

RACE & POVERTY: The Katrina Imperative

Introduction: Not Simply a Human-Made Disaster

For a brief time at least, the devastation wreaked on New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina and the wholesale failure of the local, state and federal disaster relief efforts exposed the pernicious ways in which race and poverty continue to be inextricably linked in this country. If America can be imagined as a “lifeboat”, using a metaphor in vogue during the early 1970’s, then in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, with flood-waters rapidly rising due to the failure of human-made levies, those who found themselves without an assigned seat on “the boat” or any other viable means of escape were largely black, brown and poor Americans.

The disaster continues... Nearly eight months after Hurricane Katrina first made landfall, the TV cameras have mostly turned away from the protracted struggle to rebuild New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf Coast region. But at last count nearly 500,000 people remain dispersed throughout eighteen different states, with many of the displaced saying that they lack sufficient means to return. Even if such a return were possible, survivors would likely find many of their neighborhoods declared off-limits and their houses condemned. A controversial rebuilding plan supported by some city-leaders has sparked widespread fears of re-gentrification: i.e. the permanent displacement of poor, largely black households in favor of white, mostly upper-income families. Add to this the virtual disappearance of jobs in New Orleans’ service-based economy and the daily exposure to industrial contaminants left by the receding floodwaters and you begin to get the picture.

Among progressive activists on the ground there is a growing recognition that to attribute the devastation solely to “natural causes” is an error. First, though the immediate trigger for what is now taking place in New Orleans and throughout the Gulf region may have been Hurricane Katrina, the impact of this “natural disaster” has been compounded by long-term social, political and economic policies that have disproportionately hit the poorest of the poor. The implementation of these policies has led to the diversion of much needed funding from public infrastructure systems, the systematic dismantling of important elements of the social safety-net, the reduction of available funding for environmental monitoring and toxic clean-up, a substantial increase in already high levels of cynicism about civic participation, and a record expansion of the racial-economic divide in America.

Lessons from the Field

What can the experience in New Orleans teach us about the struggle for racial justice in other parts of the country and nationally? The short answer is, “plenty.” In the immediate aftermath of Katrina, social conservatives began to openly speculate that New Orleans and the Gulf Coast Region would provide the perfect opportunity to test social and fiscal policies that were either stalled in congress due to lack of support or deemed too politically charged to implement in other parts of the country. Many of these policies entailed the suspension or virtual repeal of federal and state protections of organized labor, the environment, affirmative action, immigrants, federal contracting, and more. Though local organizers and other progressive leaders and activists have been able to challenge some of these reprehensible policies, others are still moving forward.

Coming from a place of profound sorrow and respect for the loss of human life, the destruction of family homes, the ruination of livelihoods, and the continued struggles of Hurricane Katrina survivors, progressive activists and donors can also glean important lessons from what is now unfolding in New Orleans.

Below are some key insights passed on by progressive leaders and activists — all of which apply to organizing around race and poverty issues not only on the Gulf Coast but across the U.S. As events continue to unfold, there will no doubt be many more lessons to come:

- **Becoming a Reliable Ally.** Progressive donors and activists are not immune from the effects of systemic racism and poverty. In order to become a reliable ally in the struggle against racial inequalities, some focused self-reflection may be in order.

1. How have racism, poverty, class-privilege, etc. shaped your own worldview?
2. In what way do the communities most affected give input into your funding decisions?

A number of progressive organizations currently offer workshops and trainings on unlearning racism, examining privilege, and becoming a reliable ally.

- **Strategic Coordination & Alliances — Now More than Ever.** The mammoth nature of the problems facing displaced black and brown communities requires an immediate infusion of resources to progressive organizations that are not only able to carry out their individual missions but that also are capable of building strategic partnerships and alliances. In most regions of the country, the non-profit sector has been plagued by a phenomenon known as “splintering” in which two or more organizations share similar goals, work in the same general geographical area, and engage only in minimal communication. Now more than ever — both in New Orleans and across the country — organizations must demonstrate the commitment, skill and competence to build smart and strategic alliances.
- **Responding to Changing Demographics.** Though African American culture and history have been instrumental in shaping New Orleans’ past, present and future, the city’s demographics — like those of many other regions in the United States — have been gradually shifting over the past two to three decades. It is important to recognize that Mexicans, Hondurans, Vietnamese, and other communities of color were also disproportionately affected by the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In addition, the displacement of large numbers of native New Orleanians and the high demand for manual laborers is bringing a new influx of immigrant labor, which has already led to rising tensions. Building solidarity among various communities of color requires transcending the zero-sum game myth that holds that advances for one underserved community can only be attained at the expense of another. Instead, an effective progressive movement requires identifying points of both commonality and difference, and fostering sustained commitments to effective multi-racial/ethnic coalitions.
- **Understanding the Connections.** The issues of racism and poverty can not be dealt with singly. As indicated above, not only are they intricately connected to each other, they are also closely tied to efforts supporting affordable housing, just and living wages, reproductive justice, civic participation, environmental justice, etc. The struggle for racial equality can not be waged in isolation from the efforts taking place on each of these fronts. Progressives would do well to grasp the fundamental interrelatedness of these issues and to develop an analytical framework that brings issues of race and poverty to the forefront.

Funding Strategy One: COMMUNITY-LED REBUILDING AND PLANNING EFFORTS

“As a rapacious free market has come to dominate the rebuilding of New Orleans, it has seen spiraling prices and the influx of property speculators keen to cash in on the disaster. The result is one of the most shocking pieces of urban planning that black and poor America has seen: reconstruction as survival of the wealthiest.”

The Observer Newspaper

At present, New Orleans is faced with not one but two formal rebuilding plans, neither of which has garnered significant input or support from residents of devastated neighborhoods. The plan offered by New Orleans’ current mayor has won some support from smart-growth advocates and establishes a four-month moratorium on rebuilding efforts in places like the lower Ninth Ward and New Orleans East. Over those four months, the affected neighborhoods must develop a plan for how would become viable by reaching a still as yet undefined “critical mass of habitation.” Progressive activists have yet to give formal agreement to one coordinated approach, but they are unified in their opposition to efforts to open the gates even wider for opportunistic developers. Initiatives such as ACORN’s Katrina Survivors’ Association, and the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund’s work to develop a People’s Reconstruction Plan, are connecting displaced residents and providing them the opportunity for advocacy and input in the rebuilding process.

In this respect as in all others, New Orleans is not an anomaly. In communities across the U.S., poor communities of color are rarely at the table for decisions about development of their neighborhoods, their cities or their country. Nor are their concerns prioritized over those of developers and commercial interests. Countering this reality, many community groups have built a significant track record of success in creating inclusive coalitions that are informing and setting the priorities for planning and rebuilding efforts at the local, regional and national level.

Suggested Strategy:

- New Orleans: Support community-led collaboratives that are challenging neighborhood gentrification plans and articulating an alternative, more inclusive rebuilding plan for the city.
- Across the country: Support community-based organizations and coalitions working to ensure that local and regional planning and development strategies are informed by, and reflect the interests of, all sectors of the community — not just corporate and wealthy interests. The most effective among these are those that connect grassroots organizing in specific neighborhoods with regional and national partnerships to influence policy formation.

What to Look For:

- Leadership by and on behalf of communities of color.
- Active participation in decision-making by residents of the most affected communities.
- Commitment to work in coalition with other progressive organizations to develop well-coordinated strategies for rebuilding.
- Organized efforts to protect and ensure the right to vote for displaced residents of the Gulf Region.

Possible Organizations to Fund

IN NEW ORLEANS:

- ACORN: Katrina Survivors Association
- People’s Hurricane Relief Fund & Oversight Coalition
- Common Ground Collective

ACROSS THE U.S.:

- National organizations with grassroots community organizing chapters:
- ACORN
- PICO Network
- Gamaliel Foundation

POLICY ORGANIZATIONS:

- PolicyLink
- Center for Social Inclusion

Funding Strategy Two: TACKLING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ISSUES

“Most people here assume that Coastal Louisiana’s longstanding toxicity has worsened in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Testing by Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and independent scientists confirms their fears. Lead, a severe hazard to children’s development, was stirred up and moved around by the floodwaters. Arsenic, highly carcinogenic, leached from car batteries, pressure-treated wood and disturbed landfills.”

Oskar Cole and Cleo Woelfle-Erskine, [Rebuilding on Poisoned Ground](#)

Funding strategies that seek to address race and poverty must include support for organizations committed to rebuilding safe, sustainable communities and a healthy environment in communities of color in New Orleans and across the U.S. The consequences of winning the struggle to reclaim New Orleans’ neighborhoods for its displaced residents while not at the same time developing a strategy for tackling the dangers posed by widespread toxic contaminants are potentially disastrous. Even before Hurricane Katrina, coastal Louisiana was a disaster area caused by the loss of wetlands and wildlife, long-term exposure to industrial pollutants, and the siting of toxic dump-sites in or near low-income communities of color.

Once again, the Katrina tragedy has brought to light a specific injustice that also exists in many other communities across the U.S. Over the past twenty years, as the environmental justice movement has taken shape, there has been growing recognition across the country that poor communities of color are overwhelmingly the ones impacted by the siting of toxic waste sites and contaminants. In many communities, broad coalitions of neighborhood groups and grassroots organizations have emerged with coordinated strategies to challenge this injustice.

Suggested Strategy:

- In New Orleans: neighborhood efforts with community leadership that are working to get the EPA, FEMA and other government agencies to do their job in terms of environmental clean-up in both the short and long-term.
- Across the country: coordinated strategic efforts to bring attention to, and challenge, the policy of siting toxic waste dumps in or near low-income communities of color. While local campaigns and organizing are crucial, this and other environmental issues transcend regional boundaries and present too big a problem for any local group to tackle alone. They require a coordinated strategy led by communities of color at the local, state and national level.

What to Look For:

- Leadership by and on behalf of communities of color and active participation in decision-making by residents of the most affected communities.
- Focus on short-term as well as systemic causes of pollution and environmental degradation.

Possible Organizations to Fund

IN NEW ORLEANS:

- The Louisiana Bucket Brigade
- The Deep South Environmental Center
- The Louisiana Environmental Action Network

ACROSS THE U.S.:

- Asian Pacific Environmental Network
- Center for Health, Environment, and Justice
- Southeast Alliance for Environmental Justice
- Southwest Network for Environmental & Economic Justice
- National Black Environmental Justice Network

Funding Strategy Three: BRIDGING THE RACIAL-ECONOMIC DIVIDE

“Racial wealth inequality continues to deeply shape the United States. Hurricane Katrina should have made this clear for those who previously refused to see. With destructive clarity, Hurricane Katrina highlighted the deep racial fault lines. We have been shaken... To argue that race does not matter is to reject reality. Race does matter.”

Chaka A. K. Uzundu, [Washing Away the Veil: Katrina and the Racial Wealth Divide](#)

When questioned in a national survey about whether racism played any role in the government response to Hurricane Katrina, 66% of African Americans responded affirmatively, while only 13% of whites did so. Chaka Uzundu suggests that many Americans’ inability to see racism at work can be attributed to the persistence of two pernicious myths in America: (1) the belief that America has achieved a colorblind society that has transcended racial and cultural differences, and (2) the belief that racial advancement is a zero-sum in which one group moves forward only at the expense of another.

Neither of these myths touches upon reality. In actuality, most Americans have been impacted by a widening income/wealth gap that has fostered a growing sense of economic insecurity, and African Americans and Latinos/as have been disproportionately impacted. To understand how racial injustice functions on an everyday basis, these myths and others like them must be consistently challenged. To challenge the reality requires investment in initiatives that promote collaborative solutions and long-term coalitions among communities of color including new immigrant communities.

Suggested Strategy:

- Support to organizations led by and for poor communities of color that are seeking to redress and change social and economic policies that further handicap the poor. The Economic Justice briefing paper provides a framework for funding strategies in this area.
- Support to national and regional organizations that are developing progressive political strategies that incorporate race and class, and that draw on the perspectives of poor communities of color.
- Support to organizations that build coalitions and alliances across and among different communities of color working together to develop shared strategies to attain more just social and economic policies.

Possible Organizations to Fund

- SEIU Black & Brown Workers Project
- Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice
- Applied Research Center — Racial Justice and Leadership Initiative
- East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy
- National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights
- Institute on Race and Poverty
- United for a Fair Economy

What to Look For:

- Organization’s ability to understand and communicate how local efforts fit into the “big picture,” (i.e., national struggles for racial justice).
- Strategic coordination between grassroots activists and local, state, and federal policy-makers.