

ACT Mobile: Landscape Scan Briefing & Initiative Orientation

Orientation Summary

On January 22, 2025, the Gulf Research Program (GRP) of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine held a virtual event to introduce its Adaptive Capacities for Transformation (ACT) Initiative. This event brought together a variety of participants from local nonprofits, foundations, academic institutions, and government agencies. It served as a discussion forum for the findings of a recent landscape scan that mapped ongoing health and resilience efforts in disaster-affected communities throughout Mobile County, AL, and as an orientation to its follow-on work: the ACT Initiative.

The GRP's goal was to have participants gain a deeper understanding of three major questions:

- (1) What do the landscape scan findings mean to participants and their work?
- (2) What do the landscape scan findings mean to the GRP and its work?
- (3) What could the landscape scan findings mean for everyone (participants and GRP) going forward in a collaboration via the ACT Initiative?

Participants came with a shared interest in learning more about ACT, connecting with others, tackling similar issues, and identifying new opportunities for working together. GRP staff opened the session by emphasizing these goals, expressing their hope that the ACT Initiative would evolve into a collaborative framework capable of advancing health and resilience outcomes.

A key component of the event was the presentation of a landscape scan conducted in Mobile County by consultant Melissa McKnight. Her work identified 63 active projects focused on climate, health, and equity, painting a detailed picture of both the strengths and challenges shaping the community's health and resilience landscape. Ms. McKnight noted that many organizations in the area demonstrate a strong commitment to community engagement and collaboration. However, she also identified resource gaps and inequitable funding distribution as challenges. Ms. McKnight emphasized the need for trust-based philanthropy and the recognition of community members as experts. The findings indicated a desire for a more structured collaborative approach to effectively address community priorities.

These findings led to a discussion among attendees on the accuracy and meaningfulness of the findings identified through the landscape scan. Participants shared their own experiences and perspectives. Some spoke of the presence of silos within the community, describing a sense of disorganization despite efforts to collaborate. One participant noted the importance of receiving tangible support for their work, rather than just verbal acknowledgment. Several

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participants emphasized the importance of collaboration with a unified mission among community groups. There was also a conversation surrounding the challenges faced by smaller organizations in securing funding and suggestions that they collaborate to pursue grants collectively, as well as stressing the need for equal power distribution and the importance of working together to identify shared goals.

To provide a scientific foundation for this work, the GRP introduced group concept mapping as the primary methodology through which ACT will gather input and organize collective priorities. Dr. Scott Rosas from Concept Systems, Inc. provided an orientation to this methodology and piloted a focus prompt: “What does your community need to deal with the effects of multiple disasters?”

Feedback from participants included the following comments on prompt phrasing:

- Defining “disaster”: What is a disaster to some isn’t a disaster to others. The academic literature has definitions for disasters versus catastrophes.
- Using “deal with”: the term seemed passive to one participant, who suggested to use “cope with” instead. Other participants raised the point that community leaders shouldn’t be left with the responsibility of dealing/coping with disasters, which is what the term resilience has traditionally been used to suggest, but rather some responsibility should be on local government agencies. Alternatively, other participants felt that the term “deal with” was clear and something their community members could relate to and understand.
- Defining “community”: how we define community was briefly mentioned but not further expanded upon.
- Using “mitigate” or “mitigate risk”: these terms were suggested to incorporate since they are normally used by emergency management and volunteer organizations after a disaster (VOADs).

In preparation for the next phase of the ACT Initiative, the event concluded with a stakeholder mapping exercise. The purpose of this exercise was to gather participants’ perspectives on which stakeholder groups should be considered for future consultation. Using a matrix, participants assessed each stakeholder group’s potential interest in engaging with health-, resilience-, and/or disaster-related issues and their influence within the community (both on a high versus low scale). This exercise helped identify stakeholders whose positioning may inform or affect future engagement efforts under the ACT Initiative.