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How do you engage with grassroots activists and leaders in vulnerable communities after a crisis? How do you make fast decisions about recovery resources and also ensure you tap into local knowledge about what needs to be done to build back those communities for the better? How do you facilitate and organize disparate groups when everyone you need is under extreme duress?

In 2005, when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast of the United States, these were some of the questions that occupied the minds of program officers from several foundations who were working on disaster recovery and relief efforts.¹ These questions have been the primary preoccupation in the last three years of my research as a PhD student and the issues that they bring forth will come up in the next few weeks as the nation grapples with the impact of Hurricane Laura. Understanding the who, the what, the how in disaster recovery – the disparate groups that come together to put back the pieces after a hurricane, fire, floods or Covid-19 is important in understanding theories of resiliency and social capital, particularly in the area of disaster management in vulnerable communities of color who are disproportionately impacted by large-scale disasters.

I began looking closely at a philanthropic fund called the Gulf Coast Fund for Community Renewal and Ecological Health (which existed from 2005 to 2012) two years ago when I was hired as a research

¹ Korten, A. E. (2009). *Change Philanthropy: Candid Stories of Foundations Maximizing Results through Social Justice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

assistant at the Tishman Center by Michelle DePass, (former Dean & Tishman Professor at the New School). Originally, the Tishman Center thought to utilize the information about the Fund to create a toolkit for those involved in funding disaster recovery efforts. The idea of a toolkit evolved into an [archival website and timeline](#) of the Fund's activities.

I was immediately struck by how unique this fund was and wanted to know more about how it was facilitated and who was involved. These program officers managed to bring together local activists and grassroots groups (many of which were apart of Environmental Justice organizations) from all over the Gulf South, who had experienced one of the worst collection of disasters in our lifetime and in U.S. history (Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and the B.P. Oil Spill).

Applying the Gulf Coast Fund for Community Renewal and Ecological Health (GCF) as a case study of participatory grantmaking, my qualitative dissertation uses the method of *situation analysis* to explore the process by which participatory grantmaking was applied in disaster response and recovery efforts in the Gulf South region. Fullilove, and coauthors (2003) define situation analysis as: "A theoretically derived qualitative method, to conceptualize...a complex interpersonal episode" and this aligns with other research methodologies used in understanding crisis management (Fullilove, et.al. 2003, p. 199).²

There are three main learning goals for my dissertation research:

- To describe the process by which the GCF and its advisors planned and carried out recovery efforts.
- To identify how community input informed participatory grantmaking efforts
- To connect these philanthropic sector activities with broader efforts of collective recovery in the region

I am currently in the process of securing interviews for my research. I'm particularly interested in examining the GCF through the conceptual lens of collective recovery because it offers a way to connect the role of institutional philanthropy and participatory grantmaking to other local organizations providing community restoration. Collective recovery is known more prominently in the field of psychology and is defined by Fullilove and Hernandez-Cordero (2006) as "the recovery of a community from injuries to its internal organization and its connections to other groups" (Fullilove & Hernández-Cordero, 2006, p. 160).³

Both the philanthropic sector and disaster management research in the social sciences is replete with calls for participatory approaches; particularly in supporting theories of social capital and resilience. However, little empirical studies exist that have analyzed actual cases of participatory grantmaking in the aftermath of a disaster. And although policy recommendations of community-led recovery pervade disaster management literature, there are very few examples that describe participatory approaches in these situations. I hope to change that with this ongoing research.

² Fullilove, M. T., Arias, G., Nunez, M., Phillips, E., McFarlane, P., Wallace, R., & Fullilove, R. E. (2003). What Did Ian Tell God? School Violence in East New York. In M. H. Moore, C. V. Petrie, A. A. Braga, & B. L. McLaughlin (Eds.), *Deadly Lessons: Understanding Lethal School Violence* (p. 400). The National Academies. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.17226/10370>

³ Fullilove, M. T., & Hernández-Cordero, L. (2006). What is collective recovery? In Y. Neria, R. Gross, R. D. Marshall, & E. S. Susser (Eds.), *9/11 Mental Health in the Wake of Terrorist Attacks* (p. 646). New York: Cambridge University Press.

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