

The Uncertainties of Rebuilding New Orleans

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The Chilean government recently announced that it will relocate the 5,000 inhabitants of the village Chaiten, which was practically annihilated last year by a nearby volcanic eruption. It was determined that the area was too dangerous for villagers to rebuild their community on the same site. This situation parallels the one in New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005. Do humans have a right to live where they want, and at what cost to society as a whole? What policy, economic, cultural and environmental questions should be asked and scrutinized before rebuilding a community that sits on precarious ground?

It is no secret that most of New Orleans is built upon unstable soil. The natural banks of the Mississippi river delta have been replaced by man-made levees and pumping systems in order to increase development, which consequently has affected how silt from the river counterbalances a sinking landscape. It is estimated that over 50% of New Orleans is actually below sea level at this time. The knowledge we have about global warming potentially increasing sea levels dramatically, as well as how warmer oceans can instigate hurricane-type weather, contribute to the need for a long-term look at the costs and benefits of continually trying to save New Orleans from Mother Nature. How high should levees be built and rebuilt? How many years should engineers and environmentalists project out their estimates of changing weather and soil in order to accommodate human expansion?

The question could be posed of what makes a city more or less worth saving in the face of a natural disaster. The argument of avoiding the wrath of Mother Nature would imply that no more houses should be built in southern California (earthquakes and avalanches), parts of the Midwest (tornados), central California (wildfires), and the Pacific Northwest (floods), among others. Clearly, this is not a feasible solution. However, statistics can be taken into account when determining reasonable places for humans to settle at the cost to society. Is there a greater likelihood of bouncing back from a natural disaster while living in Los Angeles or New Orleans, when factors as infrastructure, political stability, and historical precedence are included? Where the risk of failure is highest, society should carefully analyze the return on its investments.

Insurance companies, of course, do this on a regular basis. This is one reason that New Orleans has had such a hard time coming back from Hurricane Katrina in 2005 – the risk to businesses to re-invest in the area has deterred even some of the most profitable corporations such as Wal-Mart from returning. Not only is the risk high that there will be another hurricane that will wipe out human and capital assets, but the even greater risk is that the city will not be able to recuperate from such a loss, as we are seeing now in certain parishes. This then fuels the cycle of abandoned neighborhoods; businesses will not invest in risk-laden communities, and communities will not flourish

without jobs, thus becoming even more undesirable as poverty and crime take over the area.

Another reason why large corporations have not returned to its parishes is New Orleans' infamous history of deficient political leadership and integrity. Over the last two hundred years numerous mayors, governors, and U.S. Representatives from Louisiana have been accused of using their positions for self-indulgent purposes. Most recently, the charges against Representative William Jefferson of bribery, racketeering, money laundering and obstruction of justice were upheld despite his claim that a technical violation had occurred with the grand jury. Minor figures in the state's political theater are coming out of the woodwork as post-Katrina funds for re-development are being improperly used. Parish Councilmember Joe Impastato pled guilty in early 2008 to charges of extortion involving a debris-cleanup business deal.

Businesses have good reason to carefully reconsider returning to New Orleans: the legacy of politicians abusing their power leads to instability in the regulatory community, directly affecting how businesses operate. Society at large should be so wary. With a history of corruption, what policies are in place to ensure that the billions of dollars allocated to assist with post-Katrina cleanup and redevelopment are not being filtered to greedy leaders? How is the Federal government ensuring that this culture of nefarious leadership is not squandering the money that is meant to assist devastated communities?

Assume for a moment, however, that the politicians of Louisiana will hold true to their vow to serve the public interest: the levees are rebuilt higher, homes are rebuilt with more safeguards against a Category Five storm, and thousands of residents return to the marshes of New Orleans at the tune of tens of billions of dollars. Five years from now, imagine a hurricane strikes again and the levees thought to finally be high enough breach, only this time most of the residents do not evacuate because of recent false-alarms, and, more importantly, the moral hazard of believing the city is finally safe from "the big one." This could possibly leave thousands of families in need of rescue, bodies in need of collection, and more money in need from the Federal government to save the sinking city.

Do humans have a right to build habitats in areas where the State cannot protect them from natural disasters, and yet are expected to do just that? Emergency rescue personnel are put in great danger when asked to save a community that knowingly lives in an at-risk environment. At what point does society draw the line and ask residents to take responsibility for their own safety by relocating?

Instead of investing in rebuilding the parishes of New Orleans that are at a higher risk for flooding should levees break again, the Federal and State governments should use that money to sponsor former residents. Sponsorships would pay for families to relocate to areas that are more environmentally stable. Depending on the relocation costs, additional funds could be used towards adult education, long-term job training, health

care and other socially-enhancing needs. Instead of simply reconstructing the poverty and crime of the lower-level parishes of New Orleans, former residents are given the opportunity to make a better life for themselves and their families.

As fatalistic as it might be, New Orleans is in a battle with Mother Nature that it just can't win. The culture and history of the city will of course need to be actively engaged in the portions of the surviving communities above sea-level. America must never forget what role New Orleans has played in our great history. The nation as a whole should never forget the tragedy that is still occurring in New Orleans as residents try to rebuild their lives. However, instead of building the community right back to what it was pre-Katrina, we should advocate for using resources to improve the lives of dislocated residents for the long term, not just until the next hurricane. Policy-makers and volunteers alike should ask themselves if rebuilding the parishes of New Orleans is actually in the best interest of the residents themselves.

Suggested Further Reading:

- Jacob, Klaus. "Time for a Tough Question: Why Rebuild?" *Washington Post*. September 6, 2005. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/05/AR2005090501034.html>
- Shafter, Jack. "Don't Refloat: The case against rebuilding the sunken city of New Orleans." *Slate.com*. September 7, 2005. <http://www.slate.com/id/2125810/>.