Katrina and the Demographics of Disaster and Reconstruction
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Summary

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans and other parts of the Gulf Coast region need to be rebuilt in a sustainable and socially just way. It will cost well over $100 billion in federal funds to rebuild the region. People of color and low income communities disproportionately bear the burdens of the Katrina disaster, and disproportionately stand to lose out on the benefits of recovery and relief. We present recommendations below to help ensure the fair distribution of the benefits and burdens of reconstruction, while promoting democratic values of full information and full and fair public participation in rebuilding New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.

The people who lived in the areas of New Orleans that were still flooded days after Hurricane Katrina struck were more likely to be black, have more children, earn less money, and be less educated than those in the rest of the city (see demographic analyses and map in the appendix).

Normal federal contracting rules are largely suspended in the rush to help people displaced by the storm and reopen New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. The administration has already waived the federal law requiring that prevailing wages be paid on construction projects underwritten by federal dollars.

We recommend the following steps as part of a sustainable and equitable regional action plan, as described in more detail below.

(1) Provide local jobs for local workers, and an even playing field for small business enterprises that include people of color and women in positions of ownership and management, for all construction and other public works projects in the Gulf rebuild effort. Waive federal restrictions on local hiring preferences.
(2) Restore the levees and surrounding wetlands in an environmentally sound and sustainable manner that takes into account people's needs for safe and healthy open space, clean air, and clean water.
(3) Use sustainable construction practices for new construction and restoration.
(4) Rebuild the transportation infrastructure in an efficient and equitable way to meet the needs of the working poor and other people with limited access to cars that includes evacuation plans.
(5) Create an independent citizens’ oversight body of progressive individuals to find out what went wrong and why, and how to create a better future, to serve as a check and balance for any official commissions and studies. The oversight body can gather, analyze, and publish the information necessary to understand the impact of Katrina and the rebuilding efforts on all communities, including communities of color and low income communities.
(6) Articulate and implement a mission, vision, and strategic plan based on the diverse values at stake that will bring people together and ensure full and fair public participation in the decision-making process to rebuild New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.

(7) The Black, Hispanic, and Asian Pacific American Congressional Caucuses should begin to work together immediately to address sustainable and socially just rebuilding and relief efforts.

(8) Preserve, restore, and rebuild the rich cultural heritage of New Orleans, as expressed in music, art, and cultural celebrations.

(9) Never again allow such destruction and inequities.

The Challenge

The private sector is poised to reap a windfall of business in the largest domestic rebuilding effort ever undertaken. Normal federal contracting rules are largely suspended in the rush to help people displaced by the storm and reopen New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Hundreds of millions of dollars in no-bid contracts have already been let and billions more are to flow to the private sector in the weeks and months to come. The administration has already waived the federal law requiring that prevailing wages be paid on construction projects underwritten by federal dollars. Some experts warn that the crisis atmosphere and the open federal purse are a bonanza for lobbyists and private companies and are likely to lead to the contract abuses, cronyism and waste that numerous investigations have uncovered in post-war Iraq.

Lawmakers and industry groups are lining up to bring home their share of the cascade of money for rebuilding and relief. Louisiana lawmakers plan to push for billions of dollars to upgrade the levees around New Orleans, rebuild highways, lure back business, and shore up the city's sinking foundation. The devastated areas of Mississippi and Alabama will need similar infusions of cash. Communities will want compensation for taking in evacuees. Future costs of health care, debris removal, temporary housing, clothing, and vehicle replacement will add up.

Other ideas circulating through Congress that could entail significant costs include turning New Orleans and other cities affected by the storm into big new tax-free zones; providing reconstruction money for tens of thousands of homeowners and small businesses that did not have federal flood insurance on their houses or buildings; and making most hurricane victims eligible for health care under Medicaid and having the federal government pay the full cost rather than the current practice of splitting costs with states.

The relief money is not expected to cover any of the real reconstruction costs that lie ahead: repair of highways, bridges and other infrastructure and new projects that seek to prevent a repeat of the New Orleans disaster. Nor will it help pay for expanded availability of food stamps and poverty programs to cover hurricane victims. Farmers from the Midwest, meanwhile, are beginning to press for emergency relief as a result of their difficulties in shipping grain through the Port of New Orleans.

One of the most immediate tasks after Hurricane Katrina hit was repair of the breaches in the New Orleans levees. Three companies have been awarded no-bid contracts by the Army Corps of Engineers to perform the restoration. To provide immediate housing in the region, FEMA
says it suspended normal bidding rules in awarding contracts.\textsuperscript{7}

\textbf{Recommendations}

We base our recommendations in part on the experience of the Los Angeles region. Los Angeles is currently engaged in one of the largest public works project in the country, investing $14.4 billion to build new schools and modernize existing schools. Los Angeles is starting to green the 51 mile Los Angeles River, 70 years after the Army Corps of Engineers drowned the river with concrete for flood control purposes, making it into the most environmentally degraded river in the world. Los Angeles has had to rebuild after the riots and rebellion in Watts in 1965, after the acquittal of the police officers in the Rodney King beating, and after natural disasters including earthquakes, mudslides, and fires.

1. Jobs and Contracts

The people on the Gulf Coast devastated by the Katrina disaster should receive their fair share of the economic benefits of recovery through local jobs for local workers, and an even playing field for small business enterprises.

The Los Angeles Unified School District, for example, is investing $14.4 billion to build new schools and modernize existing schools, one of the largest public work projects in the United States. New schools are being built, older schools are becoming less crowded, and hundreds of acres of land are being environmentally restored. More than $9.2 billion will be invested on 14 new schools and additions, which will add over 6,500 classrooms, over 171,000 seats, and over 450 acres of playing fields and play areas. More importantly, the future has become brighter for hundreds of thousands of children. And it is being done in a manner that respects the public's demand for accountability, transparency, and social justice.

New construction and modernization will create local jobs for local workers and stimulate the Los Angeles economy in a program that can serve as a best practice example for public works projects in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. The school construction program will create 174,000 jobs, $9 billion in wages, and $900 million in local and state taxes. The School District has targeted small businesses and local workers to ensure they receive a fair share of these benefits through programs that can serve as best practice examples for rebuilding the Gulf Coast. The School District adopted a 25\% Small Business Enterprise goal in 2003. For the 2004 fiscal year, 39\% of all contract awards -- $337 million -- went to Small Business Enterprises, with the percentages increasing each quarter to 62\% in April-June. Small Business Enterprise participation in Construction Management and similar contracts exceeded 40\% in Fiscal Year 2004. The School District has set the goal of 50\% local worker participation for school construction. To achieve this goal, the School District provides ten-week pre-apprenticeship training, and facilitates placement in union apprenticeship training programs.\textsuperscript{8}

These programs should serve as best practice examples for investing over $100 billion in federal funds to rebuild the Gulf Coast to create local jobs for local workers, and an even playing field for small business enterprises that include people of color and women in positions of ownership and management. Federal regulations should be revised or waived to permit local hiring.
preferences, so that local people can be hired to do the repair, construction, and restoration work. Employers and unions should run strong apprenticeship and training programs for local workers.

To supplement the income from jobs and contracts, Individual Development Accounts can be set up for local low-income residents. These are savings accounts for low-income individuals that can be used for specific purposes, such as buying a home, starting a business, or paying college tuition. Individual savings are often matched by either government or private resources so that assets build more rapidly.

2. Sustainable Flood Control, Levees, and Wetlands

The natural ecosystem along the Gulf has been stripped of natural buffers like coastal reefs, tropical forests, and swampland that can absorb rising water and resist tidal surges. The levees in New Orleans need to be restored and strengthened for flood control purposes, but flood control cannot be the only purpose dictating the design of the levees and surrounding wetlands. Levees and wetlands should be restored in a sustainable, environmentally sound manner that serve people's needs for safe and healthy open space for parks, recreation and habitat restoration, clean air, and clean water. Every few square miles of marshes lower the flood level significantly. We should plan with nature instead of railing against it.

In the 1930s the Army Corps of Engineers drowned the 51 mile Los Angeles River in concrete for flood control purposes. The problem was defined as flood control, and the solution addressed only the problem as defined. As a result, the Los Angeles River is the most environmentally degraded river in the world. Today Los Angeles is beginning to green the river with parks, habitat restoration, housing, schools, and economic development recognized as central components of any river restoration and flood control effort. The greening of the Los Angeles River provides valuable lessons for restoring the levees in a sustainable way that takes into account the diverse values at stake, not just the need for flood control.

3. Green Construction

The Environmental Law Institute cited the green school construction and modernization program in Los Angeles as a national "best practice" example for sustainable construction with natural lighting, trees and grass, and renewable energy meeting CHPS (Collaborative for High Performance School) and LEEDS (leadership in energy and environmental design) standards. Sustainable construction standards should be set and followed for new and restored buildings in the Gulf Coast.

4. Transportation Justice

Fully one-quarter of the people in New Orleans did not own cars or have ready transportation out of town in the event of evacuation orders. Civic leaders knew that many of the city's poor, including 134,000 without cars, could be left behind in a killer storm. Many who had cars before will not be able to repair or replace cars damaged or destroyed by the flood. The plight of the working poor with limited or no access to cars illustrates the need to implement a transportation policy agenda to provide choices to people who currently lack them.
An evacuation plan for low income people must be developed and implemented with local people on the planning team to ensure full and fair public participation. Effective communication with local people is essential. The very low car ownership rates of African-Americans in New Orleans and other Gulf Coast areas need to be addressed. More public transportation alone will not be enough in an evacuation. Public transit is one of the first parts of infrastructure to cease operation or fail in an emergency. Car ownership, maintenance, and insurance should be funded through micro-loans. Neighborhood car repair businesses can be funded through disadvantaged business enterprise programs. The monopoly on taxi cab ownership and operation should be ended. Jitneys (multi-unassociated riders) should be permitted. Increased car ownership is one obvious answer, but traditional environmentalists are often not comfortable with this.

5. Oversight, Information, and Public Participation

An independent citizens’ oversight body of progressive individuals should be created and funded to find out what went wrong and why, and how to create a better future, to serve as a check and balance for any official commissions and studies. We need to offer a counter-narrative because we cannot trust what the government will do. Democratic values of information and public participation need to be implemented.

The oversight body can gather, analyze, and publish the information necessary to understand the impact of Katrina and the rebuilding efforts on all communities, including communities of color and low income communities.

Public participation has to be rooted in the impacted communities, in the hearts and minds of real people. What kinds of communities do people want to live in and raise children?

It is necessary to conduct multidisciplinary research and analysis to find out what went wrong and why, and how the future could be better. (1) Follow the money. Who benefits from reconstruction, and who gets left behind? (2) Demographic analysis. The people who lived in the areas of New Orleans that were still flooded days after Hurricane Katrina struck were more likely to be black, have more children, earn less money, and be less educated than those in the rest of the city. Additional demographic analyses using census data and GIS (geographic information systems) need to be conducted along the Gulf Coast to understand the impacts of destruction and reconstruction based on race, ethnicity, income, poverty, education, gender, access to cars, and other salient factors. (3) Historical research to understand how the region came to be the way it is, and how it could be better. Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice has recognized that the Katrina disaster “gives us an opportunity” to rectify historic injustices in the South. “When it’s rebuilt, it should be rebuilt in a different way than it was at the time this happened,” she said, adding that “maybe now on the heels of New Orleans” there could be an effort to “deal with the problem of persistent poverty.” (4) Creative legal research and analysis needs to combine civil rights, environmental, housing, employment, and other areas to bolster the weaknesses of one body of law with the strengths of another.
6. The Vision and the Values at Stake

It is necessary to articulate and implement a collective regional vision and plan for reconstructing New Orleans and the Gulf Coast based on the diverse values at stake that will bring people together and ensure full and fair public participation in the decision-making process. Key strategies should include coalition building and community organizing, public education, policy and legal advocacy outside the courts, multidisciplinary research and analyses, strategic media campaigns, creative engagement of opponents to find common ground, and impact litigation as a last resort.¹³

Emphasizing the diverse values at stake is a core strategy to bring people together to create the kind of community where they want to live and raise children—equal access to public resources; democratic participation in deciding the future of the community; economic vitality for all and local jobs for local workers; spiritual values in protecting people and the earth; environmental values of clean water, ground, and air; and sustainable regional planning. Articulating diverse values to appeal to different stakeholders is consistent with the call of Professor George Lakoff from the University of California, Berkeley, for a progressive movement built around the shared values that define who progressives are, and that encompass the work done by groups working on many different issue areas and programs.¹⁴

7. Congressional Caucuses

The Black, Hispanic, and Asian Pacific American Congressional Caucuses should begin to work together immediately to address sustainable and socially just rebuilding and relief efforts. Black people in New Orleans disproportionately suffered from the Katrina destruction. 145,000 Latinos have been left without jobs in the Gulf Coast. Many Latinos in rural areas did not have adequate access to information, do not speak English, are undocumented, and are quite alone in the recovery. The needs of Asian-American small entrepreneurs in the fishing industry on the Gulf Coast need to be addressed.

8. The Unique Culture and Heritage of New Orleans

New Orleans celebrates even in death through jazz music in funeral processions. This joyous spirit should guide the reconstruction of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. One of the reasons New Orleans is dear to the hearts of people everywhere is the rich artistic and cultural heritage of the area, as expressed in art, music, food, and cultural celebrations. Mardi Gras in February 2006, and the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival in the spring of 2006, will provide opportunities to mourn destruction and celebrate reconstruction together, with tourism helping to bring economic recovery for all. Reconstruction should preserve the rich cultural heritage of New Orleans through preservation and adaptive reuse of historic buildings and neighborhoods. Reconstruction must respect the diversity of the Native American, Spanish, French, African-American, Creole, Cajun, and other people who have given New Orleans its unique power of place. Reconstruction must preserve and build on the strengths of New Orleans and its character as a compact, walkable, historic community. Reconstruction should also avoid the mistakes of the past and prevent concentrated poverty in some areas.
9. Never Again

"I hope we realize that the people of New Orleans weren't just abandoned during the hurricane," Senator Barack Obama said last week. "They were abandoned long ago--to murder and mayhem in the streets, to substandard schools, to dilapidated housing, to inadequate health care, to a pervasive sense of hopelessness." Long term benefits of reconstruction and relief should make concrete improvements in people's lives compared to their lives before the destruction, give people a real sense of their own power, and alter the relations of power.

In a video guide to hurricane evacuations that had been prepared for but not yet distributed in New Orleans before Katrina struck, the Rev. Marshall Truehill warns "Don't wait for the city, don't wait for the state, don't wait for the Red Cross." The central message to the people of New Orleans was blunt: Save yourself, and help your neighbors if you can.

We can and must do better than that by turning to each other and our government to achieve equal justice, democracy, and livability for all in New Orleans, along the Gulf Coast, and across the nation.

About the Authors

Robert García is Executive Director of the Center for Law in the Public Interest in Los Angeles, California. He has influenced the investment of over $20 billion in underserved communities through the urban park movement, public school construction and modernization, and the MTA transportation justice litigation in Los Angeles. He is a former Assistant United States Attorney in the Southern District of New York. He has published and lectured widely on social change and law.

Marc Brenman is Executive Director of the Washington State Human Rights Commission. He was formerly Senior Policy Advisor for Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Transportation in Washington, D.C. He is an expert on emergency evacuation of low income people, people with limited English proficiency, people with disabilities, and people with low literacy. He is co-authoring a book on transportation equity for the American Planning Association.
Appendix
Source: New York Times, September 12, 2005

The Neighborhoods That Were Hit Hard And Those That Weren’t

Rebuilding New Orleans will take years or decades and cost untold billions. While larger parts of the city may be left standing, most of the low-income areas containing hospitals, government buildings, schools, historic homes and businesses still suffered minimal damage.

The people who lived in the areas of New Orleans that were still flooded days after Hurricane Katrina struck were more likely to be black, have fewer children, earn less money and be less educated than those in the dry areas of the city. People who live in the lowest-income areas of the city are among the most vulnerable. The number of low-income people in the city has grown by about 10 percent in the past decade, making up almost 60 percent of the city’s population – and contained more than two-thirds of the city’s homes.

The map shows the extent of the flooding on Sept. 2, after the water level had stopped rising, but several days before crevices were able to plug breaches in levees and start pumping water out.

DATA FROM 2000 U.S. CENSUS

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<tr>
<th>Areas with significant flooding</th>
<th>Areas with little or no flooding</th>
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<td>Population</td>
<td>346,000</td>
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Race and ethnicity

- 76% BLACK
- 18% WHITE
- 3% HISPANIC
- 2% OTHER

PERCENTAGE OF RESIDENTS THAT WERE:

- LONDON 18                       22%
- OLDER THAN 65                   12%

Single-parent families

- 29%

Education

- 72% BACHELOR’S DEGREE OR HIGHER
- 38%

Income

- $25,759 MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME
- $31,455 TOTAL ANNUAL INCOME

POVERTY RATE

- 29%

PERCENTAGE OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH INCOME OF $50,000 OR MORE

- 56%

PERCENTAGE OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH NO VEHICLE

- 6%

Houses

- 145,000

NUMBER OF HOUSES

- 70,000

Houses BUILT BEFORE 1940

- 23%

Houses OCCUPIED BY RENTERS

- 52%

TRANSPORTATION

- 29%

SOURCE: Demographia, Lincresis, and USA Today (via the New York Times)
9 Los Angeles Times, September 14, 2005.
14 George Lakoff, Don’t Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate (2004); George Lakoff, Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think (2002).