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## From Vulnerability to Resiliency: Achieving Sustainable Communities Through Social Science

Anna M. Kleiner  
*Southeastern Louisiana University*

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**The 2011  
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**FROM VULNERABILITY TO RESILIENCY:  
ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES THROUGH SOCIAL  
SCIENCE\***

**ANNA M. KLEINER**

*SOUTHEASTERN LOUISIANA UNIVERSITY*

As I sat watching TV coverage of the emerging wrath of Hurricane Katrina bearing down on New Orleans in August of 2005, with the streets slowly filling with water and several thousand people abandoned at the Superdome, I had no knowledge that this event would culminate in a comprehensive community-based research effort and lifestyle in which I remain deeply involved today.<sup>1</sup> More than five years after the storm, individuals, families, and communities continue to struggle, amid persistent social and economic inequalities in the affected areas, compounded by additional crisis events, such as the BP (British Petroleum) oil spill and the recent economic crisis at the domestic and global levels. Although these particular events receive extensive media attention, numerous vulnerabilities threaten people each day and receive little coverage, if any. From the development literature, most notably through livelihoods theory, it is argued that people's ability to handle shocks and stresses, short- and long-term, is shaped by their level of access to a wide range of socioeconomic resources (Bebbington 1999; DeHaan 2000; DeWaal 2005, as quoted in Kleiner et al. 2010: 196). Groups that are socially, economically, politically, physically, and/or geographically marginalized are especially vulnerable to shocks and stresses. On the vulnerability-resiliency continuum, people and communities are considered resilient when they have access

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\*Presidential address delivered at the annual meeting of the Southern Rural Sociological Association, Corpus Christi, TX, February 7, 2011. Address correspondence to Anna M. Kleiner, Southeastern Louisiana University, Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice, SLU 10686, Hammond, LA 70402. Email: Anna.Kleiner@selu.edu.

<sup>1</sup>This presentation is a culmination of projects and writings in my career; citations of the original sources are provided.

to the resources needed to prevent or respond effectively to a problematic situation (Kleiner et al. 2010: 196).

As is widely documented, disasters appear to function in a discriminating manner, as pre-existing structures and social conditions determine that some members of a community will be less affected while others will pay a higher price (Oxfam 2005). As potential mediators between people and vulnerabilities, community-based organizations continue to work in the Gulf Coast region, and in other vulnerable regions, such as the Mississippi Delta, another focus area of my research, to meet people's immediate and long-term needs in achieving a greater degree of sustainability within these communities. Disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill, and broader global structural changes (e.g., globalization project - McMichael 1996, 2008), have myriad effects on local communities. These events provide opportunities for academic researchers to conduct collaborative research with community-based organizations, empowering them to more effectively respond to people's needs. Through a careful assessment of these larger disasters, but also of those "creeping" disasters associated with livelihood (Enarson 2007), such as low literacy, low ownership of assets, minimal work opportunities, poor health, environmental risk, and institutionalized prejudice and discrimination, it is critical to understand and to lessen, if not eliminate, the vulnerabilities that threaten people's livelihoods, their sense of safety and self-worth, and the long-term sustainability of their families and communities.

Community-based organizations are under increasing pressure to serve vulnerable populations, which often requires increasing organizational capacity to facilitate effective program delivery, program expansion, and the ability to adapt to change (InnoNet 2008, as quoted in Kleiner et al. 2010: 197). To increase resilience to future crisis events, communities and their organizations can be better equipped to reduce their vulnerability and achieve sustainability through community-based "participatory" assessment of conditions, planning and evaluation processes, and related capacity development activities informed through the social sciences. While serving on the front lines, community-based organizations can collaborate with social scientists to strengthen their own effectiveness as service providers and their networks with other groups. Their own knowledge of and experience with vulnerabilities can help amplify the voices of the people they serve, to better inform the development of relevant policies, acquire external funding for programs, and ultimately promote action across society in support of long-term sustainability.

Several academic disciplines fall within the social sciences (sociology, anthropology, geography, community development, and history, to name just a

few); however, several other disciplines and areas of study can successfully collaborate with us at the community level. My own perspective has been greatly widened by my research partnerships developed through the documentation and analysis of the effects of disasters on people and direct work with nonprofit organizations engaged in rebuilding their communities (see: Kleiner et al. 2008; Green et al. 2007; Kleiner et al. 2007; Green et al. 2006a; Green et al. 2006b). As a Rural Sociologist committed to more clearly understanding and addressing vulnerability, I have closely partnered with a sociology, community development, and public health team of researchers from Delta State University (Institute for Community Based Research) and the University of Michigan (School of Public Health).<sup>2</sup> We continually discover that we share perspectives about society, deep concerns about inequality, methods and other strategies for doing our work, and goals for how we want to serve people through our university-based positions. The community-based organizations can gain a deeper understanding of the different ways that academics interpret the world, perform their work, and generate research with people at the community level, making it directly useful to them.

With great success and satisfaction, we have founded our community-based partnerships and our work on a community-based research (CBR) approach that focuses on involving people at the grassroots level in collecting and analyzing data to inform social change (see Pretty 1995; Reason and Bradbury 2001; Selener 1997; Stringer 1999). Employing action-oriented participatory research approaches, community-based research is used to build partnerships between university-based researchers, formal and informal organizations, and community members. A key objective of this approach is to engage groups and individuals in systematic research that gives them the tools and strategies for effective problem-solving that further empowers them to achieve positive and just social change (Green et al. 2006a). The feedback we receive from our community-based partners about their participation in this type of research remains positive, enlightening, and rewarding, especially when they request that we continue to work with them year after year and bring other local groups into our network.

Much of our recent work has involved people in the neighborhood of East Biloxi, Mississippi and surrounding vulnerable areas characterized by lower levels

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<sup>2</sup>I extend my gratitude to the following individuals and organizations for their unwavering support of my community-based research work and its many partnerships: John Green of the University of Mississippi (formerly of Delta State); Eleanor Green; JoLynn Montgomery and Dana Thomas of the University of Michigan; Kenneth Bolton, Jr. of Southeastern Louisiana University; Sarah Walker of Visions of Hope, Inc.; and my husband Roger Huff.

of educational attainment, higher poverty rates, and a higher proportion of racial/ethnic groups, especially African American and Asian, primarily Vietnamese (see: Kleiner et al. 2007). Through our research partnerships with community-based organizations serving these vulnerable groups, we have engaged non-academics in participatory processes of knowledge development and utilization, often through multiple research approaches such as analysis of secondary data, surveys, focus groups, interviews, field observation, and consensus building activities (Kleiner et al. 2010). In 2007, we assisted five nonprofit organizations with a SWOT analysis, outlining the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of each organization based on the perspectives of staff, volunteers, and service recipients. This information was used to develop an organizational plan for each group, including recommendations for technical assistance (Kerstetter et al. 2008, as quoted in Kleiner et al. 2010: 200). The process culminated in a capacity development project for the five organizations involving both large group workshops and individual technical assistance activities. This project functioned to achieve the following goals (see Kerstetter et al. 2008): (a) to aid in the planning and implementation of recovery and redevelopment initiatives in East Biloxi and surrounding areas; (b) to assist nonprofit organizations with using applied research for expanding and improving direct services advocating for the needs of underserved social and economic groups; (c) to coordinate with other organizations to fill gaps, avoid duplication of services, and build greater synergy; (d) to enhance the capacity of nonprofit organizations to inform their action via pilot implementation of plans, ongoing assessment, monitoring and evaluation; and (e) to learn and document practices to inform organizations working in the Gulf Coast region to expand access to services for recovery and redevelopment following crises. Pursuing sustainable strategies for enhancing the capacity of the organizations and following a demand-driven approach helped to ensure that the project activities reflected the needs and wants of the organizations in the community (Kerstetter et al. 2008).

Since that project, one organization, born in East Biloxi twelve years ago, has continued to conduct community-based research with us each year. This organization, Visions of Hope, aims to serve the needs of low-income youth and adults, through housing education, credit counseling, financial literacy, GED training, and tax assistance. After completing a five-year strategic plan with our assistance, Visions of Hope has worked with us to develop a longitudinal assessment and evaluation program strategy. Annually, the organization has engaged in this process of empowerment evaluation to better assess the effectiveness of its programs, the community's knowledge level of these programs, and the general

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health, safety, and economic concerns of residents. The organization's leaders continually praise the value of this information as a critical component of applications for external grants supporting their operations and services. Not only do they more clearly understand the experiences and needs of their community in the short-term following Hurricane Katrina, but also in the long-term, influenced by more chronic psycho-social stresses associated with socioeconomic conditions.

Partly as a comparative analysis to the experiences of Gulf Coast communities, we have conducted similar community-based projects in the Mississippi Delta region exploring psycho-social and physical health conditions and stresses associated with socioeconomic status, especially persistent poverty. While there may be some similarities among these communities, each place is unique in its historical experience and types of individual and communal coping mechanisms for dealing with vulnerability and working toward greater resilience. Just yesterday, we presented a paper on this comparative study.

As partners throughout this and other projects, university faculty members and students within the social sciences and in public health, gain insight into the daily challenges facing individuals and organizations in vulnerable communities. They also benefit from the hands-on learning experiences and the opportunities to build partnerships and closer ties with organizations outside the university. They have learned how to do community-responsive research of practical value to disadvantaged groups and the organizations dedicated to improving their quality of life.

Nonprofit and other community-based organizations are often the first responders to disasters and remain on the front lines as subsequent crises occur. In the face of the unknown, these organizations must continually work to maintain adequate funding and personnel, reassess programs and services to meet expanding needs, and respond to an increasingly diverse group of clients. They can use community-based research to document and interpret the needs of residents in their areas and be proactive in pursuing strategies for enhancing their collective efficacy. The organizational leaders in our studies reside in physically, socially, and economically high-risk areas, shaping their perspectives over time regarding the special needs of their community.

A great value of community-based research is that its processes and design are unique to each context in which the research activities take place. While we use common social scientific methods of gathering information, we look to the community or organization being directly served to identify the research question and needs of that population that the research activities aim to address. Globally,

governments and other public institutions appear to be increasingly ill-funded, ill-equipped, or even unwilling to prepare for or respond to shocks, such as natural and technological disasters; creeping disasters, such as social stratification, poverty, and environmental deterioration continue to grow; people are turning to nonprofit organizations and advocacy groups to help illuminate and address their needs as these conditions continually threaten their livelihood. As social scientists, we have the responsibility to share our skills and knowledge with these groups toward that end, but also to learn from them – to learn what is possible for them to achieve. As one of my earliest professors at Missouri, Daryl Hobbs, repeatedly voiced, “Information is knowledge, and knowledge is power.”

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