Katrina Revisited: The Real Lessons of a Mega-disaster

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Abstract

Much has been written on the immediate response to Hurricane Katrina. Both the initial response and the long-term recovery have been severely criticized from a wide variety of angles. The collective assessment has been one of dismay and anger with the inadequate response to the disaster.

This paper offers a much-needed correction to that one-dimensional assessment. The authors argue that, yes, much went wrong in the immediate response. But they will also show that given the circumstances the response was not as bad as often thought. In fact, in some respects the response was quite effective. Looking back and making use of the extensive data collected since the disaster, this paper – drawing from a book project – will revisit the events with an eye on learning the real lessons of Hurricane Katrina: what went well, what went wrong – and why.

The aim of this paper is to evaluate and explain the responses to Katrina. Many lessons have been learned in the wake of Katrina (and Rita), some of which have been tested in subsequent hurricanes (such as Hurricane Gustav). But not every lesson learned from Katrina is applicable to other natural disasters. We must therefore assess which lessons are unique to Gulf Coast states and which lessons should be adopted more widely.

We will use an interdisciplinary approach, combining insights from public administration, political science, sociology, economics, and crisis and disaster management research. We draw from political inquiries, media reports, academic and personal monographs, documentaries, interviews and academic articles to analyze what went wrong and what went right in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.