Conflict Factsheet

Distress and discontent in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina

Type of conflict

Intensity
1.8

Conflict Locality
United States of America

Time
2005 – ongoing

Countries
United States of America

Conflict Summary

Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005, causing severe destruction along the Gulf coast between Florida and Texas. The city of New Orleans in the state of Louisiana was particularly affected due to the breaching of levees. The storm caused an unprecedented loss of life, and massive infrastructural and economic damages. As a result, the government was met with strong criticism regarding the vulnerability of the city to such disasters, and the inadequate and untimely response of authorities during and in the aftermath of the hurricane.
Conceptual Model

Climate Change
- More Frequent / Intense Extreme Weather Events

Environmental Change
- Extreme Weather Event

Intermediary Mechanisms
- Reduced State Capacity and/or Legitimacy
- Anti-State Grievances

Fragility and Conflict Risks

Social and Economic Drivers
- Inadequate Infrastructure
- Political Marginalization

Context Factors
Conflict History

Hurricane Katrina was one of the most destructive natural disasters in the history of the United States of America, largely affecting the city of New Orleans, Louisiana. Despite the weakening in strength into a Category 3 hurricane before its landfall in Louisiana, Katrina caused severe damage to the city mostly due to the failure of the levees, which were meant to protect the city from flooding during a storm surge, and due to the mismanagement of hurricane preparedness and relief efforts (Moore, 2017). As a result, 80 percent of the city of New Orleans was flooded, killing at least 986 people in the state of Louisiana and displacing more than one million people in the Gulf Coast region. Katrina was also one of the costliest disasters causing a total damage of around USD 135 billion (Plyer, 2016). Environmental damages included substantial beach erosion, the loss of habitats and wetlands, and the infiltration of toxic substances into groundwater (Sheikh, 2006). The government, at the local, state and federal levels, was met with strong criticism and grievances from the media and the public in the aftermath of the storm as it was widely believed that much of the damage and suffering could have been avoided, and parts of the population felt neglected (Smith, 2011).

An unprepared city

Although the grievances against the government in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina are multi-faceted, much of the focus resided on the failure of the flood protection system of the city. The United States Army Corps of Engineers, responsible for the construction and upkeep of the levees, were ardently blamed by the public and the media as it is believed much of the damage could have been avoided. In fact, a report by an external review panel estimated that two-thirds of the flooding experienced in New Orleans can be attributed to the breaching of the city’s levees and flood walls (ASCE, 2007). The same report suggests that two-thirds of the deaths would not have occurred had the system not failed (ibid., 2007). These accusations led to several investigations in the aftermath of the disaster, most of which concluded that the problem lied within the inadequate design and construction of the levees. The Corps has since admitted full responsibility for the failure of the flood system (Robertson & Schwartz, 2015).

The levee breaching was not the only source of debate and conflict after the hurricane. The local and the federal government were also criticized for turning wetland—that serves as a natural barrier against storms and storm surges—into shipping lanes under the promise of economic development. By replacing a natural buffer against storm surges with a 75-mile long, obsolete canal, the hurricane was guided into the heart of New Orleans and adjacent communities (Freudenburg et al., 2009).

Inadequate response

A lot of criticism was also directed towards all levels of government, from the role of the President to the local government, regarding the slow and inadequate response to the storm and its aftermath. Public debate primarily revolved around the late call for mandatory evacuations in New Orleans from Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin despite adequate warning. With only 19 hours before landfall, the tardy mandatory evacuation order led to an incomplete evacuation of the city, and eventually deaths and dangerous conditions for those who remained. Furthermore, the aptitude and action of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was subject of heavy criticism as it failed to get relief supplies, equipment, and personnel on the ground in a timely manner. A predominant criticism revolved around the dire situation faced by residents seeking refuge at shelters. In one case, 19,000 people in the Convention
Center, which was not originally planned as a shelter but became one out of necessity, had no food or water, and no security was present. In addition, there was great media hype about the inability of the government to re-establish law and order (Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina, 2006), even though media coverage of looting and lawlessness was later found to be greatly exaggerated (Tierney, Bevc, Kuligowski, 2006). As a result, the capabilities and competence of the Bush Administration was questioned, especially after it was discovered that the director of FEMA at the time had no disaster management experience and was a political appointee of the president (Olson & Gawronski, 2010).

Racial dynamics
Debates surrounding the preparedness and response of the government point out that impoverished communities were disproportionately affected by the hurricane, bringing into question the racial dynamics at play. Before the storm, 28 percent of residents lived below the poverty line (of whom 84 percent were black) and 100,000 had no car, and therefore had no ability to flee the city when the storm hit (Casselman, 2015). Moreover, most African-Americans lived in areas that got heavily flooded. Authorities were blamed by a series of public figures for not adopting adequate measures and foreseeing the severe impact the hurricane would have on the historically marginalized African American community (Adelson, 2015; Hartnell, 2008). Hurricane Katrina brought the issue of race inequality in New Orleans to the forefront of political debates and campaigns for years to come (Harris, 2015).

The recovery of New Orleans has been a long and contested process that has also been debated along racial lines. By 2015, a majority of white residents believed the city had mostly recovered, while most black residents believed it had not (Robertson, 2015). This division may be explained to a certain extent by the fact that black residents have had more difficulty returning to New Orleans after Katrina in part because African-Americans were more likely to have lived in the most damaged parts of the city (ibid., 2015). Another factor has been that planners have been unwilling to rebuild low-income housing that mostly benefits African-American communities (Hartnell, 2008). As a result, the African-American share of the city’s population was down to 59 percent in 2013 compared to 66 percent in 2005. Moreover, the African-Americans that left were predominantly middle class, leaving behind a city with a big share of poor African Americans and affluent whites (Adelson, 2015). Thus, Katrina also altered the demographic and cultural identity of the city.

Resolution Efforts

Levees
One way to protect the city from another major storm is to make sure the levees are strong and well-engineered. The United States Army Corps of Engineers has invested USD 14.5 billion on improving the levee system, making it far better equipped to handle a high category hurricane than it was in 2005 (Harris, 2015). However, the local government’s inability to agree upon a tax increase to support the improvement and maintenance of the levees poses a serious threat to the effectiveness of the system in the future (Burnett, 2015).

Litigation
A number of lawsuits were filed in the aftermath of the hurricane by residents seeking compensation for damages cause by breached levees. Yet, most were dismissed given that federal statutes grant the United
States Army Corps of Engineers virtual immunity (Robertson & Schwartz, 2015, Schleifstein, 2017a). One law suit, however, ruled in favour of almost 125,000 homeowners and businesses with a USD 20 million settlement to be shared between claimants (Schleifstein, 2017b).

Preparedness
During Katrina, there was a significant lack of coordination among agencies and ambiguity surrounding the limits of authority and responsibility. To correct those things, Congress created a series of reforms prompted by the failures experienced during Katrina regarding disaster preparedness (Philipps, 2017). As observed in the wake of Hurricane Gustav in 2008, lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina encouraged better communication among agencies, and better preparedness and planning (Schafer, Eosco, Keim, 2009).

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Entry Points for Resilience and Peace Building

Compensation
Residents affected by Hurricane Katrina filed various lawsuits seeking compensation for damage caused by breached levees. Most lawsuits were dismissed and only one lawsuit awarded USD 20 million to be divided between 125,000 claimants.

Improving state capacity & legitimacy
A series of disaster preparedness reforms were passed by Congress in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Improving infrastructure & services
The government improved the levee and flood system around the city to be better equipped for large storms.

Resources and Materials

References with URL
Hurricane Katrina External Review Panel.
Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina (2006). A Failure of Initiative.

References without URL