

COMMENTARY

Cuba's Example

The debacle of New Orleans, Cuba's offer of medical assistance—unacknowledged—and Cuba's success in avoiding loss of life during hurricanes has drawn the attention of many people who are not at all sympathetic to Cuban socialism to ask, "how can such a poor country manage to minimize the impact of disasters?"

Hurricanes are surprises, unexpected events that give only a few days' warning. But they are also very much expected and can be prepared for long in advance. Cuba considers several kinds of events that are not predictable as to time and place—not only hurricanes but also droughts, crop or human epidemics, earthquakes, and even invasions—an expected, and in many cases, regular part of life's hazards. Therefore, the protection of people and their collective life is a regular part of planning.

All Cubans are taught how to deal with emergencies, starting in the primary grades and continuing through higher education as part of the curricula for all specialties. For example, architecture students spend 70 hours studying defense preparedness. Their curriculum includes: the harmonization of economic and social development programs with the needs for safety; fundamentals of civil defense in normal times and in emergencies; disaster management; risk mapping; vulnerability considerations in design; accessibility of buildings for evacuation; salvage and urgent repair; and designing dual-use buildings for emergency use (schools are hurricane refuges). All enterprises, including foreign and mixed companies, are required have disaster plans.

Each year at the start of the hurricane season a two-day hurricane drill is held, the first day for responders and the second for the whole country. Then, when a hurricane is approaching, plans are activated. All citizens know where they will move to if evacuation becomes necessary. Food and water are stored where they will be needed. Family doctors assure that people will have their prescriptions. All means of transport from helicopters to horse carts are mobilized. Communications, from fiber optics to ham radio to carrier pigeons, are readied. Trees near power lines are pruned. Foresters, veterinarians, entertainers, the Cuban council of Churches, the Cuban Red Cross, are all prepared under a nationally coordinated Civil Defense leadership.

After the hurricane passes, reconstruction begins immediately, with no interruption of wages when a workplace has to shut down because of damage or lack of power. Then the experience is analyzed and solutions are sought to be able to cope better with future storms. For instance, if houses in eastern Cuba suffered more damage than in the west, then it is determined that they have to be built stronger. In the aftermath of hurricane Dennis, several children died from water-borne infections. The Cuban government made it a priority to find out why. It also investigates how settlements can be built in less vulnerable places.

The result of all this is that despite often-extensive economic damage, few lives are lost. Hurricane George (1998) killed 597 people elsewhere, and only four in Cuba. Michelle

(2001) killed five, Ivan (2004) killed none in Cuba but thousands in the rest of the Caribbean, Charley killed four, Dennis at least 10.

The Cuban meteorologist Fernando Boytel told me years ago that a hurricane is a natural event with many potentials; it can even replenish water resources if people have built reservoirs. But lack of preparation makes it a disaster.

Cuba's success is based on priority given to the quality of life for everyone, a holistic approach to problem-solving across disciplines, community-level participation, thorough coordination from the national to the local, and a culture of collectivity and safety. Cuba is now ready to share its experience with the world. A mobile medical brigade named after Henry Reeve, a Brooklyn youth who fought in Cuba's first War of Independence, is now being organized to provide emergency aid wherever it may be needed.

The U.S. corporate press has difficulty dealing with Cuba's successes. The rule is that any reporting favorable to Cuba has to be offset by at least some conventional rejection of that society. The *Detroit Free Press* (9/12/05) wrote: "Cuba's form of government—communist authoritarian—undoubtedly helps to quickly mobilize in emergencies. But the real key to success is 'a culture of safety.'" The *Miami Herald* (9/17/04): "The country's evacuation of 1.9 million people from coastal and flood-prone areas underlines the effectiveness of its hurricane preparedness—partly because of its organization, partly because of the communist government's firm control over the lives of 11 million Cubans." *CBS* (9/13/04) complained that nobody in Cuba has home or property insurance. (Of course not—rebuilding is a collective, social responsibility).

Any one of Cuba's successes—in health, in controlling HIV/AIDS, in education, sports, environmental protection, general culture, foreign aid, equality, women's participation—might be dismissed as an anomaly. But the whole pattern of a human, just, participatory, and sustainable pathway of development suggests that yes, another world is possible.

—Richard Levins