



Photos taken from The Daily Beast and NYT City Room.

NESRI NATIONAL ECONOMIC &
SOCIAL RIGHTS INITIATIVE

Human Needs | Human Rights

NESRI statement on Hurricane Sandy:

November 6, 2012

For a People's Recovery with Human Rights

Hurricane Sandy has wrought the kind of disaster that [reminds us of the critical role of government](#) in supporting people and delivering essential public services such as transportation and utilities. During a crisis that appears natural and random, we expect all levels of government to act swiftly to ensure that everyone is safe and can meet their fundamental needs, such as access to water, food, and housing with heat and electricity. Yet despite visible efforts from government agencies, utility companies, the MTA, and even the National Guard, more than one week after the storm millions of people along the Eastern Seaboard are still suffering. Many are trapped in their homes without power, cold and hungry, others are stuck in shelters or with relatives, deprived of much needed paychecks.

Everyone appreciates that in a disaster of this scope, recovery will not come overnight. But we are also realizing that recovery is reaching some people much faster than others. In New York, a tale of two cities is unfolding – one light, one dark. While the power outage in lower Manhattan temporarily rendered the famous skyline black, in a visible contrast to illuminated midtown skyscrapers, today's darkness is elsewhere, in the working class communities on the city's outskirts, and in some of the public housing projects sprinkled throughout the city as perpetual enclaves of poverty. It is a darkness that extinguishes all signs of life. Its inhabitants [feel like they no longer exist](#) – they have become expendable.

These divisions long predate the hurricane, which has brutally exposed the race and class inequities that permeate our society. Natural disasters do not impact people randomly, nor do they happen at random. While wealthy residents pay service companies, staffed by low-income workers, to clean up after the receding floodwaters, take taxis to get around and work remotely in their white collar jobs, the hurricane's neglected survivors are stuck on high floors of public housing complexes, drink water from fire hydrants, lack flood insurance, miss their pay checks and are confined to their immediate

neighborhoods. Yet it is precisely the emphasis on overconsumption and wealth accumulation, enabled by an increasingly deregulated market economy, that is driving the climate crisis while blocking any environmentally responsible policy responses. The accelerated frequency of extreme weather events such as Hurricanes Irene and Sandy foreshadows the increasingly stark climate injustice faced by communities across the world and signals the urgent need to build people's power to address this crisis.

The disaster's [disparate impact on low-income people](#) and communities of color is not surprising; it reveals the systemic lack of resources and capacity in structurally disadvantaged communities. Worse still, after Hurricane Katrina it has become clear that disasters can be exploited by policies that exacerbate existing inequities and injustices. [In New Orleans, communities struggled](#) in vain against policies that promoted racially based displacement, along with the full-fledged privatization of public functions in the interest of private profit makers. In New York, some corporate commentators are already seeking to turn the disaster into [an opportunity for further deregulation and privatization](#). If public policies exploit a natural disaster in these ways, or if they fail to adequately mitigate its effects, a hurricane's impact can be even more devastating and long-lasting, affecting disadvantaged communities for years to come.

New York and its neighbors have an opportunity – in fact, an obligation – to respond differently. Using human rights as guidance, including the [UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#), we must make recovery and rebuilding for those most impacted and most vulnerable our first priority. Resources must follow people's needs. Human rights also require that impacted communities directly participate in any decisions involving recovery and rebuilding efforts.

Of course, these [basic human rights principles](#) of participation and equity are not limited to disaster settings. Yet while we look to government and public agencies to take urgent action during a natural disaster, we tend to ignore the human rights crises some of us face on a daily basis. For too many poor and working class people, every day is an emergency and requires a crisis response. Daily life entails a struggle to pay for food, housing, and health care, toiling in a low-wage job and living from paycheck to paycheck. While the hurricane has left some people homeless and hungry, for many more the fight for survival has become a regular part of their lives. Yet questions of adequate housing and other fundamental human needs are largely ignored until the next disaster strikes. Instead, we blame vulnerable individuals for the economic and racial injustices they suffer, deem fellow humans unworthy of essential public goods and services, and thus leave entire communities indefinitely in the dark.

Why do we call on government during a crisis that seems natural or random – although it is neither – yet require people to cope on their own with the perpetual crisis of unmet need and inequity? When a hurricane strikes, we recognize that each of us, on our own, is ill equipped to deal with the crisis alone. We depend on each other and need to act collectively. Yet as soon as the immediate crisis passes, the solidarity of the “we” reverts back to the righteousness of the “I”. Meanwhile, the crisis of economic injustice continues, and it demands an equally collective response. After all, climate related events and economic inequities share the same roots: the failures of our market-based political and economic systems to meet people's fundamental needs and maintain a healthy environment. If we ignore the

human rights crisis that surrounds us every day, we render the underlying causes of both natural and economic disasters invisible.

We must demand accountability for the policies that drive climate change and economic injustice. A human rights response to the ongoing crisis exposed by the hurricane would ensure that every person and every community can realize their rights to housing, food, health care and other social protections. The needs and rights of the people must take precedence over the forces of the market that serve to benefit the few. A People's Recovery based on human rights would [defund failed market approaches and instead ensure equal access to public goods](#), including adequate housing, public infrastructure and transportation, decent jobs, and renewable energy, paid for by an equitable tax system and controlled democratically by the people.

The lessons learned in New Orleans and Vermont after Hurricanes Katrina and Irene are available as movies. Watch *Coming Home: The Dry Storm* [here](#), and view a trailer for *Strength of the Storm* [here](#) and request a copy [here](#).

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