

# Neoliberalism, INGO practices and sustainable disaster recovery: a post-Katrina case study

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**Abstract** This case study of a post-Katrina community-based action research project conducted in partnership with an international non-governmental organization (INGO) sought to understand the extent to which practices facilitated sustainable recovery from disaster. Findings include three major problem areas: (i) participation; (ii) capacity building and (iii) race/racism. The author posits that the neoliberal climate in which INGOs operate enables practices that perpetuate injustice and argues for different directions for sustainable disaster recovery and social justice.

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Many dimensions of natural and technological disasters, including their causes and recovery processes, reflect profound ecological and social injustices (Ozerdem, 2003). Communities with significant social and economic disparity tend to be more vulnerable to the effects of disasters; indeed, marginalized populations face greater challenges than their privileged counterparts in terms of disaster recovery (Harrell and Zakour, 2000; Kaiser Foundation, 2007; Morrow and Peacock, 1997). This suggestion certainly holds true in the case of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, LA, USA, a city besieged by environmental, social and economic imbalances before the landfall of the massive storm and subsequent levee failures of 29 August 2005.

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A sustainability approach to disaster recovery is a critical method that potentially can remedy inequalities in communities and regions negatively impacted by disasters. Addressing development issues through sustainable disaster recovery goes beyond restoring communities to their previous conditions. It entails the reshaping of the environment, i.e. improving pre-disaster conditions and enacting meaningful changes in communities (Smith and Wenger, 2006). Mary (2008) has argued that sustainable community development involves several key principles: 'an increasing value of human life and lives of all species, fairness and equality or economic and social justice, decision making that involves participation and partnership, and respect for the ecological constraints on the environment' (p. 33). Sustainable disaster recovery would also necessitate constituency empowerment so that citizens can advocate for themselves in the face of future disasters.

By employing methods grounded in the insights of sustainable disaster recovery as well as critical discourse analysis, practitioners and scholars can uncover the political, economic and cultural hegemonies that perpetuate injustice (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000; Smith and Wenger, 2006). The ramifications of hegemonic policies and practices, such as discrimination in housing, employment and education, are often masked behind everyday discourses and other taken-for-granted assumptions. Thus, sustainable disaster recovery arguably requires radical questioning and transformation of the status quo, neoliberal assumptions about disaster recovery practices including the contestation of the terms 'participatory engagement' and 'capacity-building'.

Humanitarian relief and social development work has transpired in a context of a climate of neoliberalism. In this climate, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) attempt to fill the vacuum left by public social welfare retrenchment and the negative social effects of free market fundamentalism. Kamat (2003) has noted that in doing this work NGOs increasingly resemble corporations in terms of their move toward professionalism, technical approaches to development and dependencies on external donors.

Though some research has explored and contested the everyday practices of neoliberal NGOs doing development and humanitarian work, little research has been conducted that is concerned with the frames, mechanisms and practices that facilitate or hinder sustainable disaster recovery, particularly following Hurricane Katrina. This applied ethnographic case study of post-Katrina community-based action research conducted in partnership with an international non-governmental organization (INGO) sought to reveal and analyze the ways in which neoliberal discourse and practices facilitated and/or hindered sustainable recovery.

*Neoliberalism, NGOs and development/aid*

Neoliberalism is the predominant philosophical and economic theory that drives the globalizing economy today, emphasizing trade liberalization, deregulation and the privatization of public services. Privatization of public services involves a wide range of for-profit and not-for-profit service provision in the stead of state-run government services. For-profit privatization has included for-profit prisons in the United States, the private sector health care movement in Latin America and the privatized military services that have been one of the hallmarks of the war in Iraq, to name a few. Not-for-profit activities include child welfare services, humanitarian aid/relief and other forms of community development conducted by NGOs. The flourishing of NGOs across the globe is often considered to be an indicator of a vibrant civil society and a sign of a politically engaged citizenry. However, it is also the case that global communities are in crisis (perhaps due in large part to neoliberal policies and practices) and that NGOs are stepping in to respond (Kamat, 2003). Though there are positive indications of the existence of important global justice movements, most civil society actors are engaged in relief/aid, health and social services and community development work that tends to neglect the root causes of social, economic and environmental injustice.

Jad (2007) and others have criticized NGOs for de-politicizing grassroots social movements, arguing that the neoliberal climate and professionalization has resulted in 'NGOisation' (Alvarez, 1998) of civil society. INGOs tend to replicate neoliberal philosophies by 'partnering' with local NGOs in the top-down way that governments have come to 'partner' with the private sector. Eade (2007) has noted that INGOs that are engaged in capacity-building activities are inclined to 'ignore, misinterpret, displace, supplant, or undermine the capacities that people already have' (p. 633). These relationships are often based on power, dependency and a one-way transfer of resources, whereby the grassroots is forced to be accountable to INGOs and funders rather than the INGOs and funders being accountable to the grassroots. According to Fernando and Hilhorst (2007):

International NGOs . . . have been uncomfortably associated with a desire to impose a set of Western humanitarian values on the world. There are also questions about the power differentials between INGOs and their local implementing partners, and between humanitarians and the recipients of aid. These differences are hidden under the rhetoric of partnership and participation, but they are being played out in the realities of everyday interaction (p. 148).

### *Community-based research in disaster contexts*

Community-based research and assessment play important roles in disasters and complex emergencies. For example, the participatory rural appraisal (PRA), an action research tool that involves community members in defining and working to solve local concerns (Chambers, 1994), has been particularly popular among international NGOs working in developing countries. Some authors have criticized the PRA for its over-emphasis on localism (ignoring global processes) and the lack of recognition of the power imbalances that exist locally (Mohan and Stokke, 2000). Other examples of community-oriented assessment strategies are the rapid community needs assessment (McNeil *et al.*, 2006) and rapid ethnographic assessment procedures (REAP) (Low *et al.*, 2005).

Advocates of these community-based approaches believe that these are 'suitable mechanisms for grasping the dynamics and complexity of vulnerability, as manifested at the local level, for addressing vulnerability and strengthening local capacities' (Van den Eynde and Veno, 1999, p. 171). While practice and research in disaster often requires a rapid response approach, practitioners must balance this need so as not to: ignore the real causes of social injustice, silence local communities and perpetuate social imbalance. Little research has been conducted that explores the ways in which the interplay of INGO institutions and discourses with community-based research techniques influence sustainable disaster recovery.

### *Case study background and methods*

The damage caused by Hurricane Katrina and the failures of the federally-run levee system in New Orleans and in other areas of the Gulf Coast was vast in scope. The disaster impacted the physical and social environment in profound and enduring ways. Within hours and days of the disaster, many international humanitarian aid and development organizations descended on New Orleans, seeking to supplement the relief offered by local, state and national government agencies, as well as regional and national non-profit, grassroots and mutual aid organizations. Notwithstanding the 9/11 World Trade Center disaster, these INGOs had virtually no experience engaging in relief or development work in the United States. Though headquartered in American cities such as Washington, New York and Boston and engaging in development/humanitarian work in almost every developing country across the globe, working on its own country's soil was indeed a new territory for these organizations. To be sure, though, engaging in the southern United States, i.e. New Orleans, revealed many similarities to the work in the Global South in which these Northern INGOs operate. New Orleans is a city that has historically been

rich in cultural heritage and neighborhood networks, but has tremendous economic disparity and structural racial discrimination.

More than six months after the storm, my university entered into a contract with an INGO<sup>1</sup> to assist with community revitalization and capacity enhancement of three neighborhood associations that the INGO had identified in New Orleans. These associations were located in predominantly African-American neighborhoods and were led by neighborhood members. These neighborhood associations had received funding from the INGO to implement their own projects approved by the INGO, but were also required to comply with the INGO initiatives as a condition of funding.

The objectives of the project I worked on were 2-fold: (i) to develop a baseline measure/index of neighborhood revitalization and (ii) to develop a matrix that could assess and monitor organizational capacities of the associations. The former project was to be accomplished by creating a survey to be implemented at several points in time to measure progress on various factors that would define a revitalized neighborhood (such as housing, environment, safety, social capital and so on). The idea was that specific areas that measured low on the index would be identified for action/intervention; the index could reveal recovery progress over time. The latter project was to include the development of a matrix of capabilities that a 'high performing' non-profit organization presumably should have (such as mission-driven, board oversight, fiscal controls and so on).

In this study, I have applied critical, ethnographic methods (Chambers, 2000; Fernando and Hilhorst, 2007; Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000), drawing from my experiences working with the INGO over the course of 18 months. Such interpretive methods are appropriate for intensive participant observation approaches to action and/or evaluation research. By attending to complex cultural and political meanings that occur over the course of specific intervention activities with organizations, greater clarity can be gained and implications drawn for future interventions. Thus, to this end, I reviewed my own memory, field notes, project deliverables, as well as other documents from the INGO, including the contract, website and other organizational materials.

To be sure, this study is an interpretation of one perspective of events that have many different perspectives, including that of INGO professional staff, local staff and neighborhood target populations. It is also important to be clear about my own social standpoint as well as benefits I have received in relation to this project. I am a white, middle-class woman who at the

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1 Name of the INGO is withheld to maintain confidentiality.

time of the project had more than 10 years of experience in social change and development activities with my work primarily grounded in feminist and critical economic justice frameworks. I had conducted my previous work with local NGOs and public agencies but never before had I worked with an INGO. I received a small amount of supplementary summer funding for my efforts to fulfill the contract, as well as the support of graduate research assistants. I have published an article prior to this one on the findings from the community-based research I conducted (see Pyles and Cross, 2008). I believe my role as an untenured faculty at a research university as well as my background in progressive social change work contributed to the range of (and possibly contradictory) choices I made throughout the project.

### *Case study findings*

Here I present the findings of the case study based on my interpretation of the data through a lens of sustainable disaster recovery and applied critical ethnographic methods. The three major areas of interest are related to: (i) participation; (ii) capacity-building and (iii) race/racism. Following these sub-sections, I discuss the overall meaning and implications for sustainable disaster recovery practice.

### **Problematizing ‘participation’**

Buzzwords flooded the landscape when working with this INGO. Here I contest some of this jargon, particularly ‘partnership’, ‘participation’ and ‘collaborative’. A working group called the Community Capacity Collaborative<sup>2</sup> was developed by the INGO and included representatives from three other institutions: (i) my university, (ii) a private research organization and (iii) a center on non-profit leadership associated with another university. The Collaborative was primarily white, middle-class professionals trained in a variety of disciplines, including social work, public health, urban planning, public administration and community development. This ‘Collaborative’ served as one of the central mechanisms for the neighborhood revitalization work with the four neighborhood associations previously identified. Oddly, neighborhood leaders of these associations were never participants in this group. When I suggested (more than once) that we invite leaders to the table, responses from the Collaborative included: ‘I don’t think they would understand what it’s about’; ‘It’s important that we as practitioners get clarity separate from the neighborhood’ and ‘Neighborhood leaders are just too busy’.

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2 Name changed to maintain confidentiality.

This structure inevitably silenced the voices of the neighborhood in terms of co-constructing/conceptualizing the project in the first place and informing how the measures could be developed, implemented and sustained. As a strategy to counter this practice, I proposed, and the group agreed, that we conduct focus groups in the neighborhood to get a better sense of their vision of their revitalized neighborhood and thus what variables would be appropriate to include in the neighborhood revitalization index. The neighborhoods would never 'participate' again in this action research except at the end of the project when they were an audience to the presentation of the findings of the baseline revitalization findings. At that time, I presented each of the organizations with copies of the report and a compact disc with an electronic version of the report and data set.

When community members are equal participants in development efforts, they are better able to continue forward once technical assistance is no longer available to them (Jad, 2007; Pyles, 2009a). Because participation is arguably directly related to the goals of sustainability (Pyles, 2009a), I wondered just how exactly the neighborhood associations were going to be able to use these tools once the researchers were gone and once donor fatigue set in and the INGO was off to the next disaster. Thus, I suggested that we teach the neighborhood association members how to collect, enter and analyze the data themselves so that they could continue to use it and measure their recovery progress over time. Everyone in the group seemed to agree that this was a good idea in theory. We made some half-hearted attempts to do this, but other pressures of the project ultimately took precedence over this potentially positive measure toward sustainability.

Ultimately, because of a lack of genuine participation, it is not apparent whether the data collection was ever of value to the organization and neighborhood recovery to begin with. Though the baseline measure that we implemented did reveal some interesting and important findings that could be helpful to the work of the neighborhood associations, it is not clear whether the measure was ever useful to the associations in the short term nor the long term, as the INGO pulled away from these activities within the year and eventually left the Gulf Coast shortly after that.

### **Building capacity for what?**

Organizational capacity building was one of the other major agendas that the INGO promoted with the neighborhood associations. The Collaborative conducted workshops on such topics as board participation and financial management as a path to boosting the capacities of organizations to become 'high performance' non-profit organizations, a term suggested by the center on non-profit leadership that was involved in the Collaborative

(Letts, Ryan and Grossman, 1998). This work came about from the perception by the Collaborative that these associations needed mechanisms and practices in place that would allow them to continue to rebuild their neighborhoods over the long haul. In addition, given the growing trend in outcomes and accountability measures required by donors and other grantors, the INGO was working to prepare the associations to be poised to apply for other grants to sustain their work.

Though somewhat beyond my expertise, a graduate assistant and I began researching criteria for non-profit capacity building that could inform the development of the matrix. It quickly became apparent that most of the academic and grey literature on the subject was framed in a way that was neither culturally congruent nor appropriate for these grassroots African-American neighborhood associations in post-Katrina New Orleans. Thus, I suggested to the Collaborative that we re-think the project and conduct what I came to call an 'organizational culture and values inquiry', the purpose of which was to gain a deeper understanding of the way the associations function and what frames, values and beliefs guided the work that they did. Once we processed the results of the inquiry, then we could develop a capacity matrix based on the associations' strengths and assets. Having some knowledge of the complex history of the southern United States and the unique and rich cultural heritage of New Orleans, this seemed like an appropriate action.

We thus proceeded with a series of inquiries including interviews with leaders and observations of the associations' meetings to gain greater clarity into their peculiarities and strengths. This was a time intensive activity and eventually the whole development of the matrix was abandoned by the INGO for reasons that are not altogether clear. I re-negotiated the contract for less money, excluding the remainder of the capacity-building work. I surmise that they began to see that organizational capacity building as they conceptualized it was not a value to the neighborhood associations; there were also growing strains on their funding availability for their Gulf Coast work.

### **Silencing race**

From the perspective of many people across the globe, the issues of race and racism were some of the most salient issues in post-Katrina New Orleans (Mann, 2006; Pyles and Cross, 2008; South End Press Collective, 2007). Being one of those people who believed it was a central issue, I proposed several questions for the neighborhood survey that related to racial trust. Because I was also drawing from literature on US urban revitalization, race was a prevalent theme here as well and thus my instincts and knowledge base were telling me that we had to ask about racism in order to really

understand and measure neighborhood revitalization. The questions I chose were well tested ones that stemmed from Robert Putnam's (2000) widely cited survey research on social capital and social/racial trust in the United States. The questions were: Do you trust people who are Asian? Do you trust people who are White? Do you trust people who are Latino/Hispanic? Do you trust people who are Black/African American?

When reviewing a draft of the survey, several members of the Collaborative (a mostly white group of professionals) expressed concern with these questions on racial trust, stating that they would make people 'uncomfortable' and that they were essentially irrelevant to our work around neighborhood revitalization. It was at this point that I felt like they were telling me that I should adopt their belief that 'the sky was green and the grass was blue'. I was the lone voice at the table on this one. I have been in similar positions before over the course of my career, but never was the silence around oppression so deafening as it was then. But, I persisted, and was able to retain one question related to racial trust, namely 'Do you trust people of other races?' It would become a central and significant variable in the findings (Pyles and Cross, 2008).

## **Discussion**

My experience shows that we failed to authentically engage these neighborhood associations in ways that could have promoted sustainability, empowerment or transformation of the communities. Aid organizations focus on swift response in emergency situations and the need for quick action is always prevalent. Thus, there is a persistent narrative that points to the belief that 'there isn't time' to engage more deeply. This seems valid enough at some level, and yet it also seems to confirm the larger value system of neoliberalism that constantly strives to expand into new markets and to do its work with results-driven efficiency. Creating time for thoughtful discussions around racism and/or anti-racist practice approaches are the casualties of neoliberal development. Furthermore, these INGO practitioners constructed a discourse around participation which distorted the real significance of participation. This distortion impeded sustainable recovery and arguably perpetuated injustice including racism.

The methods of a sustainability approach to disaster recovery are premised on principles of democratic engagement and leadership development. These principles are compatible with a transformative approach to community organizing and development which strives for social change and pays special attention to the processes of such social change work (Pyles, 2009a, b). Thus, working in true partnership with indigenous community leadership is central, and excluding them in the ways we did as

shown in this case study is counterproductive. Such a transformative/sustainability approach is also always an anti-oppressive approach whereby recovery methods create a space to actively confront ways in which social hegemonies (such as racism, sexism, and classism) operate, striving for transparency and accountability in practice. Thus, the silence around race is troublesome, though not surprising as development scholars and practitioners previously have noted contradictions in the ways that ideas such as empowerment and feminism are played out in practice by INGOs (Batliwala, 2007; Smyth, 2007).

Some scholars have proposed typologies of participation including White (1996) who has offered a 4-fold typology of participatory engagement. These four types are: (i) nominal (to show they are doing something); (ii) instrumental (to make projects more cost-effective); (iii) representative (to avoid creating dependency) and (iv) transformative (to enable people to make their own decisions). I submit that the participation discussed in this case study had elements of all four types of engagement at different points in time; however, mostly the project employed nominal or instrumental participatory engagement. Cornwall (2008) has noted that although 'participatory' conjures notions of inclusion, these processes can actually 'serve to deepen the exclusion of particular groups' (p. 277). Participation, Cornwall aptly notes, 'takes investment, time and persistence: [it] cannot be achieved by waving a magic participation wand, convening a participatory workshop or applying a few PRA tools and presto, there is empowerment' (p. 278). Unfortunately, the culture and values of neoliberal INGOs pose tremendous challenges to actually implementing a sustainability approach to disaster recovery that employs transformative participation.

Micro-resistances to the hegemony of these INGO practices are important to highlight. These resistances included some of my own strategies, as well as at least one other INGO local staff member, to engage neighborhood people more authentically. In addition, I believe that leaders of the neighborhood associations engaged in acts of resistance themselves; unfortunately, these acts were often perceived by the Collaborative as a failure to comply or a lack of interest. I surmise several reasons why there was not more significant resistance on the part of the associations: (i) many of the leaders were coping with their own losses (family, housing, employment) from the disaster; (ii) the associations were receiving significant funding from the INGO that was critical to their neighborhood work; (iii) there is a long history in New Orleans of NGOs and researchers attempting to intervene and study poverty which many people had come to accept; (iv) much of the work of the Collaborative was happening behind the scenes and (v) the neoliberal climate which requires compliance with welfare reform and other development/aid programs has undermined the political power of marginalized communities.

A transformative approach to sustainable social development is a critical solution to the problems posed by neoliberal INGOs in a disaster context. To this end, it is necessary to critically evaluate social development and NGO-based models in disaster settings including how hegemonic social development practices can perpetuate oppression by overlooking the values, cultural diversity and real needs of community members. Rowlands and Tan (2008) offer strategies for sustainable disaster recovery work:

Engaging the local population, including women and children affected by disasters, and developing their skills, increases the opportunities for recovery to facilitate change and the enhancement of pre-disaster resources and quality of life. In other words, the disaster provides an opportunity for social development, not merely rebuilding things the way they were (p. 48).

New Orleans has much in common with many communities in the Global South that are at risk of predatory globalization and disaster capitalism that can leave them even more vulnerable after a disaster (Klein, 2007). The desire to produce 'high performance' non-profit organizations reflects a neoliberal and positivist frame that over-emphasizes linear outcomes and under-emphasizes group process and other aspects of community building that are critical to transforming New Orleans neighborhoods. Sustainable disaster recovery affirms the inherent value of *process* to empowerment, participation and sustainability (Cornwall, 2008; Jad, 2007). Lessons from progressive community organizers who build on cultural strengths and local leadership could be very useful to the INGO humanitarian/development community. The goals of such organizers are to (and to international humanitarians could be) build relationships, mobilize affected constituents, confront power, build community and, finally to, as Saul Alinsky noted, 'organize yourself out of a job' (Pyles, 2009a).

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