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An Ounce of Advocacy

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WHEN DISASTER STRIKES, GOVERNMENTS OFTEN RELY ON NONPROFITS AND BUSINESSES TO PITCH IN WITH RELIEF EFFORTS. BUT MAKING UP FOR THE PUBLIC SECTOR'S SHORTCOMINGS IS NEITHER AN APPROPRIATE NOR EFFECTIVE USE OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR'S STRENGTHS. INSTEAD OF MOPPING UP AFTER GOVERNMENT FAILURES, NONPROFITS AND BUSINESSES SHOULD LOBBY GOVERNMENTS TO FOCUS MORE ON DISASTER MITIGATION AND LESS ON DISASTER RELIEF. AN OUNCE OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR'S ADVOCACY WOULD BE WORTH MORE THAN A POUND OF ITS RESPONSE.

An Ounce of Advocacy

By Alyssa Battistoni | Illustration by Brian Stauffer

FOR YEARS BEFORE Hurricane Katrina laid waste to the Gulf Coast, scientists, engineers, and journalists warned that New Orleans' levees might not withstand the inevitable "Big One." Yet government officials at every level ignored the warnings and cut the programs designed to fortify the city's defenses. So when disaster finally struck in late August 2005, government agencies were woefully unprepared to deal with the devastation.

Into this breach waded nonprofits and businesses. The American Red Cross, for instance, spent more than \$2 billion and deployed 220,000 volunteers to assist 1.2 million families, reports

a Congressional committee.¹ Smaller nonprofits like PRC Compassion also sent their best. This group of ministers distributed more than 62 million pounds of food, clothing, and other aid. Likewise, businesses large and small raised funds and donated profits to the relief effort. General Electric, for example, donated \$22 million in cash, goods, and services, and raised an additional \$50 million for the Red Cross, reports the *Philanthropy Journal*.² In total, private donations for Katrina relief came to \$3 billion—the most ever donated for a single event in the United States—with corporate donations making up about one-third of that sum.

Yet the private sector's unprecedented outpouring of money and manpower was dwarfed by governments' contributions. The federal government alone allocated some \$116 billion to the Gulf Coast for Katrina relief and recovery. For all the private sector's fund raising might, the public sector can mobilize far greater resources.

Despite their assets and authority, however, governments all too frequently fail to protect their citizens. Katrina provides a particularly stark example: The Louisiana State University Hurricane Center estimates that half of the more than 1,800 Katrina-related deaths were the direct result of levee failures, report Ivor van Heerden, the center's deputy director, and coauthor Mike Bryan in their book, *The Storm*.³ Four years after Katrina, more than half the houses in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward and Holy Cross neighborhoods are still empty.⁴

Rather than trying to fill in governments' gaps, nonprofits and business should use their resources to hold governments responsible for keeping people safe. In large part, that means advocating for governments to spend more money on disaster mitigation, which includes building and maintaining structures like levees, creating regulations like land use restrictions, and educating local populations about how they can reduce the risks posed by natural hazards.

Disaster mitigation drastically reduces the need for emergency relief. For every dollar the U.S. federal government spends on disaster mitigation, it saves anywhere from \$8 to \$15 in spending on future relief, find Andrew J. Healy, an economist at Loyola Marymount University, and Neil Malhotra, a political economist at the Stanford Graduate School of Business.⁵ Likewise, a report by the World Bank and U.S. Geological Survey shows that \$40 billion in disaster prevention expenditures could have reduced the damage done by natural disasters throughout the 1990s by \$280 billion—a sevenfold savings rate.⁶

Yet when politicians hit the campaign trail, calls for mitigation do not play as well as stories of heroic response. Meanwhile, voters quickly forget about past problems and lose sight of future threats. As a result, governments underinvest in disaster mitigation. In 2004, for instance, the federal government spent just 5 cents on disaster prevention for every dollar it spent on disaster relief, show Healy and Malhotra.

Free from the demands of the election cycle, however, nonprofits and businesses can think about the long term. Through advocacy, both sectors can put pressure on elected officials to reduce communities' vulnerability to disaster. They can also use their strengths to work across agencies, geographies, and groups. And they can help the public better understand how disaster management systems work. In so doing, nonprofits and businesses can benefit many more people than they do by waiting to act until after disaster strikes.

< UNMITIGATED DISASTER >

Government officials are no more omniscient than the rest of us. But their claims that they could not have anticipated a storm like Katrina are disingenuous at best. Numerous studies had explored

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how a massive hurricane would impact New Orleans, usually foretelling dire situations that now read as if they'd been written the day after Katrina instead of years before. In 2001, for example, *Scientific American* warned that a major hurricane would flood the city up to 20 feet and kill thousands, and in 2002, *The Times-Picayune* predicted that a large storm would leave hundreds of thousands displaced and require months of recovery.

Accordingly, since 1965 the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had been working on a \$750 million project to build levees around Lake Pontchartrain, to strengthen levees along the Mississippi River, and to protect pumping stations. In 2004, the project was only 80 percent complete when the Bush administration cut its 2005 funding from a proposed \$20 million to \$3.9 million, shows a 2008 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report. Without this funding, the project remained unfinished, and the areas it was intended to protect remained vulnerable. The corps' 2005 budget for general levee work in the state of Louisiana also fell drastically, from \$14.5 million in 2002 to \$5.7 million. For the first time in 37 years, work on the levees along New Orleans' East Bank stopped.

After Katrina, the corps initially claimed that the hurricane had simply been too strong for the levees' design. Subsequent studies showed, however, that the levees would have been able to handle the storm were it not for a number of engineering errors—from insufficient margins of safety to the use of outdated surge parameters. The corps, it seems, had cut corners. But the engineers were not lazy or ignorant or apathetic. Instead, they had been underfunded for years, concludes the Independent Levee Investigation Team (ILIT) at the University of California, Berkeley: “The Corps of Engineers has been subjected to extreme pressures at the federal and state levels to do more with less,” the team writes. “Technical and engineering superiority and oversight were compromised in attempts to respond to all of these constraints and pressures, especially those pressures for increased efficiency and decreased costs.”⁷

Poor policy decisions similarly underlie the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) failure to respond to Katrina. In 1997, FEMA introduced Project Impact to improve disaster prevention and preparedness at the local and state levels. In the four years of Project Impact's existence, nearly 250 communities and 2,500 businesses in all 50 states participated in the program, initiating public-private partnerships, revising building codes and land use regulations, and commencing public education campaigns. According to FEMA's own estimates, the popular program saved \$3 to \$5 for every dollar spent on it, write van Heerden and Bryan.

Despite Project Impact's successes, Congress cut the program in 2001 to save money and to further privatize the disaster management system, relates the ILIT report. Emergency management professionals were distraught: Eric Holdeman of the King County (Washington) Office of Emergency Management, for example, viewed this development as “the beginning of the end for FEMA” and lamented that “those of us in the business of dealing with emergencies [found] ourselves with no national leadership and no mentors.”⁸

Then, in 2003, FEMA itself felt the pinch of Congress' belt tightening. Congress demoted the cabinet-level agency to a subdivision of the newly created Department of Homeland Security. In the process, Congress cut the agency's budget for natural disasters and shifted

personnel from disaster management to terrorism preparation. By the time Katrina hit, at least 15 percent of FEMA's staff positions were vacant and a number of its directors were acting, not permanent. As a result, FEMA's ability to respond to catastrophes was weakened, found the House Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina.

Not all policy failures occurred at the federal level. Local governments also hobbled projects that could have lessened Katrina's blow. Local entities like the Orleans Levee Board scrapped several proposed flood protection projects altogether and approved but did not fund others. To cut costs, officials even pressed the Army Corps of Engineers to downgrade its levee standards from the already moderate Category 3 protection. These same officials continued to fund non-flood-related projects that benefited local shipping and gambling industries, writes Rice University historian Douglas Brinkley in *The Great Deluge*.⁹ Hampered by a lack of adequate funding for flood protection, the corps resorted to building cheaper but less effective protections, such as floodwalls instead of floodgates. Two of the floodwalls collapsed during Katrina.

< THE POLITICS OF INACTION >

The impulse to push disaster mitigation to the back burner has many causes. First, politicians find it difficult to spend money on flood protection systems and wetlands restoration when teacher shortages and neighborhood crime are immediate and tangible problems. Moreover, most mitigation projects are decidedly unsexy—drainage system repairs and subterranean pumps are not as visible or exciting as new bridges and parks.

In addition, political rivals often label each other's disaster mitigation programs as pork. Former FEMA director Joseph Allbaugh dismissed Project Impact as an "oversized entitlement program" before cutting it. Even Bobby Jindal, governor of disaster-ravaged Louisiana, disparaged federal spending on volcano monitoring in the Pacific Northwest, despite the fact that keeping tabs on volcanoes is a relatively low-cost way to protect the public from a known threat.

The permanent-campaign mind-set of modern politics does not help matters. Though not a new phenomenon, politicians' tendency to start campaigning for reelection almost immediately after election has intensified in recent years. Consequently, the short-term desire to win reelection by pumping money into popular, visible programs almost always outweighs the long-term need to prevent the worst effects of disasters in the potentially distant future.

Even more perverse, voters reward disaster relief spending more than mitigation spending, find Healy and Malhotra. Tracking disaster spending and election returns in U.S. counties from 1988 to 2004, these researchers found that incumbent parties in counties with little or no relief spending between elections lost an average of five percentage points of their vote share, while incumbents in counties that had high levels of disaster relief spending gained about two percentage points. At the same time, there was almost no relationship between voter behavior and prevention spending, suggesting that voters did not value—or even notice—disaster mitigation efforts.

Healy and Malhotra's study also suggests, however, that voters in places with high-profile mitigation programs already in place respond more favorably to mitigation spending. For instance, voters in

Project Impact communities were more likely to vote for the incumbent party than voters in non-Project Impact communities.

But all too often, both politicians and the public fail to grasp the risks of scrimping on mitigation. One reason for this failure of imagination is the way that most humans evolved to think. For most of our species' existence, we have lived short lives, dominated by concrete, immediate problems, in small communities. As a result, the bulk of our cognitive architecture is dedicated to dealing with immediate, frequent, and local concerns—not the potentially long-term, infrequent, large-scale problems that disaster mitigation addresses. (For more on cognitive biases that inhibit good planning, see "Crisis Mentality" in the spring 2006 *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.)

And even when people do confront the likelihood of catastrophe, they work hard to deny their own vulnerability. Some 75 percent of residential areas in the United States bear some risk of disaster, found the 2005 Federal Disaster Mitigation Policy Roundtable. The West Coast is vulnerable to earthquakes, the Southwest to droughts and wildfires, the Gulf and East coasts to hurricanes, and the Midwest to floods and tornadoes. Yet in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, many people in these areas castigated Gulf Coast residents for living in a high-risk area. (See, for example, "Why They Stayed" in the fall 2009 *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.)

This combination of election pressures, perverse incentives, and psychological limitations leads politicians to gamble that a disaster will not occur on their watch. When they lose this gamble, the costs are often staggering: Katrina's total economic impact was between \$125 billion and \$150 billion.¹⁰ Likewise, in 1992 Hurricane Andrew exacted between \$26 billion and \$35 billion in damage. Insurance researchers later found that if government officials had enforced existing building codes, they could have reduced Andrew's costs by 25 percent.¹¹ Building codes instated after Andrew could have reduced insured losses by as much as 50 percent, found Applied Insurance Research Inc.

< GOVERNMENT WORK >

Paradoxically, Hurricane Katrina did not show people that governments are central to mitigating disasters. Instead, the storm convinced many people that government is simply not up to the task of dealing with catastrophes. "Better to rely on the Red Cross in times of crisis," their thinking goes "or, better yet, oneself."

Reflecting this sentiment, during the presidential campaign of 2008 neither Barack Obama nor John McCain outlined how his administration would handle disasters. Instead, as Hurricanes Gustav and Ivan lapped at the Gulf Coast, the candidates encouraged Americans to donate to the American Red Cross and the Salvation Army.

Yet donations did not cover the Red Cross' response to these storms. And so two weeks after Gustav, the Red Cross requested a \$150 million loan from the U.S. government to pay for its relief operations, reports *The Wall Street Journal*. Likewise, the Salvation Army raised just \$30,000, but spent more than \$1 million. The GAO concludes: "In a worst-case, large-scale disaster, the projected need for mass care services would far exceed the capabilities of these voluntary organizations without government or other assistance."¹²

Nonprofits simply lack the resources to protect communities from catastrophes' worst consequences. These organizations can

and do research local hazards, launch public education campaigns, distribute storm windows, and undertake many other small-scale programs to help people protect themselves from certain aspects of disasters. But they do not have the authority to limit development, tailor building codes, or enforce those codes. Nonprofits also lack the money to build and maintain public works like levees and drainage systems, which frequently cost tens of millions of dollars.

Businesses are likewise not equipped to respond to or mitigate disasters by themselves. They can educate their employees and communities about risks, solidify their own strategies for catastrophe management, and coordinate with local officials. They can develop structures that will be resilient in the face of disaster and offer incentives for customers to protect themselves. But they cannot build and maintain large-scale physical infrastructure.

Many nonprofits and businesses recognize that their efforts are secondary to those of governments. “The nonprofit sector functions most effectively as an adjunct to a strong state,” agreed Katrina relief workers who participated in a Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations and Urban Institute seminar on disaster management.¹³ The participants also thought that the public overestimates nonprofits’ ability to deal with disasters. Similarly, many businesses emphasize that their goal is to supplement government endeavors, not to supplant them.

In short, protecting the public is the job of governments. Unlike businesses and nonprofits, governments have the authority, finances, manpower, and obligation to protect not just some, but all citizens from the worst effects of disasters. Helping governments use these resources wisely, however, can and should fall within the realm of the private sector.

< NONPROFITS TO THE RESCUE >

Nonprofits routinely fail to wield their most powerful, constitutionally protected tool: advocacy. Advocacy includes a broad spectrum of activities, from educating government officials about an issue, to conducting research, to lobbying for specific legislation through legislators (that is, direct lobbying) or the general public (that is, grassroots lobbying).

One reason for nonprofits’ aversion to advocacy is their anxiety about overstepping legal bounds. Yet restrictions on nonprofit advocacy are actually quite permissive; organizations can spend up to 20 percent of their budgets on lobbying and an unlimited amount on other forms of advocacy. (For more on nonprofit advocacy, see “Learn to Love Lobbying” in the spring 2007 issue of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.)

Advocacy also often falls outside of the traditional circle of nonprofit activity. For organizations used to working on the ground, diverting resources to abstract policy work can feel like callously disregarding immediate needs. Moreover, it is harder to raise funds for ambiguous-sounding policy work than it is for the straightforward provision of goods and services—especially given foundations’ often overblown legal concerns.

Many nonprofits also fear that lobbying will open them up to charges of politicizing their work. As a statement of their neutrality, humanitarian and relief organizations frequently limit their activities to responding to suffering, rather than preventing it. Some other relief organizations do work for policy change, but primarily on non-disaster issues. For instance, the United Methodist Committee on Relief advocates for humane immigration policies, and World Vision advocates for food aid and global health assistance. Still other organizations, such as the ProVention Consortium, have launched campaigns to promote disaster mitigation in developing countries such as India and Guatemala—but not in the United States.

Yet a few nonprofits are successfully advocating for disaster mitigation in the United States. The Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, for example, works with local and state governments to retool coastal development for social and environmental ends—not just economic ends. One of the coalition’s major campaigns involved the Mississippi River–Gulf Outlet (MRGO), a notorious navigation channel that devastated marsh areas and strengthened storm surges. When a major levee near the MRGO failed during Katrina, “it became easy to identify the cause of flooding and to build a campaign” about the MRGO, says Steven Peyronnin, the coalition’s director. Partly because of the coalition’s efforts, the MRGO closed in 2009. The coalition did not stop there. With national organizations like the Environmental Defense Fund and the Audubon Society, the group “went door to door at all levels” in Washington, D.C., to build support for more integrated disaster management, says Peyronnin. Eventually, its hard work paid off with the creation of a federal interagency task force dedicated to coastal restoration, water management, and flood protection on August 28, 2009—the eve of Katrina’s fourth anniversary.

Although less common, some communities embrace disaster mitigation before calamity strikes. The Oregon Partnership for Disaster Resilience, for instance, began creating a comprehensive mitigation strategy in 2000. Bringing together state and local government agencies and representatives, nonprofit organizations, research institutions, and local businesses, the partnership has had remarkable success in overcoming the political and economic obstacles to smart disaster policy.

For example, one of the Oregon Partnership’s regional planning efforts helped the city of Albany, Ore., tie disaster mitigation to the city’s overall strategic plan. This ensured that mitigation wouldn’t be pushed to sidelines. After adopting this mitigation plan, the city was able to secure FEMA Pre-Disaster Mitigation grant dollars for a seismic retrofit of its water treatment plant.

Staying above the political fray limits what organizations can do for the communities they serve. Moreover, governments need nonprofits’ knowledge and credibility to design disaster management policies that take the needs of different communities into account. Nonprofits should be more active in working to improve the disaster management system by advocating for change and lobbying for comprehensive disaster legislation at all levels of government.

Disaster relief is a sure thing. Advocating for disaster mitigation is riskier. But nonprofits and businesses tout their ability to take risks. They should apply that ability to reducing risks for communities.

< BUSINESSES' HELP WANTED >

Although businesses have far fewer restrictions on lobbying than nonprofits do, they too shy away from advocating better disaster mitigation. Lobbying for disaster mitigation is more difficult than lobbying for disaster relief, and the latter more often plays to a company's strengths. Following catastrophes, many companies can donate goods in kind, or use their infrastructure to facilitate communication and deliver supplies. High-profile disaster relief is also an easy way for corporations to improve their reputations.

Yet there is a clear business case for businesses to lobby governments for better disaster mitigation. Most obviously, disasters destroy businesses' property, inventory, supply lines, transportation, and infrastructure. They can also decimate workforces and customer bases, sometimes causing enterprises to fail.

One business segment that has actively lobbied for better federal disaster management is the insurance industry. In 1999, for example, the National Association of Mutual Insurance Companies formed the Building Code Commission, whose aim is to encourage the creation and enforcement of better building codes. The commission recently drafted the Safe Building Code Incentive Act, which would give states financial incentives to update their engineering, construction, inspection, and building code enforcement standards. The legislation has been introduced to the House of Representatives and referred to the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

Although the insurance industry sometimes promotes mitigation through public policy, it also pursues goals that do not necessarily align with those of the general public. For example, the Homeowners' Defense Act of 2007, which was proposed but never passed, would have allowed states to join a national consortium that established catastrophe bonds, stabilized insurance rates, and offered direct loan programs to states suffering from severe disaster losses. Homeowners and other insurance policy owners supported the bill, but many insurance companies opposed it because they worried that the legislation would allow public funding to crowd out private reinsurers (the companies that insure insurance companies). They also argued that the act would cramp industry innovation by giving government too large a role in the insurance market.

Some objections to the Homeowners' Defense Act were reasonable. For instance, the policy could have encouraged people to live in dangerous areas. Yet the act's failure has left people without affordable insurance, and therefore vulnerable to the financial consequences of disasters. Nonprofits, governments, private citizens, and other business interests are unwise to allow the insurance industry to be the loudest—and often only—voice in disaster policy.

< PRIVATE STRENGTHS >

When people think about dealing with disasters, they usually think about volunteers distributing hot meals and blankets, churches erecting cots in makeshift shelters, and helicopters airlifting people out of flooded areas. The word *disaster* seldom brings to mind legislators establishing building codes, land use policies, and drainage systems. In other words, people think about responding to disasters, rather than mitigating or even preventing their worst effects.

For a brief moment after Katrina, this view of disaster management seemed to be shifting. But now mitigation has slipped down the

list of priorities for members of the public, as well as for legislators. In late 2006, nearly a third of New Orleanians ranked “repairing the levees, pumps, and floodwalls” of the region as one of their top two rebuilding priorities, found a Kaiser Family Foundation study. But by mid-2008, just 2 percent of residents ranked “hurricane protection/rebuilding floodwalls, levees” as a top concern.

The good news is that the time is ripe for nonprofits and businesses to move disaster mitigation back up governments' agendas. The Obama administration has reached beyond the public sector in a number of areas, creating the Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation and signaling its interest in working with nonprofit and business actors. Online tools make it easier for the public to learn about mitigation and to let lawmakers know their opinions. Comprehensive disaster legislation has strong bipartisan support in Congress, and President Obama backs better disaster prevention.

But to make the promise of mitigation a reality, nonprofits and businesses alike will have to throw out their old assumptions about disaster management and take on new, often challenging responsibilities. For the nonprofit, public, and business sectors, providing relief is a sure thing. It is uncontroversial, quantifiable, and easily documented in annual reports. Lobbying and advocacy are riskier. They may not succeed, and their successes may not be recognized. But the nonprofit and business sectors often tout their ability to take risks. They should apply that strength to the task of reducing risk for communities across the country. ■

Notes

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