

Disaster Preparedness, Urban Protection and Low-Income Communities of Color

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**SCHOLARSHIP ON HOMELAND SECURITY:
EXPLORING THE INTELLECTUAL TERRITORY**

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Two September incidents, one human-made and the other “natural”, have changed the way Americans think about extreme events. The horrors of 9/11 brought *international terrorism* to the United States and shattered this country’s perception of invincibility, while the devastation of Hurricane Katrina made Americans aware of the importance of disaster planning and management. However, Katrina, unlike 9/11, brought issues of race and class to the forefront in disaster preparedness strategies by exposing the vulnerability of African Americans and Latinos to extreme events in congested U.S. cities. The storm demonstrated that the absence of a functional link between low-income communities and the disaster preparedness team, the inability of authorities to communicate effectively with blacks and Latinos during the crisis, and the absence of trust between communities of color and disaster personnel could result in tragic consequences. This viewpoint suggests that African Americans and Latinos are marginalized in the U.S. model of disaster preparedness and this is a serious flaw in the model.

The realities of the post-9/11 world and the experiences of Hurricane Katrina suggest that congested urban areas, where large numbers of African Americans and Latinos live, are particularly susceptible to extreme events, including post-disaster psychosocial trauma. The reason is that people of color often live in the most vulnerable neighborhoods, experience the

greatest difficulty getting out of harm's way in a crisis, and are the most likely to be injured, suffer significant financial losses, and encounter major obstacles accessing assistance in rebuilding their neighborhoods. Given the complexities of the world created by 9/11 and climatic changes taking place as a result of global warming, we can anticipate that urban centers where blacks and Latinos live will be targets for both human-made and natural extreme events. Thus, without better disaster preparedness, the unnecessary suffering and loss of life that accompanied Katrina will be repeated.

In the United States, disaster policymaking, planning, and management is a hierarchical, top-down process that excludes the participation of low-income and working class communities of color. This should not be surprising. Local government policymaking often trivializes the interests of people of color and mutes their voice. Given this approach to governance, it is not shocking that black and Latino community interests are not integrated into overall disaster management. The events of Hurricane Katrina revealed that this top-down approach to disaster preparation resulted in tragic consequences.

So, how do we avoid this problem in the future? I believe that the U.S. Disaster Preparedness Model should be refashioned so that it integrates communities of color into the disaster policymaking, planning and management process. The idea is to build an interactive, top-down-bottom-up model that is anchored by a partnership between residents in communities of color and local government.

Can an effective participatory model of disaster preparedness be designed and implemented in the United States? The answer to this question can be found by examining the lessons learned in the third world, especially in places such as Cuba, where highly successful participatory models of disaster preparedness have been developed. Community participation is not popular in the United States, despite the substantial social science literature that supports this approach. Some urban planners, for example, have told me that community participation is too messy and burdensome a process to be efficient.

Yet, while we eschew this approach to policymaking and community development, many nations in the third world as well as international organizations support strategies of community

development based on participatory democracy and the concept of social capital. For example, the United Nations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund along with Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) such as the Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, acknowledge the power, value, and necessity of local participation in disaster management.

I realize that many third world countries have poorly developed systems of disaster preparedness and I also understand that knowledge transfer to the United States from other nations, especially those with fundamentally different social systems, is extremely difficult. Nonetheless, the experiences of some of these countries have demonstrated that models based on the participation of residents in low income neighborhoods can work. Within this context, the theme that flows from the experiences of these countries is the importance of social capital and capacity building for developing neighborhood-based approaches to disaster planning and management.

By social capital and capacity building, scholars and policymakers are referring to *community development* strategies that not only stress leadership training and providing residents with access to skills, knowledge, and resources, but also strategies that emphasize teaching how to apply skills and knowledge to the resolution of problems during a crisis situation. The expected outcome of these efforts is to build more aware, supported, responsible, connected, and trusting communities that will work in tandem with, not in opposition to, the authorities during an extreme event. Neighborhoods organized along these lines, it is argued, will mitigate extreme incidents, enhance the government's ability to respond effectively during a crisis, minimize recovery problems, and reduce the time needed to normalize and rebuild communities.

Cuba is considered by many authorities to be one of the most useful examples of this neighborhood-based approach to disaster preparedness. We ignore the accomplishments of this country at our own peril. For example, situated in the Caribbean Sea, Cuba frequently must withstand serious hurricanes. While its neighbors are battered, losing lives and property, Cuba is usually successful at averting these calamities and suffers many fewer losses. For example, when Hurricane Michelle ripped through the island in November 2001, 700,000 people were

evacuated to emergency shelters and in 2004 when Hurricane Ivan battered the island with 160 M.P.H. winds, the government evacuated nearly 2 million people. The result: not a single death or serious injury. This past July, I was in Havana when Hurricane Dennis hit the island. In that city, about 100,000 people were evacuated to storm centers within a two to three hour period. These evacuations are quite a feat, given that few people own cars; Cuba has a small fleet of mostly old vehicles along with fuel shortages and poor roads.

The great success of Cuba's program of disaster preparedness is based on the development of a *culture of safety*, instruction in disaster preparedness that begins in grade school, civil defense training for all adults, and an elaborate system of neighborhood organizations that are trained to mobilize people and pass on information at the street level. According to Oxfam America, a Boston-based international development and relief agency, Cuba is very good at mobilizing communities to develop their disaster preparations. This involves mapping out vulnerable areas of the community, creating emergency plans, and actually simulating emergencies so people can practice evacuations and other measures designed to save lives. "When disaster strikes," says Oxfam, "people know what to do." Because the Cuban approach is based on community involvement, there is a high degree of trust and cooperation between the authorities and the neighborhoods during times of crisis.

The important issue here is that successful models of disaster preparedness exist which are based on the integration of low-income residents in policymaking, planning, and management. However, developing such a model in the United States will be easier said than done. In the U.S. model of democracy, voting is seen as the primary way that people participate in the governing process. Policymakers and street-level bureaucrats are most comfortable with processes that exclude the messiness of working with ordinary people, especially blacks and Latinos. This perspective notwithstanding, public outrage over the Katrina aftermath may have opened the door for policy change. Natural and human-made hazards are the types of extreme events that can trigger public demand for change and spawn advocacy coalitions to fight for shifts in public policy. Katrina might be such a catalyst. Even so, to build an effective participatory model of disaster preparedness in the United States, we need to know a great deal more about

everyday life and culture in low-to-moderate African American and Latino communities. Therefore, the start point in building a participatory model of disaster preparedness is the development and implementation of a research agenda to produce a knowledge base to guide its development.

This strategy should be anchored in a participatory research model using a mixed methods approach that incorporates both conventional quantitative and qualitative analyses. I want to stress that participatory research methods are extremely important to the strategy. Such techniques focus on sequential reflection and action that are performed with and by the local people rather than on them. In this approach, residents are equal partners and have input into all aspects of the research process. Local knowledge and perspectives are critical sources of information that are integrated into and inform data gathering, analysis, and interpretation. Within this context, the research agenda should focus minimally on seven areas of inquiry and the goal should be to gain insight into the issues involved in making residents of African American and Latino neighborhoods partners with local government in disaster preparedness.

- **Completion of studies on the organization, structure, and culture of low-income and working class communities of color.**
- **Identification of best practices in integrating low-income communities into disaster policymaking, planning, and management.**
- **Development of strategies for bolstering the capacity of communities to deal with issues related to disaster management, information access, neighborhood risk reduction, community building, and the mobilization of people.**
- **Completion of studies that generate insight into the social construction of “risks” in low-income and working class communities of color and the development of a “risk” topography in these neighborhoods.**
- **The construction of interactive, top-down-bottom-up models of disaster preparedness and the implementation of demonstration projects.**
- **Investigation into the role of gender and color in disaster preparedness.**
- **Completion of studies on the problem of transferring knowledge from scholarly research to public policy and practice.**

There are numerous issues involved in developing a model of disaster preparedness that integrates low-income and working class communities of color into the local government disaster policymaking, planning, and management process. One of the most important tasks involves linking the realities of everyday life and culture in these communities to the question of disaster preparedness. People in different socioeconomic classes view *risks, hazards, and/or dangers* in different ways and set their priorities on the basis of these perspectives.

Unless there is ownership by individuals of the actual risks faced by them, along with an understanding of what can happen to them, then risk management and mitigation will be exceedingly difficult. For example, a single mother living in a high crime area may not be overly concerned about a terrorist attack or dangers emanating from a seemingly distant natural disaster or crisis. Therefore, to build an effective disaster management model based on community participation we must not only acquire deep insight into these communities, but also we must be willing to develop a model that links disasters, both natural and human-made, to other risks that neighborhood residents are concerned about. The daily risks neighborhood residents face cannot be minimized in order to *prioritize* only those risks the State deems important. For example, in Cuba, the neighborhood groups that lead the community during a crisis also take the lead in mobilizing the residents for participation in blood drives, vaccinations, and other important community issues.

These general ideas offer a platform from which more specific and targeted research activities, actions, and recommendations can be generated to build a participatory model of disaster preparedness. Building such a model will not be easy, but if urban areas are to be protected from human-made and natural disasters, we must put politics aside and construct a scenario that incorporates an interactive partnership between local government and African American and Latino neighborhoods in the formulation and implementation of efficient, effective disaster policies.

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