects known to be 'successful' by their communities. The sample strove for balance and diversity in roles, backgrounds and perspectives. The 22 interviewees, many of whom had been involved in multiple resilience-related projects, shared a total of 32 distinct examples of community-centered resilience planning.

These exceptional cases delivered results that the **involved communities themselves consider successful.**

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Success should *not* be defined only by traditional measurements of flooding or damage reduction. Instead, as communities work toward resilience planning, **successful outcomes come from initiatives with** processes that:

(i) **exhibit consistent and authentic collaboration between all relevant stakeholders,** rather than tokenistic participation by community representatives

(ii) **establish intentional and community-centered strategies to strengthen and build relationships that are well-informed by local input and knowledge**

(iii) **are well-resourced through reliable, sustained, and adequately scaled funding.**

These processes help develop resilience plans that capture community priorities more completely and cohesively, are more effective at 'getting things done,' and most critically, create well-resourced communities of practice to support long-term, multi-dimensional resilience beyond initial planning efforts.

Research Findings: Towards Fair and Accountable Spaces for Resilience Planning

Our research identified cases where frontline community leaders and organizations, working in collaboration with cooperative government agencies, developed innovative structures to create fair and accountable spaces. Across decision-making and problem-solving, these spaces maximize the effective use of resources from the various entities involved and ensure the protection and inclusion of groups that have been historically excluded from planning formulas, resilience investments, and climate protection initiatives.

Creating fair and accountable planning spaces isn't work that any one person or agency can do. **Success requires a mosaic of individuals and community organizations possessing complementary skills**, supporting relationship-based, community centered decision-making, that are not generally present or valued by traditional planning processes. Individuals and organizations in fair and accountable spaces often transcend traditional job and organizational descriptions to center on mutual respect, accountability, and trust.

In all 32 cases that RCCP studied, equitable planning was consistently supported by the **people and organizations that perform five interlocking key roles**, each fulfilled either by one individual or through a group effort. Our interviewees, each of whom had deep ties to their communities, illustrated the necessity and centrality of:

- (1) **facilitators** who connect people and resources
- (2) **educators** who foster knowledge exchanges
- (3) **mediators** who create spaces for diverse stakeholders to talk
- (4) **challengers** who advocate against injustice
- (5) **mentors** who help guide communities to long-term empowerment.

The people and groups who activated these five core roles delivered, across all cases, a tangible positive impact towards building a strong ecosystem for long-term, community-oriented flood resiliency.

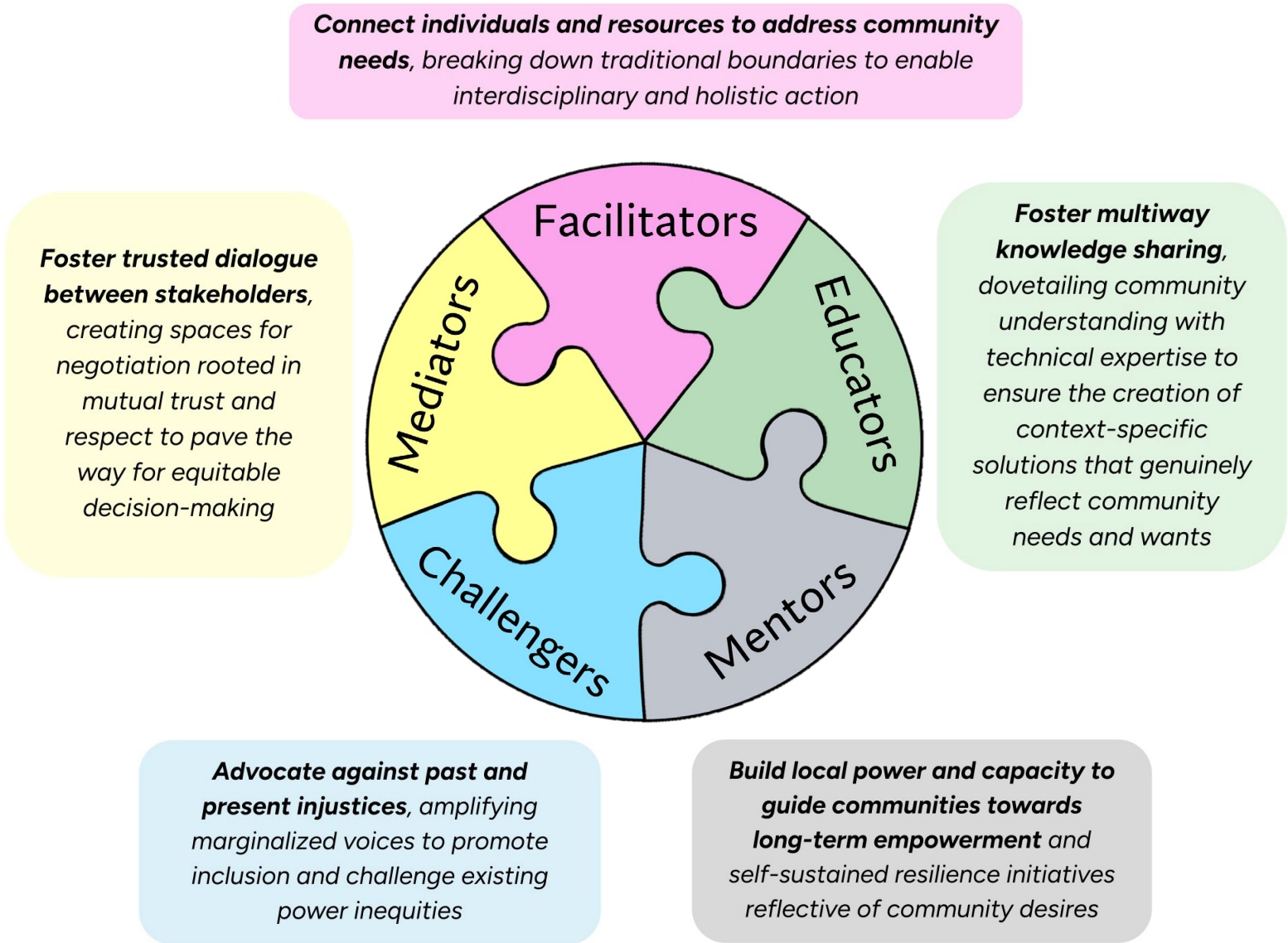


Figure 1: Five roles power fair and accountable spaces

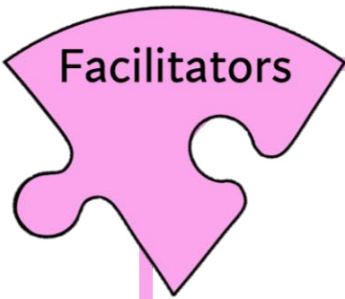
Facilitators connect across silos.

Facilitators connect individuals and resources to address community-specific priorities, breaking down traditional silos of work to encourage interdisciplinary and holistic action.

Facilitators in our cases helped transcend boundaries between government and other traditional centers of power, like academia and institutional non-profits, and frontline communities—work that is necessary for effective resilience planning.

Beyond connecting, facilitators ensure that community power is thoughtfully integrated throughout different angles of the planning process. For example, in the Save Our Compost Program, which advocated against waste disposal cuts that would disproportionately harm underserved communities, facilitators brought together distinct community groups that had not previously collaborated, working towards a shared goal of protecting the composting program. Similarly, in Aberdeen Gardens, where Wetlands Watch was involved, facilitators bridged traditionally separated communities, including public officials, lenders, and academic and technical experts.

Facilitators weave together community-driven knowledge and traditional areas of expertise. Their work provides the foundation for the reshaping of decision-making structures, allowing fair and accountable spaces to emerge and bring communities closer to more effective participation in planning processes, greater access to decision-making authority, and deeper, more relationship-based connections with government planners.



Facilitators

Save Our Compost Campaign

Climate Resilient Communities
Resilient Homes Program

Gullah Geechee SEA&ME
Program

Wetlands Watch Chesterfield
Heights

Silverleaf Buyout Program

Weatherization Funding in
Scotlandville

Adaptation Program in Menlo
Park & Bell Haven

Virgin Islands Post-Hurricane
Action

Early Warning Systems in
Alaska

St. Helena Community Meeting

Adaptation Program in East
Palo Alto

El Puente Advocacy for
BQGreen

Norfolk Sea Level Rise App

Miami Green Stormwater
Initiative

New York Flood Fellowship
Program

Staten Island Flood Maps

UPROSE Community
Engagement in Sunset Park

Gullah Geechee CREATE
Program

New Orleans PEP Projects

South Carolina Resilience
Planning

New Orleans for Lincoln Beach

Smoke Detectors Information

Rainproof NYC

Coastal Spine Resiliency Vision

Aberdeen Gardens
Engagement

North Shore Staten Island
Brownfield Negotiations

Climate Strong Communities

Be a Buddy Program

Collaboration with WEACT

Black Farmers and Green
Thumb Conferences and BUGS

“climate change is demanding co-governance, it's demanding that government move away from a place of trying to take care of us, to being in governance with us and being in partnership with us, so that the relationship really becomes stronger”

-Elizabeth Yeampierre, Executive Director, UPROSE.

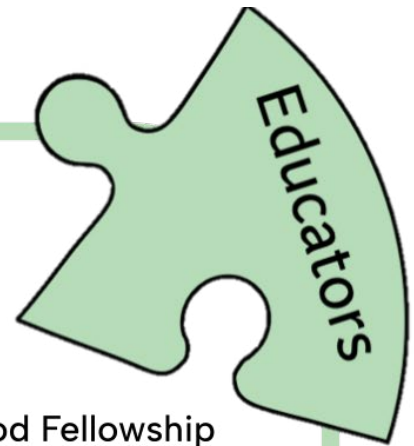
Educators bring together knowledge from different stakeholders and ensure that they are on an even playing field. Educators can come from within or outside the community; they can also serve as the links between communities.

Educators are critical in helping to ensure frontline community leaders have access to vital information, organizing interdisciplinary communication, and establishing the understanding needed to create context-specific solutions, which scientists and academics would not be able to grasp without the help of community members.

By arming both community members and agencies with the tools to reframe traditionally extractive processes that seek to employ cookie cutter-style initiatives across vastly diverse neighborhoods, educators can facilitate authority, and deeper, more relationship-based connections with government planners.

Educators foster two-way knowledge exchanges, linking local knowledge with technical expertise, to enable context-specific solutions that reflect a genuine understanding of community needs.

Educators help nudge players closer to more effective participation in planning processes and greater access. Educators "make sure people **understand the information—but it's also about [agencies] learning why the information isn't being heeded or understood**" -Dr. DeeDee Bennett Gayle, Associate Professor at the University at Albany, SUNY.



Save Our Compost Campaign

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Smoke Detectors Information

Rainproof NYC

Waterkeeper Ambassador
Program

“If you want impact, you need someone from the community to achieve it.”

-Sage Michael Pellet, Healthy Gulf New Orleans Climate Justice Organizer.

Mentors guide communities to long-term empowerment, building local power and capacity to develop, implement, and maintain resilience initiatives that reflect community needs.

Resilience planning is a long-term and ever-changing endeavour – climate change impacts and community needs will change over time. Ensuring that communities can advocate for themselves in future efforts, promote self-sufficiency, and cultivate supportive and long-lasting networks is crucial.

The goal of mentorship is to “[**build**] **capacity and cultivate long-term champions who are empowered as the torch carriers for implementation**” - Camille Manning-Broome, President and CEO of the Center for Planning Excellence.

Mentors can help ensure communities are prepared to lead their own adaptation journeys, by sharing relevant experiences, providing a sounding board for ideas, and supporting the development of effective participatory strategies.

Climate Resilient Communities
Resilient Homes Program

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Coastal Spine Resiliency Vision



Challengers stand against past and present injustices, amplifying the voices of disadvantaged communities to promote inclusive processes and reduce power imbalances.

Challengers can be individuals, organizations, entire communities, or established 'watchdog' organizations. For example, Miami Waterkeeper **"sued and successfully got the restoration of 10,000 endangered corals saved."** **With that success as fuel, they acted and "greatly damped two massive expansion dredges"** that had been proposed.
- Policy Director at advocacy organization, Coastal Florida

An equally successful example of the power of challengers can be seen in the community-based fight against gentrification in Flushing, Queens, supported by frontline organizations like Guardians of Flushing Waterways. Communities in neighborhoods spanning multiple boroughs in New York City, such as the Lower East Side, Red Hook, Harlem, and Flushing, also banded together through the "Save Our Compost" program to fight against waste disposal cuts that would have disproportionately harmed underserved communities.

Challengers are critical to holding initiatives and agencies accountable for going beyond traditionally performative promises about community engagement. Challengers can also foster collaborative approaches to problem-solving.



Mediators foster trusted dialogues between diverse stakeholders, laying the groundwork for equitable decision-making where differences can be negotiated respectfully.

Mediators create spaces where all participants have the opportunity to be heard and help to ensure that conversations between different stakeholders remain productive, respectful, and solution-oriented. The importance of mediators cannot be overstated. Many interviewees underscored the need for **“a non-biased person...to see if what the community asks for is what they’re actually receiving”** -Carolyn Ferguson, Environmental Justice Manager at Red Hook Initiative.

Most importantly, with a mediator bridging gaps and easing potentially pre-existing tensions, community trust and engagement in future planning processes both increase. During resilience planning efforts in Aberdeen Gardens, VA, described in detail below, neighborhood groups with differing perspectives found neutral ground and are now **“stepping up into broader planning [initiatives] for sea level rise and flooding”** - Skip Stiles, Founder and Senior Advisor, Wetlands Watch.



Save Our Compost Campaign -----	St. Helena Community Meeting -----	Aberdeen Gardens Engagement -----
Climate Resilient Communities Resilient Homes Program -----	Adaptation Program in East Palo Alto -----	North Shore Staten Island Brownfield Negotiations -----
Early Warning Systems in Alaska -----	El Puente Advocacy for BQGreen -----	

When individuals or organizations play multiple roles, they can strengthen outcomes.

We found that strong adaptation efforts are not only reliant on the presence of people playing the five roles described above, but also that results can be further strengthened by the presence of individuals or groups playing multiple roles, interacting together to create more responsive and equitable initiatives. For example, while it may be difficult for challengers or facilitators to also serve as mediators, they may be able to act as educators and mentors, as well.

“We work to bridge that gap between us as scientists [and the Sea Islands community members] because **just because we grow up with the salt marsh, it doesn’t mean we know exactly what its role is...**and just that when people grow up in a particular environment, it doesn't make them naturally knowledgeable where they can effectively communicate in a scientific way about that environment... they don't necessarily know what the scientists are referring to sometimes when they use terms like mitigation, adaptation, sustainability, or any of these things”

- Queen Quet, Chieftess of the Gullah Geechee Nation.

Not all stages of the planning process require individuals or organizations in all five of the specific roles our research identified. The action of each roleplayer is often highly time-dependent.

The roles in action: combinations that enabled fair and accountable cases

The cases shared with RCCP by our 22 interviewees highlight how roles are interconnected and how roleplayers often work in tandem. The relationships that emerge from the interweaving of these roles can provide foundational structure for lasting, fair, and accountable spaces.

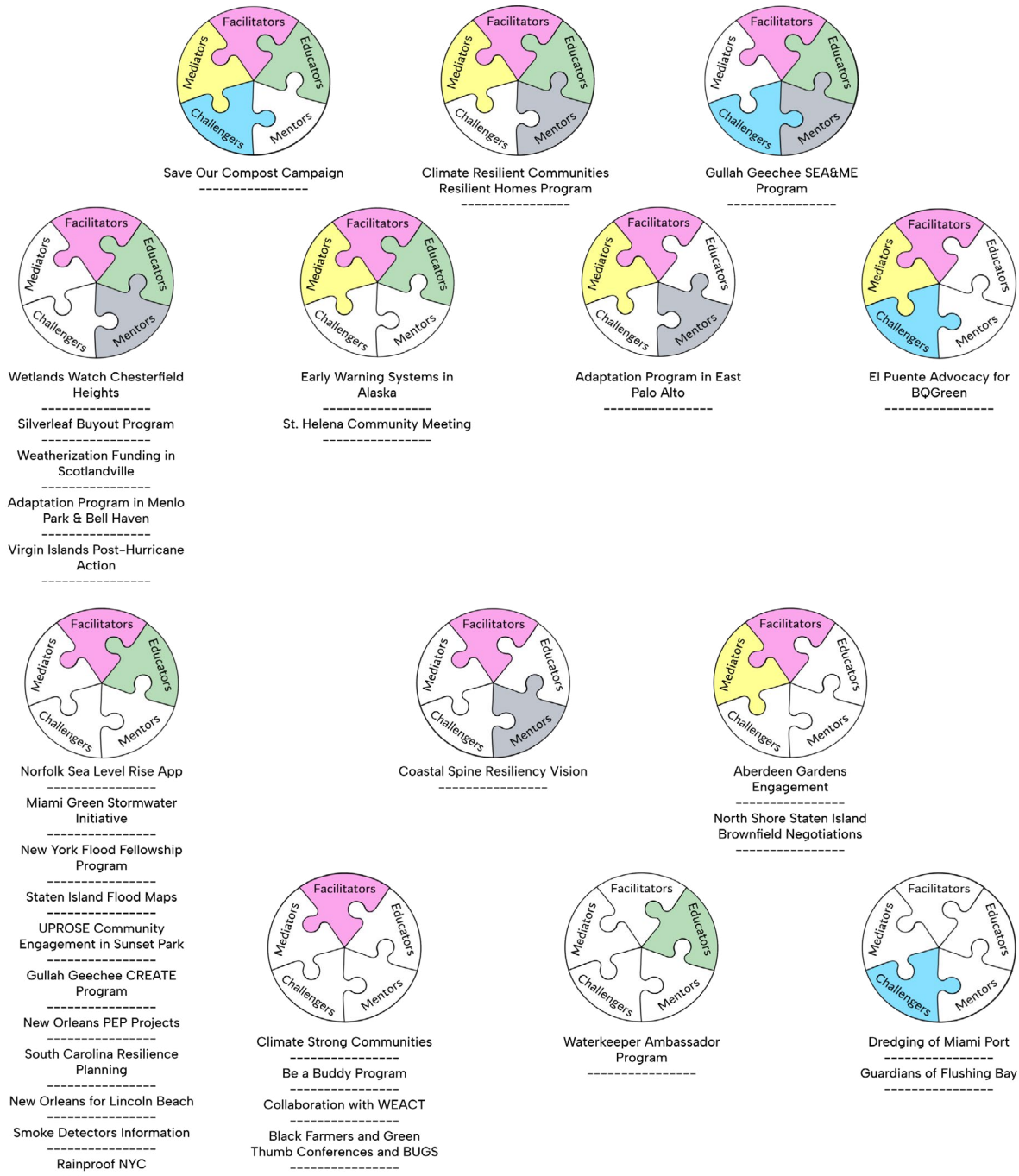


Figure 2: Interlocking Roles Across Successful Community-Centered Resilience Planning Case Studies. Key roles highlighted.

THE GULLAH GEECHEE

The Gullah Geechee people have successfully challenged government planners not only to hear the voices of their entire community but also to truly include community members in flooding initiatives from the very beginning of the planning process, thus holding planning agencies accountable for creating effective rather than extractive initiatives. To do this, the Gullah Geechee people have consistently:

- Defended themselves and their rights, continuously advocating for a seat at the table by creating their own organizations that center community stewardship of their ecosystem, rather than relying on governmental agencies to incorporate community members into their planning.
- Facilitated initiatives and forged connections between the community and academics/government agencies, through programs like SEA&ME
- Educated the community about the scientific terminology that relates to their experiences with flooding, and also helped those in traditional planning positions to understand what their community needs to move forward with further collaboration
- **"We are the ones best positioned to convey these concepts to our community, and then also translate it back from our community to policymakers and scientists and university people who are studying us unto death"** - Queen Quet, Chieftess of the Gullah Geechee Nation
- In doing so, they've ensured that their community can be self-sufficient in understanding their risks and acting upon them. The technical knowledge they're gaining is intended to supplement what they already know about their salt marshes.

ABERDEEN GARDENS

At Aberdeen Gardens in Hampton, VA, Wetlands Watch successfully built a strong foundation of trust between previously unrelated and sometimes even opposing groups of the community, increasing community engagement and representation in initiatives.

Wetlands Watch entered a community that was fragmented, with many conflicting parties.

- Before any project was initiated, Wetlands Watch had to resolve and mediate between these parties.
- Wetlands Watch set up neutral ground through various events: a fish fry and a trunk & treat, providing a safe space for stakeholders to resolve their differences and find shared values. **"There's a lot of rivalries and [so we] sort of try to do a Venn diagram and go, look, you're all concerned about this. So let's start our conversation** here and let's go to the elementary school because...that's a neutral ground where everybody meets...We must have spent \$400 on a fish fry...we're digging in big blocks of frozen fish and hiring people from the neighborhood to fry the fish at the school as sort of an icebreaker. That was one of the approaches we used. We [also] went to their Trunk or Treat event and handed out literature and candy" - Skip Stiles, Founder and Senior Advisor, Wetlands Watch.
- The connections formed in these conversations informed subsequent planning efforts, with their successful engagement creating a lasting effect - residents from that neighborhood are more involved in other regional projects. These people are now stepping up to support broader planning efforts.

What roleplayers can do and how they work together

Fair adaptation planning needs organizations and individuals who go beyond their everyday work to fill these roles. Warm bodies alone, however, aren't enough to transform resilience planning. Values of respect and collaboration combined with experience, shared effort, and institutional support are necessary conditions for their work to produce change.

Fair action: what it means and what it achieves. Fair action stems from relationships resting on respect and trust. Climate adaptation initiatives should prioritize relational approaches to have a lasting and meaningful impact. The extraordinary successes of the cases led by participants interviewed were often grounded in deep, respectful collaborations and relationships between individuals and entities with years of mutual engagement, reflecting a long-term trust-building process designed to fulfill both immediate and future needs, centering on the fundamental truth that many stakeholders bring valuable knowledge and understanding. In other cases, challengers have had to resort to legal action to hold planners accountable for their failure to center community wisdom and priority in planning. Such challenges can lead to better outcomes in immediate cases as well as greater attention to community

needs in future planning exercises. Importantly, even these types of challenges are extensions of communities' trust and investment in the challengers.

Roleplayers must know the terrain. In all the cases RCCP studied, our interviewees had deep and sustained experience in their localities. In their geography, they know people, have trust, and lead with relational approaches – collaboration isn't just something they do, it's something they value and believe in. Each of our interviewees had at least 2 years of experience in their community, ranging up to over 28 years of service, and a substantial majority of interviewees grew up or currently live in the communities that they serve. Additionally, many interviewees came from diverse professional backgrounds and so have experience with 'multiple hats'. They consistently emphasized how their varied roles bolstered their ability to work with communities because they were able to harness a wide array of perspectives and relationships they had gathered from their previous experiences.

Fair actions require shared effort. In each of the projects our interviewees shared, a key goal was to connect the strengths of residents and community-based organizations with those of governmental agencies that have official responsibility for meeting community needs and aspirations.

Role(s) of stakeholders vary across the case studies. Individuals work collaboratively to expand and evolve their contribution. On average, every interviewee mentioned at least three other players and entities involved in the process they described, highlighting the importance of collaboration. What this suggests is that in many settings, this collaboration is supported by a core group of trusted residents, CBO staff, and public-sector “translators”, who also steward the creation of resilient networks and ongoing partnerships. What emerges is a space of shared effort, where responsibilities and engagement are reimagined and sustained to meet the demands of equitable resilience.

Their relational networks represent a form of community-based resilience power - social infrastructure that can mobilize resources, knowledge, and advocacy to support technical interventions. For resilience planning to fully harness this power, diverse relational network-building must be established as core infrastructure within community-centered flood adaptation, both during the process and also nurtured and sustained, creating structures for continuity and enduring outcomes well beyond the completion of specific initiatives.

Individuals and organizations acting in each identified role must be supported. The influence of these actors depends on the skill and care they bring to their efforts to

ensure that community needs are at the center of resilience planning. Agency partners and community leaders should focus on nurturing high-quality and productive relationships between role players through increased and intentional support for initiatives, including full funding and the education needed for effective participation in resilience planning, to ensure that there is a strong foundational team or network with all the necessary resources to create successful outcomes.

Day to day work under this approach is busy: for one community program, their work is **“going to community events...[and simultaneously] having regularly scheduled meetings with city agencies around projects.”** From these, they saw their role as **“trying to [blend] information and feedback from communities about what they want... [with what’s] actually feasible and aligns with agency budgets, priorities, plans already in motion”**. - Agency Practitioner

Conclusion: Transforming Resilience Planning is a Challenge. These Cases Show a Pathway Forward

Effectively planning to protect frontline communities from the impacts of climate change and related disasters is easier said than done. RCCP's Fair and Accountable Spaces research shows that shifting to a 'relational' approach, valuing people and long-term trust-building over transactional practices, can be centrally important to making reliable, community-centered resilience planning the rule, not the exception.

Our interviewees discussed how challenging it is to participate in planning processes where they must fight to be heard; frontline communities have had to be 'brave' in extractive, unresponsive planning spaces for a long time. The presence of community partners and non-profit organizations acting as facilitators, educators, mentors, challengers, and mediators can change this dynamic; agencies, allies, and academics must now take a brave stance in support of those who live and work in frontline communities.

The experiences and achievements shared by our interviewees demonstrate that the challenging work of establishing fair and accountable planning spaces is well worth the effort.

Shifting from traditional, extractive planning to processes based on lasting relationships and mutual respect can be transformative. While our interviewees' bravery and actions, often reflected in small gains over many years, occurred in specific situations that may be very different from those confronting other communities, the values and outcomes our interviewees shared, along with the complementary roles they played, can broadly inspire new modes of action.

Solutions to specific flooding challenges in specific localities will vary, but **the presence of facilitators, educators, mentors, challengers, and mediators who prioritize and inspire respect, intention, and trust can transform community engagement and resilience planning** from a perfunctory exercise to a vital, collaborative, and restorative process led by and for communities. Ensuring that these roles are filled and cultivated as part of a relational approach to resiliency planning is imperative for success.