

Research Counts

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Disaster Justice for All: The Need for a More Equitable and Just Recovery Lens



People in Detroit call for social justice on a variety of issues faced by their communities.
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By [Alessandra Jerolleman](#)

As disasters become more frequent and severe, it is more important than ever to determine what can be done to promote more just and equitable disaster recovery. The outcomes of major disasters are nearly always inequitable, which increases the vulnerability of those who struggled before the disaster and often displaces large portions of communities. The tremendous burdens that disaster recovery imposes result in some individuals—such as renters, those working in low-paying jobs, and undocumented people—finding it nearly impossible to recover after disaster.

Recovery efforts will continue to replicate these patterns unless we take into consideration the systemic injustices that have shaped the landscape of risk, such as concentrating the poor and minorities into high-risk areas or refusing insurance to those considered a poor financial risk.

Families who are unable to afford flood insurance or adequately maintain their homes will find it more difficult to access disaster aid, which is based on the value and condition of their home. Alternatively, the added burdens of meeting higher standards—even those for that reduce risk—can drive the gentrification of neighborhoods and displace those who cannot afford to pay such “safety premiums.”



A sign at the 2014 People’s Climate March emphasizes the need for community-level consideration of the impacts of climate issues. ©Alan Greig, 2014

Emergency managers and policymakers could address these systemic injustices through the adoption of an intentional equity and justice lens. Policy-makers, practitioners, academics, and community leaders can often clearly identify unjust outcomes resulting from disaster policies that unevenly distribute resources and do not meet basic needs. What’s less clear is how to create and implement programs that result in better outcomes while still meeting legal and programmatic requirements.

In response to this challenge, advocates have created guidance to help disaster-stricken communities promote more equitable recovery. For example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) toolkit, entitled [In the Eye of the Storm: A People's Guide to Transforming Crisis and Advancing Equity in the Disaster Continuum](#), provides practical guidance for community leaders and emergency managers. There are also [examples of local governments](#) that attempt to promote justice and equity by incorporating value statements explicitly into plans and policies.

The Four Principles for Just Recovery

It's still difficult to clearly articulate exactly what is meant by "just recovery," though, and harder to put it into action. But if we can't clarify what is meant by justice, it will be difficult to hold ourselves accountable. I have proposed a four-principle framework that can provide a starting point for the conversation about what a more just recovery might entail. These four principles provide a lens through which policymakers and practitioners can view proposed disaster recovery practices.

The principles listed below are excerpted from my book, ["Disaster Recovery through the Lens of Justice."](#)

Just recovery requires the ability to exercise agency. All community members—regardless of their socio-economic status, race, gender, sexual identification, land tenure, or other factors—must have the ability to fully exercise their agency and make free and informed choices that support of their personal well-being. This is not possible if there is direct or indirect coercion, exclusion from public policies, or other barriers to participation. Furthermore, agency cannot be fully exercised if all options are not understood and made available in a timely manner and through accessible means.

Just recovery begins with equality. The principle of *prima facie* political equality, which establishes that only equality is inherently defensible—different or unequal treatment must be justified by the discriminator. Bureaucratic processes that force disaster-affected individuals or communities to prove their deservedness puts the onus to justify the need for equal treatment on the victims, and so fails this test.

Just recovery harnesses community capacity. Capturing the transformative and adaptive capacity of communities and honoring their definitions of resilience can reduce future risks. Holistic disaster risk reduction is not possible without acknowledging existing patterns of unequal risk distribution. It is not sufficient to mitigate against current risk when rebuilding; instead underlying social structures and patterns must be questioned. Colorblind and ahistoric recovery that does not consider context is not just.

Just recovery requires equal access. Without equal access to resources and programs—including full participation in decision-making processes that govern resource allocation, future development, and other functions—it is not possible for communities to effectively participate in their recovery.

This framework is by no means easy to implement and many of its components will require significant structural and programmatic changes to the ways that disaster recovery is managed and resourced. Incremental changes are possible, however, and awareness is the crucial first step towards those changes. Explicitly designing programs to not only consider the elements of this framework, but also be evaluated for those elements, is another critical step. It is important to remember that what cannot be immediately changed, can be brought to light—and casting such a light on injustice in clear and descriptive terms is a necessary precursor to change.

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About the Author



[Alessandra Jerolleman](#)

Alessandra Jerolleman is an assistant professor in Jacksonville State University Emergency Management Department as well as a community resilience specialist and applied researcher at the Lowlander Center. Jerolleman is a subject matter expert in climate adaptation, justice in disaster recovery, hazard mitigation, disaster recovery, and resilience with a long history of working in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.