

Article for NPR

With Hurricane Sara on its way, one's memory cannot help but be drawn to Sandy, Katrina, and Maria. The news cycles filling our ears and eyes on a 24 hour loop. Footage of the flooded cars, half-filled muddy apartment complexes, a young Kanye West getting a network "slap on the wrist" for saying "George Bush doesn't care about black people." These terrifying images and potent, off-the-cuff commentaries are so potent to us for a reason. One cannot help but root for their fellow man in times of crisis such as these. In the case of a natural disaster, there is not automatically one group or individual wronging another, but rather groups of individuals reacting to a situation in a way that either aids or hinders their neighbor. The issue becomes political when the government tells the citizenry who to fear when things go wrong.

My main argument in this essay is that governing bodies do more harm than good when they fear their citizens rather than trust them in times of natural crisis. From the research I have done, it is clear that the majority of people are more willing to help one another, sacrifice supplies, safety, or even their lives for one another than they are given credit for. Although the government can work to make natural disasters a political issue, most citizens are naturally drawn toward helping one another. Out of fear, governments can even feel the need to *weaken* their people so as not to raise a threat. This fear comes from the small minority of individuals who take part in wrongful looting or thievery in a time of need. But this is by no means the majority of individuals, and the government should not behave like it is. If a society can build itself up to be ready to take on a large collective problem, they can build more trust in one another and succeed in overcoming the setbacks that these disasters cause. Building on this, if the Government then uses their power to unite instead of divide, *everyone* can benefit *including* the governing body.

In an article entitled, “Natural Disaster Preparedness in a Multi-Hazard Environment: Characterizing the Sociodemographic Profile of Those Better (Worse) Prepared”, in the journal *PLoS One*, the Atacama Region of Chile is used to demonstrate different levels of preparedness among differing demographics. The article reads, “The combination of human and economic losses, together with reconstruction costs, makes natural disasters both a humanitarian and an economic problem.” The article explains that in the Atacama region, men are generally more prepared for floods than women due to economic and employment differences. This is why empowering *all kinds* of families to make plans for their homes and families in case of an emergency is so vital to the success of everyone. Because families have more incentive to regard their home with care than any other entity, it is so important that governing bodies put the power in *their hands*.

Along these same lines, in *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit recounts stories of a San Francisco café that made life possible for many during the time of the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906. I am going to use this section because it breaths a breath of humanity into what can often become a study of mere numbers. It offers an interesting example of relatively unrelated individuals taking care of one-another in a time of crisis. And doing this so selflessly in a time when the Government was clearly bracing for these neighbors and families turning against one another. She writes, “Like more recent disasters, San Francisco in 1906 highlighted how preexisting inequality shaped resilience in the face of a devastating event, what hazards call vulnerability. Despite its utility, vulnerability can convey a sense of static inevitability of unequal conditions, and it provides little space for the agency of disempowered populations” (85). Here Solnit is explaining how disempowered peoples can get the social attention they need in order to make changes amongst themselves. So not only can these disasters not be as

devastating as we might be inclined to assume, but they can even bring *long-term* good if the acting bodies react well. Let's take a closer look at this idea around the same disaster Solnit explores.

In *Seismic City: An Environmental History of San Francisco's 1906 Earthquake*, Joanna L. Dyl argues that, for marginalized communities, a natural disaster can offer a bigger space for their voices to be heard. "For refugees in San Francisco, access to basic amenities of food and housing became the basis for organizing against a relief system geared toward restoring conditions that had existed prior to the earthquake, including their inequities" (86). A natural disaster offers a time of rebuilding, rethinking, and recovering for all—a sort of blank slate for a community. Because *everything* was changed for *everyone*, Governing bodies are often more open to political and societal change than they were before. Because in recent U.S. history, the government has been more of a hinderance than a help, we can falsely assume that this is the way it has always been. But in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake this was not the case by any means. Dyl explains that the generosity in this time was not only from independent San Franciscans seeking to help their fellow neighbor, but from the greater U.S. Congress raised and provided *two and a half million dollars* to go towards the relief of San Francisco. There was also an influx of funds coming in from citizens all across the country (87). These funds not only included money, but also food. "Major General Adolphus Greely reported that the first month saw an average of 1,154 tons of relief goods entering the city each day" (88). This amount was a combined effort from both the citizenry and the government.

In Taiwan, due to the commonness of natural disasters, farming households are federally reimbursed for crops lost to disasters. Instead of the government seeing this as a wasteful

expenditure, they understand how pivotal their farming industry is for the nation as a whole and seek to protect these farmers from having more years of rebuilding. In an article entitled, “Agricultural Disaster Programs and Family Farm Labor Supply in Taiwan”, Karin Wy and Hung-Hao Chang from the Department of Agricultural Economics, and the National Taiwan University, and Lih-Chyun Sun from the Department of Urban Industrial Management and Marketing in the University of Taipei write, “To compensate farmers’ loss due to natural disaster shocks, the agricultural authority in Taiwan launched the Agricultural Natural Disaster Relief Act (ANDRA) in 1991 to maintain the operation of the agriculture industry and decrease the instability of on-farm income” (642). This allows the farmers to spend less time rebuilding, and more time farming which is good for both them, and the nation as a whole. If this were in the U.S. I could already see the kinds of speeches that would be presented: Speeches where it is made clear that “there are no free hand outs,” or “it is up to farmers to protect their own land.” But when a government trusts its people, all can benefit even in the case of an unstoppable natural disaster.

So with no indication of these natural disasters ever ceasing, what do we do? How do we prepare or react? My hope is that these disasters encourage these governments to empower their people to face these literal and metaphorical storms together. My hope is that through social and economic changes, we can not only get through these disasters, but actually be better off because of the change they spark.

Annotated Bibliography

Wu, K., Hung-Hao, C., & Sun, L. (2018). Agricultural disaster programs and family farm labor supply in Taiwan. *Journal of Agribusiness in Developing and Emerging Economies*, 8(4), 642-655. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JADEE-10-2017-0101>

This article explains the government-funded program to aid farmers in Taiwan in the wake of natural disasters. The article also explains the different programs that have been implemented over the years and then discusses what have been most productive.

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This article focuses on the Atacama Region of Chile and is used to demonstrate different levels of preparedness among differing demographics in the region. This study found that men are often more prepared for floods than women but all are more prepared for earthquakes than floods. This is due to both geographical reasons and socio-economic reasons.

Dyl, J. L. (2017). *Seismic city : An environmental history of san francisco's 1906 earthquake*. University of Washington Press.

This book summarizes the citizenry's reaction to the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and also covers the governmental reaction to this problem. It shines a light on the voices that are raised in times of crisis and summarizes how a disaster can cause the government to pay more attention to these voices.

"A Paradise Built In Hell; The Extraordinary Communities That Arise In Disaster" Solnit, Rebecca, Penguin Books, Copyright 2009, 2020 by Rebecca Solnit, ISBN 9780143118077 (paperback)

This book covers five disasters over the course of the last century. As its name suggests, Solnit delves into the good that can come out of these types of situations when the government empowers its citizenry to enable and help one another move towards a positive change.

Article for the Scholarly Journal

Few issues cause more discourse and discussion than natural disasters. For a problem that would seem to generally be bipartisan, natural disasters can often cause very political issues. The discourse can range from questions like “how do we help citizens protect themselves”, to the extreme of, “should we help individuals in crisis, or let the free market work itself out?” In this research essay, I wanted to explore these questions and present my findings in a way that could possibly cause change. Throughout my research, the conclusion I came to is as follows: Governing bodies do more harm than good when they fear their citizens rather than trust them in times of natural crisis, and governments would do better to use these times of turmoil to effect change for the better. In order to fully convey these findings in such a short time, I will explain now the path this article will take: Firstly, the specific problem will be presented. Secondly, I will present the hope in this issue to the reader. Finally, I will give examples of this process not only being in place, but working well for all parties.

Part I. The problem is this: From the research I have done, it is clear that the majority of people are more willing to help one another, sacrifice supplies, safety, or even their lives for one another than they are given credit for, *however*, official governing bodies often see their own citizenry as a *threat* instead of an *aid* in these times. In this essay I am going to give examples of governments that successfully helped and even empowered their city or nation to not only rebuild, but to actually improve their community. If a society can build itself up to be ready to take on a large collective problem, they can build more trust in one another and succeed in overcoming the setbacks that these disasters cause, and even push to make life better than it was before the incident.

Part II. Now one may be asking at this point in this article, “does this not seem too optimistic?” I want to be very careful not to understate the tragedy that these disasters can bring.

In my research there were triumphs and optimism, but there was also the recounting of very real pain and terror that these disasters caused. It is not that I think these disasters are not terrible, it is because I know they are, that I think they can draw attention to very real issues that would otherwise be overlooked, and can be a realistic catalyst to change.

In an article entitled, *Natural Disaster Preparedness in a Multi-Hazard Environment: Characterizing the Sociodemographic Profile of Those Better (Worse) Prepared*, in the journal *PLoS One*, the Atacama Region of Chile is used to demonstrate different levels of preparedness among differing demographics. The article reads, “The combination of human and economic losses, together with reconstruction costs, makes natural disasters both a humanitarian and an economic problem.” The article explains that in the Atacama region, men are generally more prepared for floods than women due to economic and employment differences. This is why empowering *all kinds* of families to make plans for their homes and families in case of an emergency is so vital to the success of everyone involved. Because families have more incentive to regard their home with care than any other entity, it is so important that governing bodies put the power in *their hands*.

Part III. Along these same lines, in *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit recounts stories of a San Francisco café that made life possible for many during the time of the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906. I am going to use this section because it breathes a breath of humanity into what can often become a study of mere numbers. It offers an interesting example of relatively unrelated individuals taking care of one-another in a time of crisis. And doing this so selflessly in a time when the Government was clearly bracing for these neighbors and families turning against one another. She writes, “Like more recent disasters, San Francisco in 1906 highlighted how preexisting inequality shaped resilience in the face of a devastating event, what

hazards call vulnerability. Despite its utility, vulnerability can convey a sense of static inevitability of unequal conditions, and it provides little space for the agency of disempowered populations”(85). Here she is explaining how disempowered peoples can get the social attention they need in order to make changes amongst themselves.

In *Seismic City: An Environmental History of San Francisco's 1906 Earthquake*, Joanna L. Dyl argues that, for marginalized communities, a natural disaster can offer an open space for their voices to be heard. “For refugees in San Francisco, access to basic amenities of food and housing became the basis for organizing against a relief system geared toward restoring conditions that had existed prior to the earthquake, including their inequities” (86). A natural disaster offers a time of rebuilding, rethinking, and recovering for all –a sort of blank slate for a community. Because *everything* was changed for *everyone*, more upper-class individuals are often more open to political and societal change than they were before. But how much change can this actually bring without help from the federal? Even when individual citizens are helping one another through food banks, donations, and physical help, things can still feel hopeless without the government setting up systems to help those less fortunate. Even for this concern there is good news.

Going back to the 1906 earthquake, Dyl explains that the generosity in this time was not only from independent San Franciscans seeking to help their fellow neighbor, but from the greater U.S. Congress raising and providing *two and a half million dollars* to go towards the relief of San Francisco. There was also an influx of funds coming in from citizens all across the country (87). You can see in this case, that the generosity of those more affluent caught the attention of the U.S. Government and sparked more large-scale change in them. These funds not only included money, but also food. “Major General Adolphus Greely reported that the first

month saw an average of 1,154 tons of relief goods entering the city each day” (88). This amount was a combined effort from both the citizenry and the government. For those more concerned with looting or theft, I would draw your attention to the correlation between the influx of generosity from the greater United States and the lack of violence during the San Francisco earthquake. There are also more modern-day examples of this type of care being taken for others in a way that applies to the questions this essay is raising.

In Taiwan, due to the commonness of natural disasters, farming households are federally reimbursed for crops lost in disasters. This was established completely by the government in order to aid farmers and not lose out on monetary gain from the exportation of grown goods. In an article entitled, “Agricultural Disaster Programs and Family Farm Labor Supply in Taiwan”, Karin Wy and Hung-Hao Chang from the Department of Agricultural Economics, and the National Taiwan University, and Lih-Chyun Sun from the Department of Urban Industrial Management and Marketing in the University of Taipei write, “To compensate farmers’ loss due to natural disaster shocks, the agricultural authority in Taiwan launched the Agricultural Natural Disaster Relief Act (ANDRA) in 1991 to maintain the operation of the agriculture industry and decrease the instability of on-farm income” (642). Instead of the government seeing this as a wasteful expenditure, the Taiwan government sees how pivotal their farming industry is for the nation as a whole and seeks to protect these farmers from having more years of recovering their losses. This allows the farmers to spend less time rebuilding, and more time farming which is good for both the individual families in the farming industry, and the nation as a whole. If this were in the U.S. I could already see the kinds of speeches that would be presented: Speeches where it is made clear that “there are no free hand outs,” or “it is up to farmers to protect their

own land.” But when a government trusts its people, all can benefit even in the case of an unstoppable natural disaster.

To summarize, the major problem we have is not just the presence of natural disasters, but the Governments skepticism of the very citizens in turmoil. The hope that one can have is the idea that natural disasters can create the room necessary for oppressed or ignored voices to be heard and create real change. And we can see this happen directly with both San Francisco over one hundred years ago, and modern day Taiwan. It is important to understand that this is not merely an American issue and possible solution, but a *worldwide* issue and solution.

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Benjitown USA (the blog)

What's up guys? Welcome back to the blog. It's gonna be a pretty disastrous one for today (naturally). I remember when I was eleven or fourteen, walking to my grandma's house one mile away in eight inches of water and thinking to myself, "Good thing we're above sea level." What do people not above sea level do? That is the question being raised in today's blog. Although many of us today are fortunate enough not to have our homes permanently damaged or worse, there are many in the U.S in recent history who have been displaced or negatively affected by natural disasters. Although this can be viewed as nothing more than tragedy, when looking through history, not only do people make it through these disasters, but also things may be improved as a result of these disasters. Let's walk a little past my grandma's house to Taiwan. In Taiwan, farmers are granted funds based on a scale of what they're growing in order to keep their farms intact so that they can spend less time rebuilding after natural disasters and more time growing crops. This helps the farmers and the nation as a whole maintain exports during times of crisis so that if in the next year, there is another disaster, then they can live off of what they made the year before. We can look even further into the past. Right? Right, guys? Let's take a small taxi ride from Taiwan back to San Francisco and also back in time. Not to mention, San Francisco girl. The year is 1906. An earthquake just quaked and caused mucho displacemento. The government was like "Hey, I'm hearing there's mucho displacemento. You know what we should do? In 1906 money, send an absurd amount of cash" (source unknown, jk). Then they sent trains full of food from the more affluent, and money directly from the government— both local and federal— into San Francisco. Not only did things get restored to how they were before, but things even improved. Many San Francisco residents would agree that things were better after the natural disaster. Let's take a small taxi ride back to my grandma's house. Look, here's the thing. I'm sure you're wondering, "Benji of *Benjitown USA (the blog)* fame, what can lil ole

me do? I don't have 1906 government money. I don't have now Taiwan money. I don't even have money." You know what you do have? A voice and a big ole storm on its way. Right? Right, guys? (This is the most fun I've ever had doing an assignment). What you can do is call your local representative and tell 'em. Thank you.