

Guiding Principles: Rebuilding Trust in Government and Public Policy in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina

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During the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, inhabitants of the United States experienced the horror of watching millions of their fellow citizens' cries for help initially go unheard. The poorest residents of New Orleans seemed to be the most vulnerable to the ill-crafted policies of the past that today spawn high levels of social distress, unemployment, rampant alienation, neglect of communities, and political isolation. Atkins and Moy (2005) argue that this human tragedy may seem to be an anomaly, but it is part of past and present social inequity. Hopefully, the aftermath of hurricane Katrina will aid in our understanding of the barriers to policy formation and implementation that exist following a catastrophe. This paper will help to establish guiding principles for overcoming barriers to effective civic engagement, and serve as a catalyst for changes in public policy and practice.

This analysis explores the impact of decades of distrust felt by many citizens of the United States and offers insight for policy crafters among citizens and community organizations, government officials, and intergovernmental agencies. By advancing the idea of reflexive inclusion, such as transparency in government transactions, sustainable equity, and the promotion of a result-based culture, we contend that not only can homes and buildings be restored, but also trust and reciprocity among the stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels.

“A true rebirth of distress areas (and the cities in which they are located) will only occur if we make these places neighborhoods of choice for individuals and families with a broad range of incomes and neighborhoods of connection that are fully linked to metropolitan opportunities” (Katz 2004, 2).

The interaction of policy, poverty, and race in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina has exposed an ugly underside of the experience lived daily by millions of Americans. The technological disaster (i.e. levee breaches in New Orleans) forever changed the physical,

social, economic, and political environment of New Orleans. “Live images of uncollected corpses and families clinging to rooftops made vivid what decades of statistics could not: that being poor in America, and especially being poor and black in a poor southern state, is still hazardous to your health” (Atkins and Moy 2005, 916). The reality-style cable news television coverage, which airs on a twenty-four hour, seven-days-a-week basis, on hurricane Katrina made it clear, “...that the U.S. has not resolved fundamental domestic disparities and inadequacies. Katrina did not create these inequities; it simply added an important reminder that they are deeply embedded and constitutive of American political, economic, and social life” (Frymer, *et al* 2005).

Hurricane Katrina provides citizens and policymakers with a reflective or teachable moment so that other people, especially the most vulnerable, will not be left behind in a *mêlée* of political red-tape. The understanding that the legacy of being left behind (like those who were left on roof tops) extends into many other aspects of life is imperative for social scientists, policy makers, government officials, and educators to recognize. For example, the gap in healthcare between white and black Americans has been estimated to cause 84,000 preventable deaths a year in the United States – a virtual Katrina every week (Satcher *et. al.* 2005; Atkins and Moy 2005, 916). Socially created vulnerabilities such as this one are largely ignored in the hazards and disaster literature because they are oftentimes hard to measure. Social vulnerability is a product of social inequalities – those social factors create the susceptibility of various groups to harm, and affect their ability to “bounce back” (resilience) after a disaster (Cutter *et al* 2003; Cutter 2005). Due to their decreased resilience during the initial and subsequent confusion of a natural disaster, victims are more susceptible, and gradually succumb, to various diseases such as cardiovascular disease, alcohol and drug abuse, cancer, and HIV infection, much in the same way the victims of Katrina have succumbed (Atkins and Moy 2005, 916).

Fundamentally, the challenges lie in the creation, implementation, and support of public policies that do not reinforce patterns of concentrated poverty which continue to serve as the source of community distrust and socioeconomic distress. In essence, “it [the policy creation process]... demands that neighborhood actions operate within the broader metropolitan geography of opportunity rather than the insular, fixed borders of deprived areas” (de Sousa Briggs 2003; Katz 2004, 2). This catastrophe remains an opportunity for renewed relationships. Lukes notes:

‘Abnormal times,’ for instance revolutions, can, as Gramsci observed, bring to consciousness alternative conceptions of the world. Disasters can generate what Durkheim called ‘moments of effervescence,’ ‘periods of creation and renewal,’ when ‘men are brought into more intimate relations with one another, when meetings and assemblies are more frequent, relationships more solid and the exchange of ideas more active’... They can be transformative or confirmatory: they can generate new ways of thinking and acting or else they can reinforce and consolidate prevailing orthodoxies and structures of power (Lukes 2005, 1).

The persisting problems of infrastructure disinvestment, poverty, and racial inequity are all part of the existing landscape that serves to deepen the ongoing tragedy caused by geographic displacement after the hurricane. Improving the discrepancy in social conditions, which were brought to light by the natural disaster, has to be on the agenda in

the same way as securing the levees and rebuilding the business infrastructure. Continuing to fail to address the social conditions in the Gulf Coast region will set the stage for another human tragedy as well as a socially corrosive community.

Setting the Stage for Disaster

The city of New Orleans is similar to most other southern cities in that migration from the rural impoverished areas to the cities was followed by “white flight” from urban areas to more suburban communities (Cutter 2005, 2). Migrants, who were predominantly black in the south, during the 1950’s and 1960’s, usually found housing in the most undesirable areas – on reclaimed land, near industrial facilities, and along or near transportation corridors (Cutter 2005, 2). Although this phenomenon of “white flight” occurred primarily with regards to blacks in the south, it also occurred throughout the rest of the United States, with not only blacks but with other ethnic groups as well.

According to Frymer, *et. al.* (2005), in an effort to address the depressing social situation of the nation’s poor, American social policies remain biased in that they tend to aid individuals that are non-minorities. Some components of the New Deal legislation, such as the Wagner Act,¹ illustrate racial bias and, in some cases, systematically promote racial segregation and poverty in communities² (Frymer, *et. al.* 2005, 3).

Modern census data provides a more vivid picture of the persistent economic inequality and how, when combined with the flooding of the city, those problems helped to set the stage for the human tragedy in New Orleans. Census data from the city of New Orleans provides clear evidence of the trends described by Cutter (2005) and by Frymer, *et. al.* (2005) in the previous paragraphs. Of the total population of New Orleans in 2004, approximately 67% (302,041) were considered African American in comparison to the white population of approximately 28% (124,591)(U.S. Census Bureau 2004). These numbers indicate a considerable difference in demographic composition within the city. Moreover, of the New Orleans residents in 2004, 23.2% fell below the poverty line, and out of 180,382 households, 74,610 households earned \$25,000 annually or less (U.S. Census Bureau 2004). The poverty is amplified by the fact that prior to the flooding which occurred during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina about 35% of all black households lacked a car or some other type of transportation which prevented them from evacuating the city when the storm approached (Economist 2005, 2).

The unique blend of history, people, and culture are all a part of the social capital needed to cope with the aftermath of such a disastrous event. Shortly after the initial numbness wears off, one of two community perspectives develop. Social scientists label these perspectives as therapeutic and corrosive community types. Empirical evidence suggests that the corrosive community – which is characterized by social disruption in the forms of uncertainty, lack of consensus about what is taking place,

¹Frymer, *et. al.* (2005) contends that legislation such as the Wagner Act and the Social Security Act did not cover occupations in which the worker population was predominantly black in composition, such as agricultural and domestic workers. Also, the legislation passed enabled private and local agents to discriminate in the enactment and interpretation of policies. Frymer, *et. al.* (2005) believe that these types of legislation, in addition to other “concerted-decision-making” at all levels of government, are responsible for the disproportionate number of poor African Americans in New Orleans.

²The construction of the Industrial Canal in 1922 was one of the many public works projects that segregated communities. The canal has separated the white community of New Orleans from the predominantly black Ninth Ward (The Associated Press, 2005, 2).

distrust, and who should be held responsible – is likely to emerge after a technological disaster (Freudenburg and Jones 1991; Gill 1994; Gill and Picou 1998; Picou, Marshall, and Gill 2004; Ritchie 2004). It can be argued that these problems are exacerbated in communities where historical segregation remains, where citizens do not have social networks fundamental to the development of social capital, and where trust and communication enable effective civic participation and policy changes to take place. In the corrosive community type, years or even decades of distrust only widen as uncertainty and rumors spread regarding what happened and why some groups are impacted more than others.

In essence, the historical patterns of social, economic, and political inequalities exacerbated the current problem when immediate attention from local, state, and federal officials did not mobilize to alleviate the suffering during the flood. Waiting and wondering when the assistance would come, many citizens' hope for survival began to diminish. Four days after the hurricane made landfall on Louisiana's coast, and many residents without basic life-sustaining necessities, relief for the city's thousands of stranded storm victims arrived in the form of military troops, transportation, and food. For many, the lack of coordination and federal bureaucracy served to decrease civic trust in local, state, and federal government.

A Review on Trust and Government

The trust of a government's citizens is essential to a state's legitimacy, and the efficiency by which government structures function. Although trust is needed less, to some degree, within more authoritative regimes, it is inherently needed in democratic governments. "The simple reality is that democratic government works better in every way when it is one element in a vibrant network of communities, associations, and families; when its citizens care what it does, [have] reasonable faith in its leaders, and participate actively in politics and policy making. That kind of essential citizen involvement and public trust to drive it are often absent from contemporary government in America" (Panel 1999, 2). Aberbach and Walker (1970, 1199) contend that there has never been a government constructed in human history – regardless of its popularity, participation of its citizenry, or how carefully leadership acquires opinions – where some portion of the population is not capable of finding injustices and inequalities. Republics and democracies attempt to decrease the overall distrust of the government by allowing the citizenry to participate and nominate individuals that will progress their interests; thus trust on the behalf of citizens toward a representative depends on the constituent's perception that the representative shares his or her interests (Ruscio 1996, 467). Additionally, more general trust from the public can be acquired by the government through the pursuit of more common interests rather than by pursuing specific agendas (Ruscio 1996, 471). Political experience has shown that trust in government is inconsequential when pertaining to policies that provide people with direct, tangible benefits; however, when policies are pursued which do not offer the public discernible, immediate benefits and may require some manner of sacrifice, political trust is extremely important (Hetherington and Globetti 2002, 255).

When governments perform with limited trust from its citizens, complications to the efficiency of the system occur. According to Aberbach and Walker (1970, 1199):

"Democracy's guiding ideal is the substitution of mutual understanding and agreement for coerciveness and arbitrary authority in all phases of

social and political life. The existence of distrustful citizens who are convinced that the government serves the interests of a few rather than the interests of all is a barrier to the realization of the democratic ideal.”

In addition to a population’s ability to express itself within a political forum, trust also can be affected by a number of other factors:

“Depending on the characteristics of the setting and population under study, political trust has been found to covary with social trust, age, education, income, sense of political efficacy, political alienation, a general feeling of deprivation, citizen expectations about treatment from government officials, level of alertness to external danger, strength of drive to self-assertion, and race (Abravenel and Busch 1975, 59).”

The interaction between race and trust in public policy and government still asserts itself into political life. “Good Faith,” (Sabine 1952; Aberbach and Walker 1970), has yet to have been established within the minds of the African American population due to experiences past and present.

In post-Katrina New Orleans, distrust in elected and public officials reached a tipping point when the help did not arrive in a timely manner – a distrust rooted as far back as 1927³ when a massive flood and hurricane Betsy combined to wreak similar damage – begging answers to the same question that was asked more than three-quarters of a century ago: – “[h]ow they could have been left behind so egregiously in a disaster foreseen for decades?” (The Associated Press 2005, 1). What’s more, distrust is further perpetuated because “good faith” efforts to effectively organize and administer timely assistance have not occurred several months after the tragedy. The nature of such catastrophes is not new to the city and region – this is the third time flood waters have devastated the region and African American communities were left to fend for themselves in New Orleans.⁴ The third time means –governments, at all levels, should be better prepared and better policies should be in place. The distrust on the behalf of the African American population is so high that there are people who believe that the Industrial Canal levee was deliberately broken, as it once was, during Katrina in order to flood the “[h]eavily impoverished Lower Ninth Ward and save the whiter parts of the city” (The Associated Press 2005, 2).

³ The Mississippi flood of 1927 followed massive amounts of rain in the Fall of 1926 and record setting snow storms in the winter, creating massive amounts of flooding in the lower Mississippi Delta. In *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* by John M. Barry, the author describes the flooding of the Mississippi River and its impact on legislation in reference to flooding. Through the flooding of the Mississippi in 1927 President Coolidge signed legislation that placed responsibility of the Mississippi river in the hands of the federal government (407). Barry contends that responsibility for the Mississippi River “vastly expanded federal involvement in local affairs”, and that it set a precedent that reflected that the federal government had a proper role and obligation to attempt to prevent mass devastation caused by natural forces (407).

⁴ According to The Associated Press (2005, 1), African Americans were “intentionally left behind – to suffer, to starve, to drown” in New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward from the destruction caused by Hurricane Betsy in 1965 in order to save the “whiter parts of the city.”

Fiduciary Role of the Government: Responding to Hurricane Katrina

While the impacts of natural disasters vary, in industrialized countries, where minor disasters are regulated, massive destruction has the tendency to occur when “once-in-a-century” disasters appear. According to Davis and Seitz (1982, 559), the most extreme cases of destruction occur when industrialized counties reduce the regularity of “...flooding, thereby eliminating many minor instances of damage and death, even as they permit (and even encourage) considerable death and destruction when extraordinary flood[ing] occur[s].”

When disasters of a large-scale magnitude occur there are four explicit objectives, put forth by Schneider, to disaster response: “(1) mitigating or preventing a disaster from occurring in the first place, (2) preparing areas for potential emergency situations, (3) providing immediate relief after a disaster strikes, and (4) helping individuals and communities recover from the effects of natural disasters” (1992, 136). The federal government, through legislation like the Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act,⁵ attempted to offset the consequences of natural disasters by setting up a system of relief and mitigation throughout the entire country. However, disaster relief is the legal responsibility of the states, and, on the micro-level, the individual local communities. The federal government’s only legal responsibility is to contribute aid and support in the event that the individual states are incapable of handling mass disaster relief efforts on their own (U.S. Congress 1988).

Because relief originates at the local level, decentralization of the system limits standardization efforts nationwide (Drabek 1985, 85). Disaster relief varies from state to state, and more so from town to town; likewise, levels of technological complexity create problems for mitigation and relief efforts in addition to a low prioritization of hazard mitigation by local government (Godschalk and Brower 1985). In a system that works from the bottom up, and when local governments bear the responsibility of preparing for an emergency and simply do not have the capacity to do so, the relief process is further complicated because preliminary relief efforts are not in place to do so. Furthermore, the role of the federal government is limited by the rights of the states.

Although there is strong support for states’ rights, in cases where preventing large-scale destruction and death are at issue, some scholars, state legislators, and citizens are demanding that future relief initiatives have an initial federal response. Many argue that the federal government is the only agent capable of crossing local and state jurisdictions (Schneider 1992). “Coordination is often a scarce resource in disasters yet it remains the key operational principle for an effective response” (Houghton 2005, 8). Moreover, Houghton contends that while coordination is often easier to accomplish at the

⁵The Robert T. Stafford Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, as amended by Public Law 106-390, October 30, 2000), United States Code, Title 42. The Public Health and Welfare. Chapter 68. Disaster Relief. [As amended by Pub. L. 103-181, Pub. L. 103-337, and Pub. L. 106-390] Pub. L. 106-390, October 30, 2000, 114 Stat. 1552 - 1575) calls for the states and local governments to set up mitigation strategies and policies in an effort to decrease the amount to damages and death that may occur in the event of a disaster. The Act also designates how much the federal government will normally contribute monetarily in the event of a disaster, however, federal response and the amount of federal aid is both regulated by FEMA and the President of the United States. Moreover, each request for aid is reviewed on an individual to individual basis, meaning that not every application will be accepted and that the amount of federal aid will vary from situation to situation and from place to place.

local level, the best local coordination takes place in the context of appropriate disaster preparedness mechanisms before they are needed.

In relation to Katrina, the government followed its legal responsibilities in that it allowed for the local government to take initial leadership on the relief of its own population. However legal, the governments' inability to foresee that the Katrina disaster would create enough damage to fall beyond the scope of the local governments' capacity raises the question of whether or not the local community should be initially responsible for managing a situation along these lines. The Katrina disaster has created a situation where the local population of New Orleans does not trust the federal or local government, which is something future leadership will have to address.

Rebuilding Trust

From the extensive flooding in the wake of hurricane Katrina there is hope that the *new* New Orleans serves to promote broad civic participation, not only as a part of the rebuilding process, but also as part of a sustained effort long after the building and clean-up crews are gone. Because the decisions made today will either enable or constrain options later, a new process is needed to maximize stakeholders input; the process we put forth is called *reflexive inclusion* and it differs from traditional constituent management in that reflexive inclusion combines both constituent affairs with a more active role in the total development of policies. A reflexively inclusive conceptualization of the fiduciary role government officials have involves the development of a critical appreciation of the public sphere's history, ethnic-gender composition, and culture in relation to past and present power relationships that motivate unintended negative consequences which can compromise the integrity of the road to the rebuilding of trust. In other words, reflexivity incorporates a critical examination of past and present, of what passes as 'good' knowledge and practice, and how this influences present and future policy decisions (Lhulier and Miller 2006). Additionally, reflexive inclusiveness refers to using knowledge in the development of sensitivities for all aspects of modern life, particularly characterized by the ongoing problems that exist surrounding the rebuilding and repopulation of New Orleans. A reflexive inclusion actively involves the citizenry by educating the public, empowering them to give a voice to issues, and places them at the center of the decision making process by establishing a symmetrical understanding of the negative public perception (Lhulier and Miller 2006).

Clearly, reestablishing trust and confidence are part of an overall strategy to address many of the complex problems that exist. Three guiding principles are needed to bring confidence and legitimacy to a process many find skeptical.

Guiding Principle 1, Transparency: To the extent local groups are able, they join in the policy formation of the rebuilding of New Orleans early in the process. They are included for their local knowledge of the community to represent people-of-color, low and middle-income interests, small businesses, and the aged. It is important to be inclusive and open about every step of the planning, and make sure that those disenfranchised groups of the city are not left out of the process (Good Jobs First *et. al.* 2005). This may be difficult due to the dispersal of the communities, but an aggressive attempt to seek stakeholder support is important.

Guiding Principle 2, Sustainable Equity: The trust relationship is not constrained spatially and temporarily. By showing good faith in the initial phases of the restoration and carrying that good faith to ensure that everyone has a voice, sustainable equity is accomplished not only by addressing the needs of business, but also by paying attention to the social fabric of local communities within the city. Delicately reconnecting the ties that exist among the cultural institutions, small business, public spaces, and between communities will be essential to the shaping of a diverse and strong, local economy. In essence, concentrating on nurturing existing neighborhoods and locally embedded cultural institutions – and not displacing them with larger development (Good Jobs First *et. al.* 2005) will serve the returning residents and preserve the local cultural aspects of the city. This allows for the rebuilding of institutions that sustain daily life, affords entrepreneurial opportunities, and defeats the social isolationist policies of the past that currently limit opportunity.

Guiding Principle 3, Results-based Culture: Governments at all levels must adopt and follow through with a culture of exceptional performance and measurable mutually agreed upon results that are congruent with efforts that engage citizens in the dialogue of planning. Furthermore, this guiding principal demands accountability by broadening citizen input where standards of progress and success are collaboratively set, assessment is on-going, and the results are made public.

It is the hope, that measures taken are aligned with these three guiding principles that offer the citizens of New Orleans more active participation in the rebuilding efforts, and help restore trust in the government that the city needs to function effectively.

Conclusion and Implications in the Rebuilding of New Orleans

We argue that these guiding principles are a starting point in the physical and socio-economic restoration of New Orleans. The importance of New Orleans and the region to American society, economy, and politics are far reaching. The guiding principles address the manner in which the culture of public policy must change in order to deal with a natural disaster in a meaningful way. It is important that the race to hold back the water of the Mississippi River and rebuild the infrastructure of New Orleans is not lost due to decades of racial strife and governmental distrust that becomes reified as intergovernmental agencies fail to cooperate and cause more ambiguity.

As previously noted, fear, uncertainty, distrust - and their ongoing affects - are not new in the African American community. In a recent address, Sandra Gadson, MD, president of the National Medical Association, asserted, "In African American communities the word 'Katrina' may take on the power of the term 'Tuskegee experiment,' and become a new synonym for neglect of African Americans." She continued by remarking that "distrust in the health system does not bode well for minority healthcare as one of the factors highlighted in the 2003 Institute of Medicine report on Health Disparities" (NMA 2005, 1335). Hence, failure to understand the roles of transparency, sustained equity, and a results-based culture of government, all

encompassed within a reflexively inclusive model, will lead to more distrust and civil unrest. Also, failure to adopt such guiding principals only serves to reify rumors such as: “They blew up the levee to save the white part of town,” “They had it all planned, to force us out,” or “The *new* New Orleans will be for the rich, the famous, and the white.”

Throughout this paper, we have argued the dysfunctional aspects of a lack of trust, but we also acknowledge that a lack of trust can be functional at times. When citizens view their interests are being ignored, or bypassed in the interests of another group, civil disorder can ensue. In democratic societies, when groups feel that the mainstream political parties do not express their views, they voice opposition and establish coalitions that are congruent with their ideologies. However, within the American system, where there is difficulty forming new parties, the problem of distrust is only perpetuated. In this paper, our goal is not to eliminate all issues surrounding the lack of trust, but rather to provide a framework that can eliminate the dysfunctional aspects of distrust that constrain growth and dialogue needed to overcome the consequences of what is arguably the worse natural disaster in United States history. The problems surrounding the recovery of New Orleans and the region are so varied and complex that the adoption of such principles will not only increase policy efficacy and offer timely information with immediate impacts in the lives of returning citizens, but also, hold out the promise of an inclusive government that gives voice to racially and economically diverse groups that were once politically alienated and marginalized.

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