

The Power of People: Social Capital and Post-Disaster Recovery

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Since Hurricane Katrina destroyed all of our worldly possessions and shut down Tulane University (the university which employed me at the time), I have had plenty of time to observe the process of rebuilding in New Orleans. I noticed something interesting over the past five years: neighborhoods with similar levels of damage and poverty bounced back from the disaster at very different rates.

The Vietnamese community centered around Mary Queen of Viet Nam (MQVN) Church in Village de L'Est brought back a tremendous number of residents and businesses. This was despite high levels of poverty, flood waters, and low levels of formal education. Within a year of the disaster, for example, observers estimated that 9 in 10 businesses and households had returned to the area. Residents set up their own charter school, built an urban farm, and set up new medical clinics to avoid the 25 minute wait for ambulances.

On the other hand, similar neighborhoods in the Big Easy which also suffered from unemployment, damage, and poverty did not seem to be recovering. Some of those neighborhoods now – some five years after Hurricane Katrina – seem untouched since the day the levees broke. Blighted properties filled with tall weeds dominate and less than half of the residents have returned in these slow-to-recover areas. Government officials did not send more funds to survivors in the MQVN area; if anything, they told me in interviews, they often ignored the neighborhood. If government aid, wealth, education, and damage from the disaster cannot explain their resilience, what can?

The ties that bind residents to each other are a resource that social scientists have labeled social capital. During and after a disaster, neighborhoods with deeper reservoirs of social capital can recover more effectively, efficiently, and quickly. Three mechanisms allow these tightly knit communities to bounce back: information, collective action, and connections.

One early-returning community activist I spoke to told me that he sent so many emails after the storm to keep up with the demand for information from refugees scattered across the country, AOL shut his account down. They assumed he must be spamming because of the hundreds of recipients of his daily messages. Post-disaster, residents want to know about the condition of schools, supermarkets, roads, and their homes. Tightly knit communities – such as that of MQVN – kept in touch through visits to far-flung temporary shelters, phone calls, texts, and emails. Information from and about neighbors – more than government pronouncements or Red Cross websites – helps residents determine what to do in an uncertain situation.

Getting organized after a disaster is tremendously difficult. The local energy utility Entergy required hundreds of signatures to turn on the power to neighborhoods shortly after Hurricane Katrina. MQVN mustered hundreds in a single day. Following other disasters, like the 1995 Kobe earthquake in Japan, local communities often lacked such organization, and suffered. In one case, the local government offered free debris removal if local property owners would sign

off on the deal. Unable to get enough signatures, the owners sat helplessly as rubble and debris piled up until they could cough up the money themselves.

Finally, neighborhoods with deeper levels of social capital are better able to make their voices heard and connect with authorities. When New Orleans officials showed “green dots” where they planned on doing no rebuilding, connected communities spoke out loudly and clearly. They brought in architects and urban planners to the Mayor’s Office to show their visions for the future, and they launched petitions and on-line campaigns to demand services, improved roads, and school reopening.

If social capital is critical, how can residents and government decision makers increase their shares of this resource? Residents should self-organize long before tropical storms, tsunamis, or other crises appear on the horizon. Get to know your neighbors, make lists of the elderly and infirm, and meet regularly both in formal neighborhood association meetings and through informal block parties, holiday celebrations, and sports events.

Finally, governments should stop focusing their relief efforts only on physical infrastructure and recognize that social infrastructure is at least, if not more, important, than sandbags, tents, and evacuation plans. Given recent disasters – such as the tragic floods in Pakistan and ongoing consequences of global warming – we should recognize that in the end, resilience and recovery are functions of the power of people.

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For more information on social capital and disaster recovery please see the following resources:

Daniel P. Aldrich. 2010. “Fixing Recovery: Social Capital in Post-Crisis Resilience.” *Journal of Homeland Security*. Available online at <http://www.homelandsecurity.org/journal/Search.aspx?s=Aldrich>

Daniel P. Aldrich. Forthcoming. “The Power of People: Social Capital’s Role in Recovery from the 1995 Kobe Earthquake.” *Natural Hazards*. Available online at http://works.bepress.com/daniel_aldrich/8/.

Daniel P. Aldrich. 2008. “The Crucial Role of Civil Society in Disaster Recovery.” *Japan aktuell* 3 pp. 81-96. Available online at http://works.bepress.com/daniel_aldrich/6/.