

Hurricanes, The United States-Cuba Disconnect

During the period between 1886 and 2002, Cuba had 222 tropical storms and/or hurricanes. In the past ten years of violent storms hitting Cuba, the country has had a total of 18 losses of life. When Hurricane Katrina hit the Mississippi Gulf Coast and the levees broke in New Orleans in the fall of 2005, more than 1,500 people were killed and more than 1,000 were missing.

It would seem to make sense with both the United States and Cuba located in the path of hurricanes that we would cooperate and learn from one another to become better equipped to deal with these storms which we are told are going to increase in size and intensity for the next 10 - 15 years. Dr. Ivor van Heerden reported in the Mobile conference that “80% of the people who live on the gulf coast and the east coast have never experienced a hurricane and do not know what to expect”.

Conception of a United States-Cuba Hurricane Summit began in Kingston, Canada in 2007. Led by Wayne Smith and the Center for International Policy, the idea became a reality the following year in Monterrey, Mexico and a year after that in 2008 in Havana, Cuba. Several Cuban colleagues were able to meet with a delegation from the United States during these meetings. On September 9th, 2008 in Mobile, Alabama a conference was held to discuss what was learned from the meetings in Mexico and Cuba and to share ideas with other local officials and with the general public. Listed below are some of the lessons learned from the United States delegation.

- Children are educated very early in school regarding the natural phenomenon of hurricanes and tropical storms. The amount of quality time and effort placed in the school systems to help children and youth understand the dangers posed by a hurricane is woven into the fabric of the society. Maybe the old saying is correct, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”. This type of education and preventative measures sounds very similar to the days in the late 50’s and early 60’s in the US schools as we practiced civil defense methods during the Cold War.
- In Cuba each block has four block captains. They are volunteers. These block captains know everyone in their block, in their neighborhood. When someone has a special need whether that is a disabled person or a senior citizen, the block captain is aware of the need.
- Concrete warehouses and raised storage are available for important possessions during an evacuation. Items of necessity that are destroyed by the storm are replaced by the government.
- Emotional Wellness and Mental Health: Randy Poindexter asked the question, “How do they handle the emotional distress after the disasters?” This is a huge issue for the gulf coast. People were profoundly affected after Katrina and recent studies report one in five people on the Mississippi gulf coast are suffering with post-traumatic stress syndrome and depression. The Cubans response were people are so confident that their government will take care of them after a disaster that such emotional devastation is less likely to occur, that they have mental health workers and strong community support for victims, as well as the assurance that their belongings and housing will be replaced if it is lost.
- The Cuban government offers assistance to help evacuations, but it is more community minded. In the United States these efforts are coordinated through the emergency management operations through local and state government.

- Every May the entire nation of Cuba participate in Meteoro, a drill to practice emergency evacuation. This drill educates Cubans from a very young age about the emergency procedures. Information materials designed for children are distributed throughout the country and emergency broadcasts are made in layman's terms and complimented by graphics to insure that every Cuban has access to and can understand information on these natural phenomena. "People tend to see hurricanes as a point, moving along a certain path," explained Dr. Rubiera, but in reality the area affected by hurricanes is much larger. By showing people a cone-shaped radar image of where a hurricane could go and what areas will be affected by the hurricane, the Cuban people gain a better understanding of the danger they might face.
- The people in Cuba are educated that they must be able to take care of themselves for 48-72 hours in the face of an evacuation.
- One of the problems American emergency managers faced during Hurricane Katrina was people refusing to evacuate their homes. When questioned about the issue of forced evacuations, Cuban specialists remarked that most Cubans have a profound understanding of the risk posed to them if they remain in the path of the storm, thus they are more than willing to evacuate and the problem of forced evacuations does not often rise. During Hurricane Noel in 2007, despite an estimated \$500 million (USD) in damages, 80,000 residents in Cuba were evacuated, and only one man died of attempting to cross a swollen river.

Basic Structure of the Cuban Model

- The first step of the structure of the Cuban model is early storm warning.
- The second step is communication to inform every citizen of the risks posed to them and what they can do to avoid vulnerability. Radio broadcasts reach 97% of the population while television reaches 96%. Despite limited internet connections, storm warnings can also be found on the Meteorological Institute of Cuba's website at www.insmet.cu.
 1. 72 hours before a storm hits the island, a first warning goes out to mentally prepare the people for what is to come.
 2. At 48 hours, evacuations begin in which local authorities pay special attention to those citizens who may need additional assistance such as pregnant woman, the elderly, and the disabled.
 3. Finally, 24 hours before the storm hits, the affected areas are evacuated and shelters are stocked with water and medicines from the local emergency supply.

In closing Cuba is raising a society of prepared people. As Dagoberto Rodriguez, former chief of the Cuban Interests Section in Washington D.C said, "There is nothing natural about a disaster. With proper planning and risk-reduction measures, natural disasters can be avoided". This has been the successful approach in Cuba for the past 30 years, in which time, despite being in the direct path of several hurricanes each year, there have been remarkably few fatalities.

The United States could greatly benefit from Cuba's experience and in some respects already has, especially in the area of hurricane forecasting, a skill Cuba developed over a hundred years ago, as seen in the disastrous storm that hit Galveston, Texas. Well before the storm hit, Cuban forecasters gave the United States the information and warning that could have saved thousands of lives.

As Jay Higgenbotham reported in his findings on the meetings, "The United States and Cuba have a common enemy in which both countries could fight together to achieve a common victory. In this respect, the hurricanes present a startling opportunity for both our nations."

This information was presented at the Mobile Conference and the International Policy Report, *Reducing Risks, Avoiding Disaster: Managing Hurricanes the Cuban Way*, Jennifer Schuett and Eva Silkwood and *Hurricane Diplomacy*, by Randy Poindexter. For a more in-depth analysis of the Cuba Conference report go to the website for International Policy Report: www.ciponline.org

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