

Recovery of the people, by the people, for the people

Julie Hernandez looks at the issues and practicalities of recovery and special justice in areas devastated by disasters, drawing on elements from Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, and the earthquake in Haiti



THE SPEED AND STRENGTH WITH which the US and the rest of the world forged relief strategies in Haiti must be welcomed. But before we rush into recovery for the Haitian people by outside agencies – without the participation of local people themselves – there are a few lessons to be learnt from the other side of the Gulf of Mexico. The events of 2005 in New Orleans – the collapse of buildings and infrastructure, communication networks, law enforcement and governance at every level – pose a crucial challenge of how to invent new ways of tackling a cataclysmic crisis when the usual

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means of crisis response lie in disarray.

The situation in New Orleans today, in 2010 – the incredibly slow, unplanned and selective recovery of a city more vulnerable than ever to the next disaster – opens a new front line in resilience. Throwing billions of dollars at a disaster is no use when the agencies supposed to spend this money have, themselves, been washed out. This leads to the question: How can we invest whatever

recovery capital into the only resource that won't go away in a disaster – its survivors?

Despite its staggering poverty, shaky political history and rampant violence, Haiti functioned before the quake. Its citizens were neither the hapless victims of dire circumstances, nor the hardened criminals portrayed by news media and, sometimes, disaster managers. To discard their resources and adaptability when planning for a future mega-crisis would amount to chopping off recovery's most resilient component.

The lessons of Katrina have opened a few paths, the first of these being reconnecting people with information and mobilisation networks.

After food, water, shelter and sometimes medicine, knowing what's going on, and where, is one of the most important, yet often overlooked, needs of disaster victims. After the trauma of seeing one's familiar world collapse, literally in Haiti's case, reliable information is a crucial element in jump starting a community's resilience. One of the most unnerving aspects of the media coverage after Hurricane Katrina was that the spectacular footage of flooded houses repeated on revolving news cycles bore no indication as to which neighbourhoods were under water and which ones had been spared. This kept the evacuees in a very bleak and debilitating state of limbo for several days.

On the other hand, national talk-shows and local radio stations played an incomparable role in circulating eyewitness accounts from locals (loaded with spatial indications relevant to the listeners) and reconnecting the dots of the scattered communities.

The earthquake in Port-au-Prince struck during late afternoon, a time when families were disconnected between home, work and schools, and the subsequent wanderings of people running around the streets to find their

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FROM THE UNKNOWN

Dr Patrick Lagadec introduces this article by Julie Hernandez as part of CRJ's regular series devoted to exploring the challenging issues characterised by 21st Century crises. Julie works on the issues and practicalities of recovery and spatial justice in devastated areas, and specifically in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. He says: "This article was in progress when the earthquake devastated Haiti. It seemed logical to bridge New Orleans and Port au Prince, and to share crucial facts as conferences are programmed to design Haiti's recovery."

of the United Nations Stabilisation Mission (MINUSTAH) in Port-au-Prince reflected. Because in the complex and interdependent systems of today, crises have a tendency to trigger and fuel each other. The global economic crisis has led to concerns that the international outpouring of help and donations might be short-lived. How do you treat an epidemic when the doctors themselves are getting sick?

If Katrina has taught us but one thing, is it not that major disasters can strike even the most powerful of nations dumb? If we drop the comforting supposition that, as developed countries, we'll always have more money and power to throw at a major crisis, (and the current financial issues ironically disproves this reasoning), then we must start thinking about better ways to invest in the human capital constituted by survivors, because in our potential multi-crisis context this capital is the only common currency.

The bad news is that such a view is very far from usual visions and processes of bureaucracies, including relief agencies. The good news is that the pressure of events will be so high that we will have to learn fast, very fast indeed.

The ongoing conferences on how to rebuild Haiti will have to go beyond plans, money, and concrete. Human processes and the creative dynamics to sustain and build upon will be the name of the game.

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loved ones further hindered the organisation of relief. Ideally disaster preparation plans should encourage families and local communities to agree in advance on a meeting point outside the danger zone and make sure everyone knows different ways to get there. These 'recovery hotspots' could be used by relief agencies as emergency bases.

A striking example of the imperative to improve the integration of geography into relief logistics is provided by the 12-hour delay experienced by the French military hospital. Although preparations had been made as to who should go and what sort of medical support should be sent to Haiti, it had not been decided where the resources should be deployed.

SURVIVORS NOT VICTIMS

Hotspots for medical care and food must be selected according to their relevance to affected population. And this geography must be informed by local knowledge and practice, because people simply will not go to seek help in a place that is either unfamiliar to them, or which is associated with bad memories prior to the disaster: the reluctance of Katrina refugees to move from the unsanitary but familiar shelter of the Superdome to the Convention Center (where they had never set foot before the storm) is a good case in point.

Once the connection has been made between the victims and relief agencies, the former should stop being treated as such by the latter. People are not disaster victims, they are disaster survivors. Physical and psychological trauma must be addressed, but affected people should be involved as early as possible as participants in their own recovery. Once the American Red Cross and FEMA allowed the Houston Astrodome's evacuees to access the Internet and activate their own support network, these agencies were relieved of a good share of their task and could dedicate more time and resources to care for the most vulnerable and the truly helpless.

News media's predictable focus on social collapse and looting scenes misses the point that most post-disaster observers have made, that the unpredictability of people's behaviour is usually one of unexpected resourcefulness and that the apparent improvisations are framed by the sense of place and community of affected individuals. People in post-disaster situations act upon rationales that cannot be reduced to cost/benefits models (or worse, to clichés of violent or fatalistic cultures) and these rationales must be known and integrated beforehand because they are, ultimately, what people are going to act upon.

This is not to say that violence and abuse never exist (especially in places such as Haiti, where pre-existing conflicts made the social fabric extremely vulnerable) or that all funds and logistics should be surrendered to a 'locals-know-best' ideology. But confiscating the latter will only isolate the recovering society, which is then likely to engage in its own strategies and initiative, despite the rest of the world's best intentions. Against a Pavlovian top-down management, localised resources and knowledge can thus help tweak and adjust a one-size-fits-all relief plan to the specific context of a given crisis. An actual partnership between international relief agencies and local citizens may thus ensure that we go beyond being always one major crisis behind.

Eventually, and for all the admonishment currently circulating emergency planning circles to 'think outside the box', it is too often forgotten that individuals are ultimately the only actors capable of improvisation. Government and NGOs, soldiers and bureaucrats have plans and strategies (and sometimes agendas),

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but when unexpected disasters strike, the affected population are the only people with a life or death interest in the place. Relief agencies don't have a survival instinct.

This is why we need to come up with new ways to make room for the victims' intuition and strategies in the relief and recovery phases. This is not about making experts and planners more flexible, but about oiling and nurturing the articulation between multifaceted inward assistance and the recipients of this aid. The key to achieving this starts with the basic premise of not considering people a liability.

Thus, forcing even the best intended relief plans onto a devastated physical and social landscape without first questioning the local context, is usually a route to failure because of the disconnection between intervention models and the victims' actual needs.

Besides, opening the recovery agenda to people is not a luxury to be played with in less cataclysmic times. Quite the contrary: the worse the situation, the more you have to rely on social capital. Because worst-case scenarios include those where no-one has been spared, including those who could help mobilise funds and logistics, as the powerlessness

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Julie Hernandez is a geographer working on urban resilience and social capital in large scale recovery operations. She was living in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina struck, and is now deeply involved with the rebirth of the town – both with a strong academic dimension at Paris Ouest Nanterre and Tulane University, and through her engagement with various NGOs and civic associations in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Julie has helped develop community mapping projects for New Orleans neighbourhoods