**Adapt or Die: Why the Environmental Buzzword of 2013 Will Be *Resilience***

By [Bryan Walsh](http://science.time.com/author/bryanrwalsh/)Jan. 08, 2013

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A destroyed home sets along the beach in the Belle Harbor neighborhood in the Rockaways in Queens, N.Y., Jan. 2, 2013.

Journalists and politicians have short memories. Just two months ago, Superstorm Sandy was everywhere in the news. And it wasn’t just weather porn — there was serious debate about the impact [climate change](http://topics.time.com/climate-change/) had on the storm and about the now obvious need to prepare cities for worse to come. *Bloomberg Businessweek* put it on the cover — “[It’s Global Warming, Stupid](http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-11-01/its-global-warming-stupid)” — and in my [TIMEcover story](http://science.time.com/2012/11/05/sandy-what-a-coastal-u-s-can-learn-from-other-threatened-cities/), I focused on adaptations that cities like [New York](http://topics.time.com/new-york/) could make now to ensure that the next storm wouldn’t be so destructive. Politicians like New York Mayor [Michael Bloomberg](http://topics.time.com/michael-bloomberg/) and New York Governor Andrew Cuomo [emphasized the need](http://science.time.com/2012/10/30/climate-change-and-sandy-why-we-need-to-prepare-for-a-warmer-world/) to rebuild better from Sandy, to ensure that the billions that would go into storm response would also flow to the sorts of global-warming-adaptation initiatives that would climate-proof cities. To proponents of climate action, Sandy seemed like a last, desperate chance. If the sight of flooding streets in lower Manhattan couldn’t galvanize political will on climate-change adaptation, what would?

For the U.S. Congress, however, it seems that what is likely to be the second most expensive extreme weather event in U.S. history isn’t quite enough to spur meaningful action. There’s little indication from the White House or Congress that climate change will be a priority this term. Storm-hit states like New York and New Jersey [have been reduced](http://www.recordonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20130103/NEWS/130109940Article) to begging — or in New Jersey Governor Chris Christie’s case, [bellowing](http://tpmdc.talkingpointsmemo.com/2013/01/christie-sandy-aid-boehner.php) — for delayed aid from Congress. And even that money is likely to come with strings, with Republican House members [questioning why funds](http://thehill.com/blogs/on-the-money/appropriations/275089-house-releases-smaller-hurricane-sandy-bill) should go not just to repair damage, but also to improve existing infrastructure. The brief moment when Americans saw and feared the effects of global warming has already been eclipsed by the long-running, intra-Washington war over the nation’s finances, or whatever is up next on *Politico*.

So don’t expect a whole lot from Washington in 2013 or beyond. But that doesn’t mean the need to adapt to climate change has disappeared. That’s one of the main messages of the World Economic Forum’s (WEF) [Global Risks 2013 report](http://www.weforum.org/globalrisks2013/dataexplorer), which came out today, just a couple of weeks before the group’s annual confab in Davos, Switzerland. And it’s at the heart of a hastily drafted report put out by New York’s [NYS 2100 commission](http://inhabitat.com/nyc/nys-2100-commission-recommends-major-changes-to-cope-with-worsening-storms/), established by Cuomo in the wake of Superstorm Sandy to advise the state and city government on how they should protect themselves even as the weather grows less predictable and their populations grow. The message of both reports is clear: corporations and cities alike are entering an age of intensifying environmental risks, and action is essential — now.

The NYS 2100 report, [published in advance by the New York *Times*](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/07/nyregion/new-york-state-storm-panel-recommends-major-changes.html), recommends a range of options to blunt the impact of the next Sandy. Most notably, the study says the state should consider building vast storm barriers with movable gates that would span the Narrows, the true-to-its-name tidal strait that separates the New York City boroughs of Staten Island and Brooklyn. (The Verrazano Bridge, which marks the start of the New York Marathon course, crosses over the Narrows.) Cities like London and Rotterdam already have similar storm barriers — I [wrote about them recently for TIME](http://science.time.com/2012/11/05/sandy-what-a-coastal-u-s-can-learn-from-other-threatened-cities/)— and such a defense system would have certainly reduced the unprecedented flooding that struck lower Manhattan. But a barrier on that scale would be extremely expensive — likely in the tens of billions of dollars — and it would protect only part of New York City. Inevitably, some New Yorkers would be left out.

The commission’s report also emphasizes what might be called “soft” adaptation, including converting some of New York’s industrial coast back into oyster beds, which would provide natural protection from floods. (Oyster beds can act as buffers against flooding, while also filtering pollutants in the water.) There are also recommendations for infrastructure projects that make sense with or without another Sandy, including a new rail tunnel under the Hudson River to alleviate commuter traffic and a connection between Penn Station and rail lines that run north to New York’s Hudson Valley and Connecticut. But as the commission’s co-chair Judith Rodin of the Rockefeller Foundation [noted](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/07/nyregion/new-york-state-storm-panel-recommends-major-changes.html), the key is building a more resilient New York, a city capable of bouncing back from a range of natural and man-made threats:

Research, practice, thought, conversation, debate and hard experience with disasters around the world — from post-Katrina New Orleans to post-tsunami Asia — form the bedrock of the recommendations in this preliminary report; many of which we can implement immediately, and all of which would ultimately save dollars and even lives.

Of course, the policy world is littered with the recommendations of blue-ribbon commissions that never came to be, either because of cost or political viability, and I wouldn’t be surprised if much of the NYS 2100 study never advances beyond the page. But it’s worth noting that Davos-class CEOs — people who presumably can get things done — are becoming increasingly worried about environmental extremes. In the WEF Global Risks report — developed from an annual survey of 1,000 experts from industry, business, government and civil society — respondents ranked rising greenhouse-gas emissions and water-supply crises as two of the top-five risks most likely to manifest over the next decade.

Just as the global economy has been buffeted by unforeseen and damaging shocks over the past several years, earth’s environmental system — which underpins the global economy, not to mention pretty much all life on the planet — is increasingly vulnerable. And just as the international community has worked to make the global economy more resilient in the face of major financial shocks, so we need to design cities and systems that minimize environmental shocks when they happen, as David Cole, the chief risk officer of the reinsurer Swiss Re, put it:

Coping with the economic and climate-change crises is unfortunately no longer seen as a continuum, but as opposing choices. The idea has gained ground that we can’t have solutions to both. But we need to go beyond this thinking-in-boxes approach. So because smart risk management is about taking a holistic stance on situations, we should do the same when it comes to the economic and climate-change challenges we’re facing.

It’s easy in the immediate aftermath of disaster, when the photos and the videos of loss are still fresh, to swear that this time will be the last time; that we’ll finally make the hard decisions now to head off catastrophe. It’s harder to keep those promises as the memories fade, as media and politicians move to the next crisis. In 2013, we’ll see if this time really was different.