

Hurricane Katrina: Humanitarian Obligations and Lessons Learned

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Abstract

As of 2011, there still are lessons to be learned from Hurricane Katrina, its survivors, and the government assistance efforts, linked to the background effects of poverty and vulnerability. Key findings of this rapid on-set disaster are presented. Ethical implications for humanitarian assistance building on the theory of obligation, and the provision of recommendations on how to resolve some issues with natural disasters in the United States, also are featured.

(Key Words: Hurricane Katrina, poverty, theory of obligation)

Introduction:

Author Michael Eric Dyson and his wife visited Pompeii in August 2005 and couldn't help but notice how the "hot head" of Vesuvius and the winds of Hurricane Katrina shared similar stories of vulnerability, poverty, and natural disaster. When the city of Pompeii witnessed disaster it was the slaves who didn't own horses or carriages who were victim to the crisis. In New Orleans, "when the city fell to the fury of nature, (the poor) were most vulnerable to the environment's brutal backlash" (Dyson 2006, x). There are lessons to be learned from Hurricane Katrina, the survivors, government assistance, and the effects of poverty and vulnerability. In this report I will discuss the key findings of this rapid on-set disaster, ethical implications for humanitarian assistance involving the theory of obligation, and provide recommendations on how to resolve certain related issues involving natural disasters in the United States.

Overview:

Holly Ann Williams defines complex humanitarian emergencies as "situations in which large civilian populations are exposed to... population displacement resulting in excess morbidity and mortality" (Van Arsdale 2011). As a major, rapid on-set natural disaster, Hurricane Katrina is considered a humanitarian emergency, as government officials, NGOs, and volunteers crossed cultural, economic, and geographical boundaries to help survivors. A timeline of important events is listed below

- On Tuesday, August 23, 2005, the United States National Hurricane Center reported at 5:00 p.m. EDT that tropical depression 12 had taken shape over the southeastern Bahamas (National Hurricane Center 2005).
- On Friday, August 26th, Hurricane Katrina underwent dangerously rapid expansions; at 5:00 p.m. CDT it was announced that it would soon reach Category 3 intensity (*Hurricane Katrina* 2006).

- At 5:00 p.m. Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco declared a state of emergency while on Saturday, August 27th, Governor Haley Barbour followed suit in Mississippi (Press Release 2005).
- On Friday night Governor Barbour requested 1,000 National Guard troops with 600 on standby, and Governor Blanco summoned 4,000 (Eichel et al. 2005).
- On Saturday, August 27th, President George W. Bush declared a state of emergency for Louisiana, and for Mississippi and Alabama the following day (Dyson 2006, 57).
- By 4:00 p.m. CDT on Saturday, Governor Blanco ordered contra-flow out of the coastal areas to speed evacuation and New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin issued a voluntary evacuation at 5:00 p.m. (Nolan 2005).
- On Sunday, August 28th, the National Weather Service warned that the storm would make southeast Louisiana “uninhabitable for weeks, perhaps longer,” and that there would be “human suffering incredible by modern standards.” The agency also warned in capital letters: “SOME LEVEES IN THE GREATER NEW ORLEANS AREA COULD BE OVERTOPPED” (Eichel et al. 2005).
- At 10:00 a.m. on Sunday, Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin held a televised press conference where Nagin confessed, “we’re facing the storm most of us have feared.... this is going to be an unprecedented event,” and announced a mandatory evacuation order. They urged those who couldn’t evacuate to get a ride with friends or family, or get to the Superdome (*Hurricane Katrina* 2006).
- Between 3:00 and 5:00 a.m. Monday morning, August 29th, the Army Corps of Engineers headquarters announced a breach in the 17th Street Canal levee (MacCash and Bryne 2005).
- On Monday at 6:10 a.m. CDT, Katrina made landfall as a Category 4 storm south of Buras, Louisiana, along the Mississippi Delta, and brushed the outskirts of New Orleans around 9:00 a.m. as 6 to 8 feet of water covered the Lower Ninth Ward (NASA 2005).
- By Wednesday, August 31st, the Superdome and the New Orleans Convention center were filled beyond capacity as nearly 100,000 people waited to be evacuated and 80% of New Orleans was under water (Dyson 2006, 66).
- By Friday, September 2nd, thousands more troops were able to reach New Orleans and evacuation of survivors stretched throughout the south. In the end, an estimated 400,000 jobs were lost, 1,836 people died, 705 people were still reported as missing, 275,000 homes were destroyed, and damage costs to the United States were an estimated \$110 billion (*Hurricane Katrina* 2006).

Key Findings:

An analysis of key findings indicates both positive and negative impacts of the disaster.

According to Michael Eric Dyson, “the people of America (had) done a remarkable job in

responding to Hurricane Katrina, and to Hurricanes Rita and Wilma: the charitable giving to the victims of these three disasters has topped \$2 billion” (Dyson 2006, 203). Franceria Moore, recently voted one of the “Top 30 Under 30 in Louisiana” for her efforts in educational development in the Baton Rouge area, found that certain communities were incredibly successful in coming together and rebuilding on their own. In particular, church communities and the Red Cross were a big help in providing assistance and relief. She also stated that education in the area is one aspect that the federal government targeted for development and poured money into with some widespread success. The Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools serve as one example of the educational development that subsequently showed improvements in literacy, parental involvement, and social advocacy, particularly among black youth (Moore 2011).

However, despite positive key findings, there are several negative “lessons learned” from this disaster. I have highlighted some below:

- Chaos and calamity were reported in the shelters of last resort, the Superdome and Convention Center. Thousands of New Orleans’ most vulnerable residents were said to be engulfed in filth and feces, stench and urine, hunger and hopelessness, anarchy and anxiety, darkness and death (Dyson 2006, 71).
- Several reports blending fact, legend, and myth flowed throughout local and national communities, as occurs often in natural disasters. A CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll reported that “60% of blacks believed that race caused the government’s delay in rescuing folk, leaving many of them to starve or drown, while only 12% of whites agreed” (Dyson 2006, 33). A myth that came out of the Superdome was that the military orchestrated the storm to declare marshal war on the city. Further speculation that God was punishing the poor of New Orleans rang throughout televised and radio productions of evangelical church sermons.
- Incredible hype brought on by the media, fueled by sensationalism, produced a “face of the disaster” through a picture of an elderly, disabled woman and young child outside the Superdome, deemed “the forgotten.” These productions by the media used victimology adversely, heightening racial and class tensions.

Other key findings revolving around poverty and vulnerability show early warning systems in areas hit. These include the following facts and figures:

- The hardest-hit regions in the Gulf States had already been drowning in extreme poverty: Mississippi is the poorest state in the nation, with Louisiana ranked just behind (Dyson 2006, 5).
- More than 90,000 people in each of the areas stormed by Katrina in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama made less than \$10,000 a year. Black individuals in these areas were strapped by incomes that were 40% less than those earned by whites (Dyson 2006, 5).
- New Orleans ranks fourth out of 297 metropolitan areas in the country in the proportion of households lacking access to cars, at 9% of the population with no access. The top three cities are within the New York City area where public transportation is thoroughly developed (Dyson 2006, 5).
- The national average for elders with disabilities is 39.6%, New Orleans hovers near 57% (Dyson 2006, 5).
- The Lower Ninth ward, an area hit particularly hard, was symptomatic of the geographical isolation on which concentrated poverty feeds. It was isolated from the rest of the city and lacked adequate drainage systems (Dyson 2006, 10).

Further key findings show that reaction and assistance by the administration, represented by FEMA, and the local government were extremely poor:

- Pre-Katrina, New Orleans had 134,000 people without transportation, and 550 municipal buses and 254 working school buses (70 of the city's 324 school buses weren't functioning). Projected, this adds up to 804 buses with 60 seats each, space enough for 48,240 people. This would only have taken three trips to get everyone to safety (Reiland 2005).
- The mandatory evacuation order came only after Katrina had climbed dangerously to a Category 4 at 1:00 a.m. on Sunday morning and then escalated to a Category 5, the highest possible rating, with lethal 161 mile-per-hour winds, at 8:00 a.m. (Dyson 2006, 59).
- The Louisiana National Guard delivered three truckloads of water (90,000 liters) and seven truckloads of MREs (43,776 "meals ready to eat") before the storm, enough supplies for 15,000 people for three days. This was determined by low estimates made by government officials and minimal standards of preparedness (Dyson 2006, 60).
- Some of the first evacuated from the Superdome were the 700 guests and employees of the far less damaged Hyatt Hotel (which was being used as Nagin's headquarters) who

were able to “cut the line” and get on busses before others who had been stranded for far longer. This instance, later recognized by National Guard Captains as a poor decision, was among many indicating how classism played out in relief and assistance efforts (Dyson 2006, 96).

- After President Bush made his disaster emergency declarations for Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama he flew Air Force One from Texas to Arizona en route to discuss illegal immigration, in which he infamously took part in eating birthday cake with Senator John McCain as the Superdome leaked rain on thousands of evacuees. Other individuals in the administration, including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, were also criticized, as she was seen shopping on Fifth Avenue spending thousands of dollars as Katrina hit. The lack of serious consideration for the disaster at hand has led several critics to compare the administration to Marie Antoinette’s infamous standard of “let them eat cake,” literally (Dyson 2006, 60).
- Chief Michael Brown of FEMA, several members of the Bush administration, Governors Blanco and Barbour, Mayor Nagin, and the National Guard played the blame game and had a severe lack of communication throughout the days leading to and as the hurricane hit land. There were several examples in which poor judgments were made, including when FEMA and the National Guard temporarily blocked the Red Cross from providing food aid to evacuees at the Superdome and Convention Center.
- As the last individuals were evacuated, contractors came into play. On Labor Day, it was announced that Kellogg, Brown & Root Services, Inc, had begun tapping a \$500 million Navy no-bid contract to perform emergency repairs at Gulf Coast naval and marine facilities damaged by the storm. A month after Katrina struck, more than fifteen contracts had been awarded for more than \$100 million, including five contracts that were worth \$500 million or more. More than 80% of the \$1.5 billion in contracts awarded by FEMA were no-bid or limited-competition agreements (Dyson 2006, 132).
- Reconstruction and development efforts have received much public outcry for their lack of outreach to minority companies, a situation made worse when Bush issued an executive order on September 8th suspending the Davis-Bacon Act of 1931, allowing reconstruction companies to pay workers less than the prevailing local wages. This unduly sustained the profits of some corporations, made local wageworkers more financially unstable, and reinforced the consequences of a racially segmented work force (Dyson 2006, 134).

Implications:

According to Fred Cuny, the root cause of most disasters is poverty (Van Arsdale 2011).

Risk exists in the environment and impinges upon people; vulnerability exists within cohorts of people. Those in areas affected by Hurricane Katrina were at-risk as vulnerabilities such as impoverishment combined with the low-land geography and environmental risks of the

hurricane. Poverty is particularly highlighted as a primary construct in protection, relief, and prevention. Long-term vulnerabilities interact with risk factors that exist in the environment, creating problems in humanitarian emergencies. As Barbara Thomas Slater explains, poverty reflects long-lasting systematic inequalities in life chances (Van Arsdale 2011). Furthermore, speaking generally, those systematic inequalities related to ethnicity, gender, religion and caste, lead to unequal outcomes: income, power, privilege, fame, and deference.

William Felice states that poverty should be a central concern for humanitarians (Van Arsdale 2011). Thomas Pogge argues that people of the developed world must be mandated to tackle poverty. To paraphrase him, “The inadequate response we’ve had to poverty is in part due to thoughtlessness, and we must morally situate ourselves in respect to poverty and chose to act. If we fail to act we must understand the consequences” (Van Arsdale 2011). Human accountability and responsibility are associated with a theory of obligation. These are not options, nor abstractions; we must help and sustain help to those in need. Humanitarian action and motivation must revolve around need, not be donor-driven.

Within the theory of obligation ethics, practice and theory come into play (Van Arsdale 2011). Regarding ethics in the example of Hurricane Katrina, key philosophical questions must be asked. Can we really afford to proceed as a nation without addressing how race, poverty, and class infiltrate the opportunities of so many citizens? Why is it that the poor of New Orleans, as well as the poor of the nation, are hidden from us? The factors of race and social economic status contribute. The implications are critical as “lessons learned” emerge and as the United States learns to better prevent and respond to future disasters.

Following the hurricane, the belief that the poor black population of New Orleans brought their suffering on themselves was reflected throughout the media, including remarks made by religious leaders and talk show hosts like Bill O'Reilly and Rush Limbaugh. One journalist argued, "poor, often black hurricane victims brought all the misery and death on themselves, because they weren't motivated enough to succeed in America" (Dyson 2006, 181). Race and socioeconomic status in fact are reflected as the theory of obligation is considered in practice. Poverty is not a choice, as several humanitarians previously explained. Yet obligations must exceed simple morality and be underlined in government, NGO and individual reactions to disasters, interpreted through policy and practice.

Recommendations and Conclusions:

This document has highlighted key findings from Hurricane Katrina. From these "lessons learned," what can NGOs and other organizations do to better serve individuals in the future? My recommendations are centered on leadership, the inclusion of the local people, positive media participation, FEMA restructurings, improved preparation, societal conversations, education and advocacy.

Francia Moore explains how the emphasis in education has not only helped survivors who are children get back to leading a "normal life," but has also aided in breaking the perpetual cycle of poverty. The implementation of Freedom Schools, which is specifically targeted towards black youth, has helped communities rebuild, gain hope, and develop through youth leadership. She states how important it is for NGOs and other organizations to not only put efforts into education to enhance basic rebuilding, but to enhance long-term aid that helps break poverty and reduce vulnerabilities. She also believes that relief efforts should not only target rescue of the survivors, but supplement relief sites by delivering proper tools and supplies. For

example, areas like Montgomery and Baton Rouge did not have as much physical damage, but nonetheless were not well equipped to handle the thousands of people attempting to escape the devastating conditions in New Orleans. Cities receiving survivors need to be part of the relief effort *writ large* and provided adequate tools and supplies to assist the influx of displaced people (Moore 2011).

The main leaders in this disaster encountered problems of poor communication, misguided reactions to early warning systems, and mass criticism amongst the public. It is important in any disaster that communication from the top down and bottom up be clear and concise. Furthermore, officials should not underestimate a potential disaster. Local officials in particular should be held accountable for knowing the specific vulnerabilities of the people they represent. This information also needs to be better reflected in the quickness of government representatives like the National Guard in providing aid. The blame game is nonsensical when people are still being evacuated in an emergency. Better collection of data and systems of reporting need to be set up, especially in geographical areas at high risk for natural disaster. NGOs can also help in identifying towns that are in greater need of long-term development and which could be identified as promising sites exhibiting early warning signs of disaster.

FEMA did undergo restructuring following the Hurricane; however, as the 2010 BP oil spill proved, efforts still were negated by key logistical problems and FEMA continued to have difficulties in poverty-stricken areas. FEMA needs to be held accountable for its lack of efficient and equitable aid in the Louisiana – Mississippi region. Also, federal, state and local organizations need to develop means to better prepare “at-risk geographies.” Contingent expertise in the natural disaster/emergency relief field is necessary, as it relates to an administration’s preparedness to respond effectively to a contingent hazard or set of risks.

In the relief, assistance and development context, the development stage clearly needs to include the local people. Reconstruction must invite local companies and leaders to the table. Not only will this help stop victimizing amongst large corporations, but also help garner a sense of ownership amongst the survivors. Categorical politics, particularly politicization that turns events into a manipulated political agenda, has no place in a complex humanitarian emergency.

The media plays an imperative role in any disaster. Post-Katrina, the media should have recognized the delayed efforts of leaders and the large amount of work still needed to help the people of New Orleans and other coastal areas. Most importantly, the reporting should not have focused so heavily on racial elements that became central in stories as the disaster unfolded. In the future, the focus must incorporate a balanced conversation on race, class, and poverty; key technological findings and implications of the disaster; and what still needs to be done programmatically. Linked to the media's role is a need for a societal change. Obligation by, for, and amongst the American people must be considered in the context of poverty. More broadly, advocacy is essential as we consider the repressed, depressed, and oppressed of the world.

Hurricane Katrina became a pivotal benchmark in the history of humanitarian aid within the United States. The disaster and events that followed opened a door to American poverty, aid systems, and humanitarian assistance, as these exist under our own roof. This brief illustrates both positive and negative consequences since August, 2005. But what can be learned from this natural disaster is how the root cause of poverty has a profound impact on at-risk individuals. We must help those in need, not only in a reactionary sense, but proactively as we prepare ourselves for the inevitable fact of future disasters.

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