

Before the Hurricane: Cuba, Global Model for Risk Reduction

Cuba is a world leader in hurricane preparedness and recovery. What can we learn from the small island nation?

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Featured image: Hurricane season in Havana in March 2007. (Source: mmj71 / Flickr)

Along with the horrifying images of floating corpses, devastating flooding, and people trapped on makeshift islands, another indelible image has emerged from the Hurricane Harvey catastrophe. In the midst of disaster, locals began [sharing pictures](#) of [hundreds of fire ants](#) forming chain-linked rafts to float on water and protect their queen, eggs, and young.

This striking display of insect solidarity in the face of calamity seemed to contrast with the human response to Harvey, which, however valiant, appeared to remind us of the [apparent futility](#) of human resistance in the face of acts of God.

But what if I told you there was a country that has survived its last seventeen hurricanes with only thirty-five deaths? What if that country demonstrated exactly the kind of society-wide solidarity we envy the fire ants for? And what if that country had a GDP that was a fraction of the United States'?

There is such a country: Cuba.

While 2016's Hurricane Matthew [killed forty-four people](#) in the United States, it [killed no one](#) in Cuba, despite leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. Ditto for [Hurricane Katrina](#), which left [as many as 1,800 people](#) dead in the US. In 2008, Hurricanes Gustav and Ike pummeled Cuba at the peak of their intensity, slaying seven. But in the US, thirty people perished, even though the storm [had lost much of its strength](#). Hurricane Isabel killed more Americans in 2003 than six major hurricanes killed Cubans between 1996 and 2002.

The same pattern holds true for every hurricane that's struck the two countries. It's no wonder then that organizations like the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the [United Nations](#) have repeatedly cited Cuba as a global model for risk reduction.

So how does Cuba do it? There's no great secret. After several particularly deadly twentieth-century hurricanes, the country simply put in place a comprehensive, all-hands-on-deck national program of disaster preparation, evacuation, relief, and recovery that involves virtually every citizen, from the national to the local levels.

Rather than a side issue, forgotten until the next time disaster strikes, hurricane preparation and recovery in Cuba are treated as the life-and-death matters that they are. And while some might argue that the Cuban model is only possible because it's a one-party state, there's little about its hurricane program that rests on authoritarianism.

Here are four key facets of the Cuban program that set it apart.

1. Cuba is always preparing for the next hurricane.

Cuba quite rightly assumes that another major hurricane is always right around the corner. It therefore has a variety of government entities devoted to predicting and bracing for the next hurricane. Its sixty-eight weather stations track storms, while the National Civil Defense has an early warning system, emergency stockpiles, and rescue teams.

This by itself does not set Cuba far apart from countries like the United States. But as a [2009 delegation](#) to Cuba from Galveston, Texas found, "preparation in Cuba is a year-round event." All adults are mandated by law to go through a civilian defense training program that teaches them how to help during an evacuation. Every year since 1986, each and every citizen, regardless of age, has taken part in a [two-day hurricane drill](#) known as the Ejercicio Meteoro, in which they simulate an evacuation. Schools have [incorporated preparedness](#) into the curriculum at all ages.

In addition, emergency plans at the national, provincial, municipal, and local levels are devised and updated annually. As part of this plan, every Cuban is designated a location for refuge well in advance of any storm.

Weather information, meanwhile, is broadcast continuously on state-run media, every six hours, increasing in frequency to every three hours if storms are on their way, while alerts are sounded seventy-two hours before a hurricane hits. In other words, the state of the weather is never far from Cubans' minds.

2. Everyone is mobilized.

A major reason for the Cuban model's success, particularly in a country with comparatively few resources, is its philosophy of total mobilization. The hurricane response may be directed from the top down, but it's carried out by ordinary Cubans in their local communities, building on the regular training they receive.

As Oxfam America found in a [2004 study](#),

"the single most important thing about disaster response in Cuba is that people cooperate en masse."

Provincial and municipal leaders are made Civil Defense leaders and put in charge of their particular areas, combining a centralized decision-making process with a decentralized implementation. They call meetings, review emergency plans, assign transportation and equipment, delegate tasks and duties, and more.

In Cuba, everyone has a role. Doctors, school directors, members of mass organizations, and others review emergency plans and check evacuation procedures and supplies. "Everyone,

even the children, knew what to do,” observed one foreign aid worker in 1996, noting how everyone in an apartment building would get to work taping up windows, stockpiling rations, cooking food, and advising neighbors on how to safeguard their property. It’s part of what the UN-Habitat [has called](#) a culture of safety.

Community members work to move animals to higher ground, rescue those who are stranded, and hurricane-proof homes. If a family home is deemed safe and not at risk for flooding, they take in neighbors. Otherwise, citizens are assigned to a neighbor or family member’s house, or, failing that, to a government-run group shelter (which can be anything from a school to a church).

To get people there, local communities draw on whatever transportation they have on hand, from cars and trucks to boats and horse carts. Citizens are even allowed to bring pets, with veterinarians stationed at evacuation centers ready to tend to them. Municipal bakeries pitch in by providing the shelters with food.

This continues into the recovery phase. Local communities form teams to assess the damage and start cleaning. Citizens work together to clean up and rebuild, collecting clothing and materials for the community. Some continue to live with friends and family, or in shelters, until it’s safe to go back.

Such solidarity is not somehow unique to Cuba. As [scenes out of Texas](#) and other disaster-stricken states over the years have shown, ordinary Americans are more than ready to sacrifice to help their neighbors. But such energies are often expended after the fact, when it’s too late, not in advance, as in Cuba.

3. Vulnerable communities are taken care of.

The damage wrought by natural disasters is always lopsided. In the United States, wealth inequality makes this stratification especially acute, but a whole host of other factors — from geography to personal health — also contributes to disparities.

Cuba goes out of its way to identify which of its citizens, areas, and properties are most vulnerable to disaster, at both the macro and micro levels. Municipalities compile detailed biographical information on all citizens annually, from their age to any special services they might require.

Meanwhile, community members such as doctors or representatives of mass organizations assess their own neighborhoods. One explained to Oxfam that she knew the people who lived in the neighborhood and their particular needs, from an elderly woman in a wheelchair to a pregnant woman in need of assistance.

As a hurricane approaches, these local representatives make sure vulnerable people are okay, while community doctors check on patients to see if they need to go to hospital as a precaution.

4. The protection of personal property is guaranteed, among a host of other unique measures.

One of the most unique elements of the Cuban model is the government’s effort to protect ordinary Cubans’ personal property. This is important for financial and sentimental reasons, but also to convince people to follow evacuation orders.

Government officials, police, and the military are sent in to move furniture and other belongings to higher ground or somewhere else safe. Some provinces let residents put their valuables in boxes, and send them away to be stored elsewhere. To give citizens added peace of mind, the government guarantees the replacement of all destroyed property, despite the country's meager resources.

This is just one of a number of distinct measures the Cuban government takes during a hurricane. Print and broadcast media give detailed instructions for how to secure homes and where to go. Electricity and cooking gas mains are shut down when the wind reaches a certain speed, preventing deaths from electrocution or gas explosions. Harvesting is accelerated in advance of an event, while trees near phone and electrical wires are cleared.

And instead of closing hospitals and other vital services, as is often done in the US, Cuba keeps them open and secures them, to provide medical care and more to its beleaguered people. Such medical help for victims continues long after the disaster is over, a reflection of the government's insistence that health care is a human right.

We Can Do Better

All of this stands in stark contrast to the United States.

The US's disaster response is planned and carried out with little to no citizen engagement. Municipalities don't have to respond to a centralized body concerning evacuation procedures, but instead make their own decisions, which they can't enforce. There's no mandatory emergency drill or cooperation that citizens must take part in. Vulnerable communities are not mapped out, and the military's resources are directed toward fighting far-off wars instead of helping communities back home.

True, the United States doesn't have a state-run media that can broadcast information in an emergency. Yet privately run media is known to collaborate with the US government to transmit information in times of emergency, as well as cut into regular programming to deliver urgent messages from the president. It's difficult to believe they would refuse to assist the government when natural disaster strikes.

Some might also point out that the United States can't force people to evacuate, a major cause of death as residents ignore evacuation warnings. But as the Galveston delegation determined, "an informed populace, more keenly involved and aware of the risk a natural disaster poses, will be more likely to evacuate voluntarily." In other words, making ordinary people part of the response effort, delegating responsibilities to them and educating them about the dangers of natural disasters, means they're more likely to take such threats seriously — as is guaranteeing the safety of their personal property.

The Cuban model is not some kind of outlier that is the outgrowth of its authoritarian political system. It's a product of political will. The government decided they would prioritize the lives of the Cuban people, including the most vulnerable, and built a hurricane response program around that.

Imagine what the United States, a nation with more one hundred times Cuba's wealth and resources, could do if its politicians made the same decision.

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