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OPINION

**Getting Personal**

*The Right Kind of Reinvestment in the Gulf Coast*

By Rick Cohen

For seven years, I have never written anything on behalf of NCRP for *Responsive Philanthropy* or *Nonprofit Quarterly* or the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* or any other outlet where I used the first person singular. I dislike and avoid the endemic solipsism of many nonprofit sector leaders who view themselves as fonts of wisdom and knowledge because they happen to sit at the helm of national nonprofit trade or what some call “infrastructure” organizations.

Having no delusions about the shadowy craters of knowledge and experience I possess, I nonetheless have been distressed by the instant expertise of people who have waxed eloquently about the needs and proper responses to the Katrina and Rita catastrophes because they happen to get invited to—or lobby to get themselves invited to—meetings where the groups on the ground in the Gulf Coast region are explaining their actual needs and frustrations to spin-deafened ears. Some of these national nonprofit photo ops are as thinly believable as a foray by a construction-work-belt-clad President Bush wielding a hammer at a Habitat for Humanity work site for a couple of press-worthy minutes.

For me, Katrina makes me return to my experiences directing, for two national nonprofit community development intermediaries, substantial nonprofit technical assistance and strategic planning programs with community-based and constituency-led nonprofits around the nation, including in some of the communities of the Gulf Coast. The community-based nonprofit infrastructure of these communities isn’t an abstraction viewed through the soft-focus lenses of national nonprofits; it’s real and tangible to me because I’ve worked with community development corporations and nonprofit housing development groups—and their municipal and state government partners—making things happen.

And when I used to do that community



Rick Cohen.

development technical assistance work, I would bring my experiences heading a mid-sized city’s housing, economic development, and planning operations, where I managed Community Development Block Grants,

designed and operated state and federal enterprise zones, financed low-income housing and high-end waterfront office and residential development across the Hudson River from Lower Manhattan, created housing trust funds, opened homeless shelters and transition housing complexes, and used public funds to create the partnerships between city government and nonprofits to do what some of these national infrastructure spokespersons merely talk about because that’s what their speechwriters scribble out for them to read.

So when I waded through the torrent of heartfelt and other less-than-sincere sentiments expressed by national nonprofit leaders suffused with concern for the community-based nonprofit sector in the Gulf region, I think of the following:

Most of these experts have never walked the low-income neighborhoods and public housing projects of New Orleans or the Mid-South Delta patch towns of rural Louisiana, Arkansas, and Mississippi and seen the depth of challenges facing the nonprofit sector there prior to Katrina, not to mention how much the hurricane’s devastation made conditions so much worse. They haven’t stood in what arguably have been candidates for the nation’s worst public housing complexes—the Desire Project being a standout—and

realized what decades of public sector disinterest and disinvestment wrought in the lives of these families.

The calls of concern from some national players ring a bit hollow when the public and private disinvestment in desperately poor inner city neighborhoods and rural communities was visible and real long before anyone ever detected and named the hurricane called Katrina. While national nonprofits with their legions of speechwriters and public relations firms may be recruiting groups for photo ops and site visits, the local groups in the Lower Ninth Ward and Mid-South Delta towns—and their constituents—have plenty of experience with what it means to be the objects of bus tours during national nonprofit conference site visits, on the radar screen for moments here and there but quickly forgotten when their utility is over.

All too many instant national experts have never really gotten into the details at the city or neighborhood level of making federal program funds work, crafting the intersections for the effective leveraging of federal, state, and local program dollars, reading and understanding the financial pro formas of housing and economic development projects. Lacking much real connection to these dynamics, these national observers may not fully realize what it means to be a local agency official or a community-based nonprofit packaging deals with behemoth corporations and national banks, plus multiple layers of state and federal bureaucracies.

Let's face it: The rebuilding of the Gulf Coast region is a multiyear challenge that makes all previous urban and rural development efforts look minuscule in comparison. Conservatives will ply the region with a potpourri of half-baked program ideas that many of us know from experience aren't loaded with great promise, and their ideological opposites don't seem ready to offer a compelling alternative vision. In all likelihood, the tools at the disposal of local officials and community-based nonprofits will be just as unworkable and marginally effective as in the past, with the big winners as always being the Halliburton-like corporations lining up at federal contract troughs.

The climate has turned against the federal program slashers, with the public showing signs of renewed support for real public investment in the Community Development

Block Grants, housing subsidies, and economic development grants that the Bush administration originally targeted for reductions or extinction in its fiscal year 2006 proposals. But having tried to make these programs work at the municipal government level, I think the time has come to demand a new deal for the Gulf Coast.

It's time for public investment that doesn't end up in the coffers of tax-incentivized and contract-laden private corporations, but under the control of community-based, constituency-led nonprofits that truly represent the families and communities victimized by the decades of disinvestment reflected most poignantly in the collapse of the Lake Pontchartrain levees. It's time to demand high-quality, competent government program implementation that doesn't further victimize the community-based organizations and their stakeholders. It's time to demand hard-core accountability through a Gulf Coast reconstruction inspector general with the power to finger the abusers—whether for-profit or nonprofit—and demand repair and restitution, as well as fines, penalties, and, if necessary, incarceration. Gulf Coast profiteers ought to feel the pressure of a potential “perp walk.”

More than ever, it's time to reinvest in the community-based nonprofit infrastructure of the Gulf Coast region—urban and rural—so that the reconstruction of the region reflects what ought to be the core democratic principles of our sector. It's time to ditch the national spin and PR and reinvest in the organizations that will make the reconstruction of the region a long-term, sustainable enterprise. That's what I think I know from working in urban and rural neighborhoods, not just studying them or spinning them; that's what I think I know from administering the governmental programs that will be needed in the rebuilding process. ○

*Rick Cohen is executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP). Since 1976, NCRP has advocated for the philanthropic community to provide nonprofit organizations with essential resources and opportunities to work toward social and economic justice for disadvantaged and disenfranchised populations and communities.*

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