

Case Study - America's response to the Louisiana and New Orleans hurricane disasters

*When hurricanes Katrina and Rita struck the Louisiana coast on August 29, and September 24, 2005 respectively, the level of destruction was unprecedented in recent US disaster history. Claiming some 1,600 lives, displacing hundreds of thousands of people, and leaving damages estimated at close to \$100 billion, the hurricanes have scarred lives and memories forever. Here **Heinz Kull**, UN-HABITAT's former disaster management coordinator, looks at how the world's most powerful and wealthy nation handled the disaster.*

The stumbling humanitarian aid provided during the first days and weeks after the disaster, closely witnessed in disbelief by the national and international community, was accompanied by conflicting and competing political statements by the Federal, State and local authorities.

In terms of operational focus, Louisiana's State Governor, Ms. Kathleen Blanco, concentrated right from the start on how to enable Louisiana's displaced population to return home or settle in other Louisiana towns and parishes. At the Federal level, President George W. Bush vowed to re-build "a larger, more modern and better New Orleans".

At the heart of arguments among various public actors and party representatives were the performances of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Homeland Security Department, the National Guard and other federal and state agencies. A special White House report concluded that "inexperienced disaster response managers and a lack of planning, discipline and leadership contributed to vast federal failures during Hurricane Katrina".

The highly disputed report and similar studies undertaken by the House of Representatives, the press and other sources examined improving relief coordination between agencies, and closing disaster relief gaps such as insufficient stockpiling of supplies. It also looked at the establishment of a National Operations Centre to coordinate disaster response, and the Pentagon's disaster response.

On the ground it quickly became clear, that attempts made in the context of temporary and transitional housing provision for the evacuee population could not match demand. Its main instrument, the provision of equipped sites for trailers and mobile homes (supplementing immediate accommodation in private homes, hotels and cruise-ships) proved to be too slow in implementation.

The problems encountered by the time-consuming production of sites, equipment and trailers were aggravated by the fact that potential host communities were often not ready to accommodate concentrations of evacuees characterized by low-income, unemployment, lack of professional skills and training, within their jurisdiction, - or when ready to do so in principle, asked for compensation packages resulting in lengthy negotiations with State authorities.

With increasing insight into the complexity of temporary and transitional housing – to which a study group called the "State of Louisiana's Temporary Housing Effort" was created at the Governor's Office – the more it became evident that this type of housing was not a matter of weeks or months, but years. And that heavily depending on progress made in the rehabilitation and reconstruction of New Orleans and other coast towns.

The large-scale flooding of New Orleans, and subsequent recovery efforts, drew world-wide attention. The spectacular levee breach at its Industrial Canal, the many deaths and people reported missing, the devastation of inner-city areas and the appalling situation at its 9th Ward, brought desperate calls for help from Mayor Ray Nagin.

There was no doubt, however, that just like elsewhere in the world, the main contributor to rehabilitation and reconstruction has been the remaining and returning

population. They have stuck it out despite disrupted gas and electricity supplies, poor transport, closed schools and medical facilities, an economy in a shambles, and rising crime.

There is indeed no doubt today, one year after Hurricane Katrina struck, that the newly revised disaster response mechanisms at the disposal of Federal and State authorities for the 2006 hurricane season are certainly better than those in place before. Areas of concern such as communications, logistics and registration have been strengthened.

Strong efforts have been made, particularly by the State of Louisiana authorities, to understand the disaster as a chance to reduce the vulnerability of marginalized groups within the evacuee population. With the support of public and private institutions and local NGOs, special training facilities have been provided. Specific skills programmes, job provision and small-scale credit systems have been developed, resulting often in the integration of evacuees into their host communities or enabling them to contribute actively to rebuilding their former communities.

Tax breaks for developers of low-income housing and those setting-up or reviving businesses aim at the same purpose.

On the other hand, in striking contrast to the somehow normalized situation in areas only slightly touched by the flooding, important parts of the New Orleans East neighbourhoods have not recovered yet and still look very much disaster-stricken.

The unsettled debate on practical risk reduction – such as ban on rebuilding in low-lying, exposed areas, versus strengthening of levees and other high-tech approaches – has de facto created a divided city characterized by a significant absence of investments and economic activities in these areas, with corresponding consequences for access to housing, jobs, income and good living conditions in general.