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Post-Katrina New Orleans: History Lessons

“I also offer this pledge of the American people: Throughout the area hit by the hurricane, we will do what it takes, we will stay as long as it takes, to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives. And all who question the future of the Crescent City need to know there is no way to imagine America without New Orleans, and this great city will rise again.”

– President George W. Bush, September 15, 2005

Introduction

In the summer of 2005, the havoc created by Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans proved to be one the most expensive and lethal disasters in American history, with billions of dollars of damage, thousands dead and tens of thousands left homeless. What led to such horrific proportions and how can such a tragedy be prevented in the future? Below I discuss four public administration issues and solutions that must be addressed before the inevitable next Category 5 hurricane strikes New Orleans again.

I. City’s Perilous Location, Concentrated Poverty and Segregation

New Orleans was founded on a perilous location, and has been chronically susceptible to flooding since recorded human settlement in the early 18th century. Current building codes and zoning have only aggravated the risk by allowing and, in some cases, publicly funding residential development further and further below sea level. For example, the 10 big public housing projects built in New Orleans were all sited in flood-prone zones.

The historic city was furthest from Lake Pontchartrain, on higher ground – an area barely touched by the Hurricane Katrina. Before the storm, New Orleans was a predominantly African-American city (67%) and a poor city, with 27% of residents living in poverty. As the city developed, the higher-ground and areas safer from flooding were the whiter, wealthier neighborhoods and the flood-prone areas were disproportionately populated by low-income African-Americans.

Solution: Ethical & Equitable Development: Mixed Incomes Above Sea Level

The first solution to rebuilding New Orleans is to stop building in the middle of harm’s way. It is unethical to allow building (or rebuilding) to occur in low-lying areas that will inevitably flood again and are furthermore disproportionately occupied by poor and minority communities that have neither the means to evacuate during a storm nor the ability to manage the aftermath, such as mold and other property damage.

Over the years, some attempts have been made to discourage such development, including the “National Flood Insurance Program” of 1968, with the intent to limit inappropriate development in flood-prone zones. However, authorities have done little to enforce this or other attempted limits on inappropriate development. Such laws should be made much stricter. For example, no property owner should be able to get a building permit in flood zones. Low-lying neighborhoods should be dismantled and the housing lost should be replaced only on higher ground. Because of its uniquely precarious geography – and to keep residents out of harm’s way – New Orleans’s population must be limited to those areas at or above sea level. Fair compensation should be given to property owners who are not allowed to rebuild.

To counter racial and economic segregation in the higher-ground areas, a series of equitable economic development tools should be employed, such as: implement inclusionary housing (requirement that all market-rate housing include a percentage of affordable units), form community development corporations, conduct entry-level professional training at community colleges, establish business improvement districts, and offer entrepreneurial loans prioritizing women and African-American owned businesses.

II. Man Versus Nature: A History of Environmental Degradation

Further aggravating the impact of the hurricanes is a series of environmental degradations: the loss of wetlands, the dredging and pumping of the waterways, and the removal of tens of thousands of trees. The wetlands that used to ring the region out into the Gulf of Mexico provided a natural “buffer” against hurricanes by absorbing the blows. The dredging and pumping of the waterways and the removal of tens of thousands of trees has caused unnatural erosion and put New Orleans on shaky ground. Thus, the environmental landscape and the human settlement of New Orleans are fiercely intertwined.

Solution: Ecological Restoration

The New Orleans region needs to be viewed as an ecosystem that needs extensive restoration to function again. The region must work in partnership with nature – instead of constantly fighting and destroying it – in order to prevent further disasters. Working under the direction of the best ecological restoration professionals, the Gulf of Mexico’s wetlands need to be restored, trees replanted, and barrier islands restored as natural storm surge protectors.

III. Failing Infrastructure

The failure of the levees in New Orleans is a clear reflection of lack of accountability and coordination in infrastructure investment. The U.S. Army Corps of engineers has been attempting for decades to gain control of flooding through levees, to limited success.

Solution: Effective Network Management: Employ Modern Levees

The government should look beyond the U.S. Army Corps of engineers to potential private contractors and other experts to build the infrastructure necessary to truly protect New Orleans. A great model of a country that has mastered water is the Netherlands, where a significant proportion of the population lives safely below sea level because of the sophisticated network of dikes, dams, and levees. The U.S. should take a cue from the Dutch who significantly invest in infrastructure and employ the latest technology.

IV. Democracy Versus Effectiveness: Lack of Government Coordination

According to Kettl (2002), a central public administrative dilemma is government accountability versus effectiveness of government. The response – or lack thereof – to Hurricane Katrina illustrates this dilemma: the federal government appeared beholden to “home rule” laws, like the Stafford Act, which prohibits the president from declaring a disaster in a state unless requested to do so by the state’s governor. The roots of “state-first” laws are the Jeffersonian concept of democracy. Unfortunately, the practical implication of such laws in disaster relief is that those with the greatest experience and capacity in managing disasters (federal agencies) follow rather than lead. State and city resources, especially in an economically struggling state like Louisiana or city like New Orleans, are extremely limited and they desperately needed more of DoHS and FEMA’s assistance. Such assistance would have made the difference between life and death for many New Orleans residents who were trapped either in their flooding homes or in the insecure Superdome.

Solution: Federal-level Leadership & Authority

In massive disaster relief situations, a Hamiltonian strong central government is needed to bring the appropriate resources to bear. Democracy is not always efficient, and in disasters like Katrina, efficiency is needed above all else to save lives and property.

Conclusion

In 1998, the threat of a big storm had pulled together various levels of government – from national to local – to create a strategic 2050 plan to restore the Louisiana coastline. This inter-agency plan was an important first step towards strategic planning in the battle against hurricanes. This early effort must be married with planning at all levels of government to address: the strategic rebuilding of New Orleans in an ethical and equitable manner, ecological restoration of wetlands and other natural features that help “buffer” storms, the construction of modern infrastructure, and inter-agency disaster-relief planning.

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