

“Natural” Disasters are Social Problems: Learning from Katrina

by

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The Problem

Natural disasters provide textbook examples of how the cumulative effects of discrimination and social *injustice*, particularly in social service delivery, leave people unprotected, unassisted and unaccounted for in the event of a sudden system breakdown.

Disasters tend to intensify pre-existing inequalities and social problems, and most experts agree that seemingly “unpredictable” disasters resulting from natural causes are in fact *very* foreseeable.

Illustrative is the 2005 “double disaster” of Hurricane Katrina and the resulting floods, followed by an equally devastating but avoidable blow delivered in the form of botched relief and reconstruction efforts. Many victims belonging to previously disenfranchised lower class and ethnic minority statuses were ultimately displaced in the aftermath, making participation in the recovery process practically impossible. The whole world watched as poor planning, neglect, and incompetence compounded the suffering of those left behind after the evacuations, most of whom were poor, African American, elderly or people with disabilities. With the basic infrastructure of New Orleans destroyed, shipping from its major port came to a halt, an aging public transportation system stalled, government functions evaporated, public records floated in contaminated waters, and health care facilities were no longer operative.

A critical historical juncture arises out of the ashes of disasters like Katrina that presents opportunities for positive changes that can unfold through the reconstruction process. If informed by a vision of social justice and participatory democracy, the social welfare of the most vulnerable sectors can be maximized, allowing for a more rapid transition out of the emergency and shelter stage towards recovery, reconstruction and more equitable development. Such positive change requires dedicated effort by all levels of government to break with “business as usual,” using an approach that incorporates the principles of participatory democracy and community-based development. In the rebuilding process of New Orleans and surrounding Gulf Coast areas, significant strides toward rebuilding the region on a more just and inclusive basis would have required the organization, empowerment and very fullest participation of area residents, including the over 110,000 citizens who remained displaced from the area well over two years later.

In contrast, the essential thrust of government sponsored plans, policies, and programs of recovery and reconstruction tended to favor the interests of big business and the wealthy. Documented studies by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and a U.S. House of Representatives report point to widespread corruption and mismanagement in the awarding of demolition and reconstruction contracts. Throughout the Katrina aftermath, the media highlighted, among other things, the heroism, compassion, and generosity of area residents and voluntary organizations helping to meet the needs of those most afflicted. Less talked about was the valiant struggle of such organizations to exert influence over the recovery process. There

should be renewed efforts to draw upon the sponsored urban redesign models that include a multitude of religious, civic, bi-partisan, and neighborhood groups and organizations that are eager to work with government and local businesses to restore the distinctive character of New Orleans and to rebuild the Gulf Coast under conditions of dignity and justice. Two key questions have shaped the contested terrain: Whose vision will guide the reconstruction of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast? Who will do the rebuilding?

The Research Evidence

Studies have concluded that key governmental agencies reaching up to the Federal executive branch failed to heed warnings about the probable catastrophic consequences should a major storm pass precisely through the path taken by Katrina.

For decades, the Army Corps of Engineers argued that the existing antiquated levee system would not protect the area from a direct hit by a major hurricane. FEMA's "Hurricane Pam" simulation forecasted the catastrophe. The frequent path of hurricanes tracking Northward through the Caribbean Islands essentially made this occurrence inevitable.

The human costs and suffering were exacerbated by the lack of a coherent and effective response plan. The media initially focused on FEMA and Homeland Security, both of which struggled to define their respective jurisdictions while little immediate aid was delivered. For its part, the State of Louisiana quickly found its resources being stretched thin. Those emergency response plans that were in place faltered because of the failure to properly execute them. One telling example was the provision in Louisiana's emergency plan that specified that the State's Transportation Secretary was responsible for evacuating all nursing homes in the area. The failure to do so contributed to numerous deaths including a highly publicized case in which 35 residents drowned in a single nursing home in St. Bernard Parish.

Meanwhile, the City of New Orleans also lacked a coherent plan to evacuate the large numbers of people being affected. Most people without the personal resources needed to escape were left behind to fend for themselves. For the first few days, the local police and fire personnel were the only visible representatives of government in the area. Understaffed and otherwise ill-equipped to handle the crisis, they made numerous errors in judgment that undermined their legitimacy, further exacerbated by various instances of corruption and theft. Following exaggerated reports of social unrest, military forces were called in, ultimately heightening tensions within a highly distressed population.

In the aftermath of the storm, approximately 20,000 residents received federal or state support for housing. Seventy-seven thousand rental units were destroyed and the more than half of the residents of New Orleans who were renters now make up the majority of those who are still displaced. Rents in the area have increased by 40-50 percent, putting the average apartment out of reach for low wage earning families. Two years after the disaster, only about 21 percent of low to mid-income rental units were being covered by government rebuilding programs.

There are now over 12,000 estimated homeless people living in New Orleans. A class action lawsuit was required to halt the government's destruction of entire neighborhoods without

adequate owner notification or compensation. Federal agency reconstruction plans continue to impose a homogeneous, suburban configuration onto a historically diverse, multilayered urban landscape.

The Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) plans to demolish 3,000 public housing units, replacing them with only 1,000 units designed for mixed income residents. A major struggle waged by former public housing residents and supporters failed to deter these plans. This will disproportionately affect the city's African American communities. Most former public housing residents are still displaced and denied the opportunity to retrieve any remaining personal belongings even from those units that escaped flood damage. Plans to raze public housing projects and replace them with smaller, "mixed income" neighborhoods simply do not adequately address the housing needs of all those who were affected by the disaster.

Widespread complaints from area residents indicated that insurance companies issued lower than expected settlements, rejected the claims of many policyholders, and have still not settled many pending claims. In defiance of state law, many major companies have in fact cancelled the policies of long term customers. Official investigations of the industry are now underway to assess the veracity of allegations that insurance companies colluded in fixing prices and systematically orchestrated low damage assessments. If true, these might indicate deliberate attempts to shift the burden from the insurance companies back onto the taxpayers who provide compensation through federal flood insurance and subsidized rebuilding programs.

Policy Recommendations and Solutions

For the immediate area affected by Katrina

- Reconstruction policies should make local social and economic development their highest priority. Without local development at its core, the result of the process will be to continue the historic dependency of the area on federal and state sponsored relief funds. Louisiana is ranked among the lowest in fiscal capacity, thereby limiting the state government's ability to provide direct aid to the poor.
- Federal program payouts must be streamlined to circumvent the red tape associated with chronic delays. While Federal agencies have agreed to pay at least \$2.3 billion for rebuilding Louisiana public works like schools, sewers and police stations, only about 28 percent (\$650 million) of that money has been allocated.
- Central to the Katrina recovery process is the availability of affordable housing for middle and low income residents and displaced families. New Orleans is desperate for the return of its former workers, particularly in the low wage sectors of the tourist and construction industries. But these people cannot return to New Orleans without the availability of affordable housing.
- Long term solutions to the housing problem must include economic development programs directly aimed at the poor sectors of the area. While immediate attention must be given to avoid the destruction of historically established African American communities in the course of short-term rebuilding efforts, direct participation of the residents and the displaced is vital to developing a successful and more sustainable housing reconstruction plan. Government

should work assertively with the private sector to guarantee the availability of affordable and subsidized housing for low income residents.

- Additional Federal and State funding should be made available for studies. It is essential to better understand how deeply rooted class and racial conflicts specifically manifest themselves in disaster situations and can lead to potentially explosive social outcomes. State funding for research should give special priority to initiatives proposed by universities located in affected and surrounding areas. Katrina reconstruction constitutes an important case study for deeper exploration into the torn fabric of the U.S. social safety net.

More General Recommendations Based on the Lessons of Katrina:

- Coordinated efforts at all levels of government must develop genuine mechanisms for community and citizen participation in emergency prevention and response plans. Communities at risk of disaster must be involved in all preventive planning. FEMA's organizational structure should be redesigned to include the active participation of state and local resident groups in emergency response planning.
- Comprehensive rebuilding must take historical social inequalities into account when forming reactivation plans for essential social services. The break in "business as usual" that occurs in the context of major disasters presents an exceptional opportunity to correct stubborn patterns of structural discrimination. The needs of the least powerful social groups must be made a top priority. Basic and universal human rights to housing, employment, safety, freedom from discrimination and the right to return must be protected. Katrina taught the difficult lesson that all social sectors have a critical role to play in pre-disaster prevention and post-disaster reconstruction. The goal is not simply to return to the *status quo ante* but rather to ensure better access to critical social services in the rebuilding of a better society.

Key Resources

Albala-Bertrand, J.M. 1993. *Political Economy of Large Natural Disasters*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Corotis, Ross B. and Elaine Enarson. *Socio-Economic Disparities in Community Consequences to Natural Disasters*. http://www.ifed.ethz.ch/events/Forum04/Corotis_paper.pdf

Hook, William H. *The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina*. Case study 2006. The American Meteorological Society.
<http://www.ametsoc.org/atmospolicy/SPCCaseStudy06Hooke.html>

Nigg, Joanne M. and Kathleen J. Tierney. 1993. *Disasters and Social Change: Consequences for Community Construct and Affect*. Disaster Research Center, University of Delaware.
<http://www.udel.edu/DRC/preliminary/195.pdf>

United States House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform --- Minority Staff Special Investigations Division. August 2006. *Waste, Fraud and Abuse in Hurricane Katrina Contracts*. <http://oversight.house.gov/Documents/20060824110705-30132.pdf>

Useful Web Sites

Brookings Institute. The Brookings Institution is a nonprofit public policy organization based in Washington, DC. www.brookings.edu/

Disaster Research Center, University of Delaware. Contains an extensive collection of articles and analyses on the social and behavioral aspects of disasters.
<http://www.udel.edu/DRC/publications.html>

Greater New Orleans Community Data Center (GNOCDC) is a product of Greater New Orleans Nonprofit Knowledge Works. The Data Center provides sustainable sources of data and information to support nonprofit planning in a rapidly changing post-catastrophe environment.
<http://www.gnocdc.org/>

Quigley, Bill. *Lessons Learned by Grassroots Katrina and Tsunami Social Justice Activists*.
www.justiceforneworleans.org

Social Science Research Council. www.ssrc.org/

Urban Institute Non Partisan Economic and Social Policy Research. www.urban.org

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