

ND-GAIN UAA Program
Case Study: Atlanta and Governmental Offices of Sustainability
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I. Introduction

My name is Anna Scartz. I am a rising sophomore planning on majoring in anthropology and economics. I believe that climate change is one of the most pressing issues facing our world today. I have always had a passion for caring for the environment. Now, at Notre Dame, I am involved in many environmental and climate change groups including GreeND, Fossil Free ND, and a Sustainability Plan Small Working Group.

I am very excited to be a part of the pilot Urban Adaptation Ambassador (UAA) program. The ND-GAIN project is an ambitious one: a detailed analysis of 278 cities and their potential damages due to climate change. Luckily most of the data can be found fairly easily for free online. However, this is not always the case and it still misses the more personal, intimate details of cities. The UAA program is an attempt to close the gap between indifferent data and human connections. As ambassadors, students such as myself are able to bring the information to their home cities. We are raising awareness of the program and conducting case studies aimed at helping the ND-GAIN team gather all that they need to create the best tool.

Abstract

My case study deals with city governments' Offices of Sustainability. I interacted with my local office and learned what would be most useful for cities to have in the tool. I created a survey which can be generalized and distributed to Offices all over the country in an attempt to receive as much feedback as possible while the tool is being produced. This case study provides background information regarding the city examined (Atlanta) and details the process of engaging and meeting with city officials. It also includes notes on the survey and a full copy attached at the end.

II. Atlanta Basic Information

Atlanta is located in the Deep South, but maintains a fairly liberal attitude, purporting itself as “a city too busy to hate” during the Civil Rights Era. Atlanta has approximately 463,878 residents according to 2015 census data and about 5.6 million people live in the metropolitan area.¹ The city of Atlanta sprung up at the ending of a few major railroads in the early 1800s and has been a point of commerce ever since. Today, Atlanta’s Hartsfield-Jackson Airport is the busiest in the world. Atlanta has the eight largest economy in the country and over 750 of the Fortune 1000 companies conduct business in the area².

Atlanta is committed to becoming a more sustainable city. Mayor Kasim Reed was one of the 364 “Climate Mayors” who pledged to uphold the Paris Climate Agreement. The city currently has an Office of Resilience as a part of the city government. The Office of Resilience helps Atlanta “prepare for sudden shocks and chronic stresses to its people, its infrastructure and the systems that support.”³ The office is partnered with 100 Resilient Cities (by the Rockefeller Foundation) and the chief resilience officer is Ms. Stephanie Stuckey. They are currently working on many projects to increase the sustainability of the city.

One project is increasing the green space in the city to a “minimum of 10 acres of green space per 1,000 residents and protect and restore the city’s tree canopy to 50 percent or greater.”⁴ The office also plans to “reduce, reuse and recycle 30 percent of the city’s residential waste by 2013, 50 percent by 2015, and 90 percent by 2020.”⁵ An initiative which is sustainable and also helps

¹ "Atlanta Population 2017." *Atlanta Population 2017 - World Population Review*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 Aug. 2017.

² "Atlanta." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 13 Aug. 2017. Web. 14 Aug. 2017.

³ "Atlanta, GA." *Atlanta, GA : About the Office of Resilience*. N.p., n.d. Web. 14 Aug. 2017.

⁴ "Atlanta, GA."

address another issue the city has (extreme traffic causing many problems) is the “Green Fleet” initiative. This program is reducing the number of city vehicle and how often they are used. It also encourages carpooling and other options decreasing carbon emissions. The Beltline, a path which goes through many park areas and previously abandoned/unused building space, has become a popular attraction, revitalized sections of Atlanta, and led to many residents getting outdoors and being more sustainable.

III. The State of Sustainability

As mentioned before, given its location and the general attitudes associated with the region, Atlanta is pretty progressive. One such example is the recent mandate that banned Styrofoam from use by restaurants in the airport. Given the size of the airport, this is a large step. The functions of the Office of Resilience also play a large role as shown in the previous section.

At a federal level, environmentalism and sustainability have been much discussed in the news this summer. The mass interest began when President Trump withdrew from the Paris Agreement, making the US one of only three countries (the other two being Syria and Nicaragua) who were not in the Agreement. It seems as if, since then, there has been at least one story on sustainability, climate change, energy, etc, each day. Alston and Bird (one of the biggest law firms in the city and where I am working this summer), even had a “lunch and learn” of deforestation and the rise of the oceans.

It is not just the media, either. The people are talking. I often heard co-workers talking about the recent events and wondering what effects there would be in the future. Once I heard the friend of a girl who had dropped a piece of trash tell her friend to pick it up “because global warming is coming to get you!” While this may not be the most accurate of statements and is not

a grand gesture of support for environmentalism, I think that it is still very important. It shows the little attitude and action shifts of the everyday citizen- exactly what we need to have a more sustainable future overall. I think that this is a good sign for those of us who invest so much in the cause. The conversations and actions show that it is a great time for cities to capitalize on the general attitude of the people in order to create change.

IV. Engagement

Due to the nature of my case study and my objective, I knew that I wanted to meet with a city official in the Office of Resilience. Prior to reaching out, I spent a lot of time researching the Atlanta Office of Resilience. In fact, in the course of the summer I actually saw the name change from the Office of Sustainability to the Office of Resilience. I explored their website and looked further into initiatives they had started. I tried to learn as much as I could from news sources and people around me in order to be prepared to meet with an official.

V. The Meeting

The meeting began with a brief overview of ND-GAIN and the UAA program. I introduced the idea of a city index and who I was.

A focus of the beginning of the conversation was the use of “mitigation” versus “adaptation.” The city official was adamant in saying that mitigation had to be done in addition to adaptation and was even more important. Some confusion arose because he seemed to define adaptation as only the immediate fix and anything that was meant to fix the cause of the problem long term as mitigation. This made him feel that ND-GAIN, by using the word adaptation, was ignoring a large part of the work that cities were doing and had to be done. I was able to clarify that; ND-

GAIN has a high concern for mitigation and even uses the word in its definition of adaptation. This was very important to the city official.

Another topic we discussed was how this initiative was different other programs that Atlanta is already heavily involved in. The program is indeed similar in that it looks at potential risks that could happen to cities. In discussing both programs however, a few differences came up. The city official mentioned that other organizations were reluctant to use the word “climate” and didn’t provide solutions. He said it was “cute” to measure, but what he wanted to see was “what are you going to do about that?” The official appreciated that ND-GAIN did not shy away from that for political (or other) reasons.

During this meeting, the official and I went through the general presentation of ND-GAIN that was provided by the team beforehand. This was very helpful in structuring the conversation and a good way to make sure I went through everything in a logical order. The official did approve of and like the methodology of ND-GAIN. He did say that he would like to see more of the indicators. He was interested in hearing how the methodology and data collection would be available on the tool. The official felt it was important that the tool be so see-through that he would be able to know where the information came from, from the site.

Since the end result of this initiative is being referred to as a tool, the official wanted to see proposed solutions to issues, but also what the costs (monetary and other) would be and what had worked previously. He wanted to know what other cities in similar situations have done. We discussed how this might involve a follow-up evaluation of cities or at least a question of how they are dealing with the shocks/hazards that have come to their city. The solutions and effectiveness of results are what the official felt would make the tool unique and useful.

While discussing how the tool would be used by cities, we began to talk about the role and effectiveness of cities, not necessarily just in responding to shocks but in addressing climate change in general. I pointed out all of the commitments that city mayors (including Kasim Reed of Atlanta) have made lately and the positive attitude citizens seem to have. While the official pointed out that even if the local governments did want to start acting, they were often dependent on the federal government and could be influenced in many ways by them. The Atlanta Office of Resilience, for example, is funded mostly by federal money. This is not a unique circumstance and puts the office in a difficult situation as they must try and do what they feel is right but avoid losing their funding. I pointed out that being privately funded by the Kresge institute was one advantage ND-GAIN has although unfortunately, we cannot fund cities in their efforts.

Overall the official seemed very interested in the program and willing and ready to learn more. He had many questions and seemed very engaged. Both his questions and his responses to those I asked him will be very useful in molding the tool into the best product for cities all over the country in their own quest to mitigate and adapt to shocks and risks.

VI. Sources

- "Atlanta Population 2017." *Atlanta Population 2017 - World Population Review*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 Aug. 2017. <http://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/atlanta-population/>
- "Atlanta, GA." *Atlanta, GA : About the Office of Resilience*. N.p., n.d. Web. 14 Aug. 2017. <https://www.atlantaga.gov/government/mayor-s-office/executive-offices/office-of-resilience/about-the-office-of-sustainability>
- "Atlanta." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 13 Aug. 2017. Web. 14 Aug. 2017. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlanta>
- The Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative, <https://gain.org>

VII. Survey Questions

Knowledge of Climate Hazards and Priorities

1. As you are well aware, climate change poses significant risks, particularly to lives and livelihoods within the urban sphere. Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative (ND-GAIN) is developing the Urban Adaptation Assessment (UAA), a tool that aims to assess the vulnerability of 278 U.S. cities with populations over 100,000 to climate change hazards and their readiness to adapt. From your perspective, what are the significant risks that Atlanta faces in terms of climate change hazards?
 - a. How is Atlanta addressing these risks and how are they prioritized?
 - b. What are some successful adaptation efforts or initiatives currently being implemented in Atlanta?
 - c. Where do challenges or gaps in knowledge lie in the implementation of adaptation efforts?

Hazard Data

2. The UAA is unique in that it incorporates adaptive capacity and readiness, the use of outcome data to determine the best indicators, its broad geographic coverage and hazard specificity. Moreover, the UAA specifically assesses the vulnerability of cities to the climate change hazards of extreme heat, extreme cold, inland flooding, drought and coastal flooding.
 - a. Can you envision data on these hazards being information to your adaptation planning?

Decision-making Process

3. Overall, the UAA aims to better inform city-level managers and municipal government official on adaptation planning. From your perspective, who are the key city leaders in Atlanta's decision-making process?
 - a. What resources are currently being utilized to assist these leaders in the adaptation planning process?
 - b. What technology is being utilized?

Stakeholder Engagement

4. The UAA intends to engage a range of stakeholders including city managers, municipal government officials, community leaders and organizers as well as urban residents.
 - a. Through what means does Atlanta engage stakeholders in their decision-making processes?
 - b. What are some challenges Atlanta has faced in engaging stakeholders?

Social Inequity

5. The UAA will also include sub-city level data to capture, and allow exploration of, potential inequities within a city and highlights more inclusive adaptation options for all residents. Furthermore, the UAA will provide information that will aid in the identification of

populations on the front lines of climate change that do not have resources to adequately adapt to climate risks. How does Atlanta currently define vulnerable populations?

- a. In what ways is Atlanta addressing social inequities in their climate adaptation planning?
- b. What are some challenges decision-makers encounter in doing so?
- c. What information would be useful to better inform this process?

Dashboard & Visualization

6. The UAA will present an open-source, online platform that will include elements such as a city profile, city-to-city comparisons and social equity mapping.
 - a. Who in the Office of Resilience would utilize the platform the most?
 - b. In what capacity does the City envision the “tool” being used?
 - c. What additional features would you like to see included as a part of this platform?
 - d. Besides a web-based platform, can you foresee the UAA tool being useful in other formats (i.e. app-based format)?

Climate Networks & Coalitions

7. As stated prior, the UAA is intended to spark conversation and dialogue, both amongst city stakeholders as well as between cities.
 - a. Currently, is Atlanta part of any climate networks or coalitions?
 - i. If so, what kind of information is shared?
 - b. Can you envision the UAA playing a role in helping the City build out these networks and coalitions?

Ambassador Program

8. This is the pilot of the Urban Ambassador program. Would the city benefit from the continuation of the program in this form?
 - a. Are there any recommendations/requests for future Ambassadors?

General

9. This survey is currently in the development and refinement phase, and potentially, be sent to other Offices of Resilience/Sustainability in more of our UAA cities. Are there any questions that you would recommend including moving forward?
 - a. Any other comments?
 - b. What are some efficient ways to connect with other Resilience/Sustainability Offices to disseminate the survey?

This case study reflects the opinion and sole research of the author, an Urban Ambassador who participated in ND-GAIN's pilot program. Published August 2017.