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## New Orleans: a lesson in post-disaster resilience

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**Factors that foster social cohesion in communities – such as shared long-term networks and shared community identity, central organisation to which the community adheres, and established trust – have been identified as critical for post-disaster resilience and recovery.**

The flooding of the city of New Orleans in September 2005 during Hurricane Katrina resulted in the permanent displacement of primarily poorer, and often female, African-American residents. Many of those who were evacuated before and after the hurricane were unable to return to New Orleans.<sup>1</sup> The US government officially designated the residents of New Orleans who left the area before, during or after Hurricane Katrina as 'evacuees'. The designation of 'refugee' has often been resisted by governments due to the fear of consequently needing to offer the same protections and interventions to disaster victims as those reserved for political refugees. The term 'evacuee' sounds less urgent and suggests a lesser need for state intervention and assistance.

Disasters can effectively create a blank slate for states and venture capitalists to take advantage of and potentially make permanent the displacement of marginalised people.<sup>2</sup> In post-Katrina New Orleans three crucial sectors were privatised: housing, education and health care. The City Council unanimously voted in 2007 for the destruction of 4,500 low-income public housing units (of the total of 5,100 pre-Katrina units), thereby eradicating the possibility of public housing for a majority of low-income forced migrant families. The public school system was dramatically reorganised and now more than half of school-age children attend privatised schools.

In terms of health care, there had been a single public hospital in New Orleans to serve the needs of low-income residents. Though initially flooded, the hospital was deemed fit to reopen after the US military thoroughly cleaned it. However, the Board of Louisiana State University, which owned the building, refused to allow the hospital to re-open,

effectively leaving lower-income residents without a hospital. Thereby, low-income forced disaster migrants dependent on public assistance were effectively prohibited from returning to New Orleans due to the cessation of public assistance across these key sectors. Regardless of the actual effects on people, these changes were rationalised as a means to protect the well-being of evacuees "for their own good", subsuming any question of citizen rights and recourse to justice.



Entrance to park area opposite Mary Queen of Vietnam Catholic Church, the cultural heart of Village L'Est in New Orleans East.

Post-disaster recovery in New Orleans also resulted in the forced migration of entire communities through a process known as 'green-spacing', whereby city planners designated vulnerable low-lying residential areas as non-residential park areas. Although the plans ultimately failed, many communities were discouraged from rebuilding. However, one community refused to accept any rationale for relocation and did return to rebuild their community.



Entrance to the residential neighbourhood areas of Village L'Est, showing both US and Vietnamese flags.

In 1975, Catholic North Vietnamese who were being held in refugee camps in the US were invited by the Archbishop of New Orleans to form a community. As a result, in 1980 a new parish – called New Orleans East – was formed with approximately 6,000 Vietnamese residents. Activity centred around its central church, Mary Queen of Vietnam. Disregarding the City Council ordinance to turn New Orleans East into a non-residential green zone, the majority of Vietnamese residents returned to their homes less than five months after the hurricane. The priest of the local church, Father Vien, and his church staff displayed tenacious leadership, working tirelessly to make their way through the morass of city, state and federal bureaucracy to secure the mass of permits and funds required for rebuilding their community.

The members of this hitherto quiet and compliant community were converted into community activists refusing their green-space designation and almost immediately upon return, they took the rebuilding of their community into their own hands. More importantly, the rebuilding of their community was specific to the needs and the desires of the community, a development that could only be effectively executed from within the community. No other community in New Orleans went to such lengths not only to return but to rebuild itself

on its own terms, as opposed to passively 'participating' in the City Council's plans.

The social trust that has been essential to the cohesiveness of this community network both before and after the disaster was found to be seriously eroded after Katrina in many other communities with disenfranchised residents, including in similarly ethnically homogeneous communities. This highly cohesive Vietnamese community of three generations of refugee families migrated to the US together and have shared long-term networks and a shared community identity. Furthermore, cohesiveness was fostered by the insularity of a community whose central engagement with one church helped to reinforce community identity and establish trust. Thus, these assets of the Vietnamese community of New Orleans East, that differentiate it from the other affected communities of New Orleans, may have been essential for its marked resilience in post-disaster recovery.

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1. This article is based on 155 in-depth semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of stakeholders conducted over a period of two years.

2. Klein, N (2007) *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York: Henry Holt.