

Responding to Katrina: Humanitarian aid principles overlooked and discounted?

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Hurricane Katrina has demonstrated that natural disasters also affect the most developed countries. It showed the fragility of the human settlements in the US and the lack of an efficient response to disasters. It also pointed out the lack of a proactive risk management policy centred on the prevention, mitigation and reduction of the catastrophe. This comment analyses the response to a predicted emergency such as hurricane Katrina from a humanitarian perspective.

Ten months into the tsunami relief and recovery operation, the international community is attempting to draw key lessons from its response to one of the most devastating natural disasters of our time. Among crucial areas that require considerable improvement are coordination, agency transparency and accountability, and greater consideration of local capacities and needs. And as part of the aid community strives to learn from the ongoing response to the tsunami and improve standing disaster response operations, the world is still struck by the consequences of Hurricane Katrina.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, the general perception was that natural disasters were a catastrophe for underdeveloped regions with limited national means, countries that devote few efforts towards disaster preparedness and mitigation, and where these severe climatic or tectonic events are unforeseen. In nations where the executive regime excessively centralises power and capacity, local disasters tend to exemplify problems of governance and the authorities' lack of surge capacity in disaster response. Katrina does not fall into any of these categories. Hurricane Katrina was a devastating, major hurricane, category four on the Saffir-Simpson scale, which forewarned an extreme level of damage¹ with winds hitting the coast of Louisiana at 125 mph, and ended up affecting an area roughly the size of the United Kingdom. Katrina, and now Rita, demonstrate that even the richest and most powerful of nations can be severely hit by the forces of nature, particularly when it is not prepared for a catastrophic event.

The disaster is, however, primarily perceived as having been extreme and uncommon because of its difficult to justify humanitarian consequences. It can be argued that these extremes have, to a certain degree been emphasized by the media, which quickly equated the situation in New Orleans to that of a war zone and, for instance, defined displaced evacuees as refugees. In the wake of Hurricane Rita, differences between the disaster responses to both hurricanes are already being drawn.

The latter, which was a less dangerous category 3, will above all be remembered by its prior mass evacuation and the additional toll it has taken on the state of Louisiana. Rita posed additional hardship on tens of thousands of Katrina affected evacuees housed in emergency shelters in Houston and surrounding areas who were once again displaced by an incoming hurricane. The response to hurricane Rita marks a sharp contrast with that of Katrina. Among factors explaining the differences are the improved response and coordination between the federal, state and local levels, the large presence of emergency rescue personnel and military already in the state in the aftermath of Katrina, and the far more difficult situation associated with devastation in a densely populated and vulnerable city like New Orleans.

The US will have to extract critical lessons from its operation and evaluate its policies and systems within its national context. And in wondering why the response to Hurricane Katrina has been so defective, the catastrophe should be analysed from a humanitarian perspective and determine how the initial response has measured against basic humanitarian aid principles and accepted practice.

¹ Hurricane Mitch was a "catastrophic" category five hurricane. The Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Damage-Potential Scale is a hurricane force scale using the numbers 1-5 to rate a hurricane's intensity. The scale is used to provide an estimate of the potential property damage and flooding expected along the coast from a hurricane landfall.

Key humanitarian principles

The objective of humanitarian action is, above all, to ease human suffering and save lives. This implies assigning top priority to recovery and rescue activities and to measures that alleviate the distress of the most vulnerable. In reviewing the response to hurricane Katrina, there is little indication that these were the main concerns driving the decision making and intervention processes, either before or after the disaster. An analysis of the humanitarian response to Katrina should focus, in particular, on the degree of flexibility in the use of available resources. This specific analysis should consider that, contrary to many other natural disasters, Katrina was announced and had struck the state of Florida days before with strength prior to reaching coastal Louisiana.

Essential to the provision of humanitarian aid is the concept of timeliness. The first hours and days following a catastrophe are critical to life saving activities. Common criteria used to measure the performance of a humanitarian response system are the level of access and coverage of population in need, and the percentage of the population being reached within the first days. The system should also manage to identify responsibilities in the delivery of assistance and define coordination roles early on. The response to Katrina was ineffective when measured on the basis of these basic criteria. That people were able to voice their pleas for help both on roof tops, at the convention centre and Super Dome and, that these could remain largely unanswered for a stifling period of time, is difficult to comprehend.

In planning disaster response, preparedness and deployment capacity prove critical. The "DART" OFDA (USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance) disaster response teams are dispatched around the world in less than 48 hours. The US military's 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, provides the ability to begin executing a strategic airborne forcible entry into any area of the world within 18 hours of notification. Members of the division were in New Orleans on September 3rd, over four days after the catastrophe, carrying out activities that were initially only indirectly linked to improving humanitarian access and coverage of people in need of assistance.

Many examples of inconsistencies between what would normally qualify as humanitarian priorities and the actual response can be drawn. It is difficult to understand how the media were able to move and report while at the same time, people's needs remained largely unmet. While recognising that large aid efforts require strong logistic support in different phases and that the conditions in the city posed a serious challenge to relief efforts, it is clear that other considerations prevailed. Conditions still enabled for the airport to be used and, as necessary as repairing levies is in the medium term, and so are efforts to prevent looting and restoring order, means were deployed to meet these objectives at the expense of life saving activities and evacuation.²

Over 20,000 evacuees were accommodated in the Superdome Stadium. The situation inside was described as desperate. The New Orleans Convention Centre also became an emergency centre for evacuees, but by September 1st, the facility, like the Superdome, was overwhelmed and declared unsafe and unsanitary. Reports indicated that up to 20,000 people had gathered at the convention centre, many dropped off after rescue from flooded areas of the city. Others were directed to the centre by police as a possible refuge. It was only by September 4th that the centre and the stadium were completely evacuated. Although there were thousands of evacuees at the centre, it was only on the afternoon of September 1st that FEMA claimed to have "factual" knowledge of the use of the Convention Center as a shelter and on September 2nd that military support at the convention center had established a steady supply of water and emergency rations as evacuation efforts were in progress; buses arrived later that day to pick up the refugees and take them elsewhere.

² The fact that in a given hospital in New Orleans, 44 bodies were recovered over 10 days after the disaster proves rather alarming.

Vulnerability, preparedness, prevention and mitigation

New Orleans is a city which is especially vulnerable to disasters, considering that 70 % of the city lies below sea level. Hurricane Betsy flooded 20% of the city in 1965. Hurricane Katrina proved overwhelming in flooding 80% of New Orleans. Despite the high recurrent risk and warnings issued by the U.S. National Hurricane Centre, New Orleans' inhabitants have often preferred not to evacuate the city, also because they have been relatively spared by catastrophe for 40 years.

In anticipation of Katrina, local authorities urged residents to evacuate the area. Many residents and tourists reported problems in evacuating New Orleans as less means of transportation were available out of the city and the airport had been shut down. According to the US National Hurricane Centre, the damage to be expected from a category 4 hurricane implies that terrain lower than 10 ft (3.3 m) above sea level may be flooded requiring massive evacuation of residential areas.³ Evacuating residents were told by officials in warnings to take at least five days of supplies with them in the likelihood that it would be several days before they could safely return to affected areas. The Super Dome football stadium was opened as a last resort emergency shelter for 10,000 residents. Considering that authorities warned evacuees on the need to carry more than five days worth of supplies, it is alarming that planners did not make the same provisions for the remaining population accommodated in collective centres.

Especially considering that the latter, compelled to take refuge in emergency centres, form the bulk of the most vulnerable population. In a disaster prone city and given sufficient warning, considering that Katrina hit Florida days earlier, on the 25th of August, contingency stocks of relief items and maintenance provisions for water and sanitation should have been foreseen. It was alarming to follow the deteriorating conditions in these collective centres. The failure to respond to basic needs in hospitals and collective centres was amplified by the deficient evacuation process of both the Convention Centre and the Super Dome. A week after the hurricane, the disaster response effort still proved incapable of providing sufficient and adequate means of transportation to evacuate collective centres in disaster affected areas.

What Katrina has made visible and that is often overshadowed by the US' super power status, is the fact that over 37 million Americans live below the poverty line.⁴ It has also highlighted racial inequalities, and made evident that the overwhelming majority of people living in poverty in urban areas are African-American. Scenes of those affected by Katrina clearly show the legacy of segregation and the limits of integration in the US. After declining under the Clinton presidency, poverty has worsened under both terms of the Bush administration. 24% of the black population in the US now live in poverty.

As in the rest of the world, the poor are the most vulnerable in the advent of disaster, and the ones who in New Orleans were less willing or capable of leaving. Contrary to what has been stated, the marginalized and underprivileged often prove to be less resilient and most affected by displacement. In New Orleans the economic problems faced by those living below the poverty line do not stem from unemployment but from low wages. Americans, including those who work minimum wage jobs, spend on consumer goods. For low income workers these goods are often their only assets and represent their entire net worth. When faced with the option of evacuating, they are less willing to leave their assets behind at the risk of looters. Initial data on evacuees has shown that a majority of these do not possess bank accounts.

³ With nearly half a million inhabitants, the number of displaced equates to the number of displaced Kosovars in 1999.

⁴ Individuals under the age of 65 receiving less than UDS 9,800 a year are regarded as poor.

International Humanitarian Assistance

A week after the disaster, the Katrina rescue operation was reported to be costing over 2 billion dollars a day. It is unlikely that the US will not manage to provide for the necessary means to now cover ongoing needs and future rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts.

As humanitarian aid strives to be both needs driven and needs based, it is a wonder how many nations which have offered support a week in to the relief operation, when surge capacity is no longer the main issue. In justifying the international and UN involvement, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan was quick to acknowledge the US' history of great generosity with other countries.⁵ Generosity cannot replace needs considerations and is not a basis for driving humanitarian response. Some countries that have responded have drawn assistance from current development and humanitarian aid budgets. Specific analysis of the factors motivating these commitments and their relationship with principles of humanitarian donorship deserve analysis. Compassion can drive private funding but not official assistance which is earmarked for a different purpose.

In many international humanitarian relief operations, coverage and specific targeting of minority populations is not uncommon. This occurs when governments are less willing to address the needs of minorities or when they directly discriminate against specific groups. Examples of discrimination have been cited in relation to the black *garifuna* population in Central America in a post Hurricane Mitch context and, more recently, in the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami in both Thailand against sea gypsies and Muslim minorities, or in India due to the specific caste system. In this case, it is unlikely that the aid response now discriminate among ethnic groups in any way and that foreign assistance prove necessary to cover gaps with targeted assistance via NGOs.

The basic code of conduct governing humanitarian aid interventions also underlines that this assistance should by no means replace the responsibilities of national governments in caring for their own people. In the case of Katrina, this should also apply. Although the US government is known for having a detached approach to poverty reduction, different elements should come into play in the aftermath of a natural disaster and the amount of national non-official aid should be considerable in a wealthy country that provides for tax deductible contributions.

The international aid effort is not sizable in financial terms, but over 90 countries have come forth offering aid. This is in sharp contrast with international reaction to other natural disasters and forgotten emergencies. In a recent article "When disasters hit rich, poor nations," published in *The Miami Herald*, Pedro Medrano, WFP's Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean, remembers how the world was witnessing almost identical images from Gonaïves in Haiti, lashed by Tropical Storm Jeanne on the night of September 18th. The great difference with respect to Katrina is the funding shortfall. Medrano recalls that WFP currently faces a funding shortfall of more than 75 percent in Haiti and that in the poorest country of the Hemisphere, only a fourth of the funds needed over the next two years have been received.

Disasters are not to be stereotyped. Each differs according to force, type and a region's or area's specific economic and political contexts. Katrina is, however, a vivid demonstration of nature's power coupled with a defective response. These hurricanes add to the list of natural disasters which the world must collectively learn to respond to in more effective ways.

⁵ The US government accepted a United Nations offer to contribute to the aid effort on September 3rd. OCHA and other key UN agency staff have been deployed to help U.S. authorities coordinate US relief efforts .

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