

A TALE OF TWO SANDYS



White Paper
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Superstorm
Research Lab



Superstorm Research Lab

About Superstorm Research Lab

Superstorm Research Lab (SRL) is a mutual aid research collective working to understand how New York City policy actors, NGO leaders, activists, volunteers, and residents are thinking about social, economic and environmental issues following Hurricane Sandy. We produce traditional scholarship, but also push the boundaries of what it means to do academic work founded on the need for social change.

www.superstormresearchlab.org

Authorship

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Methods

The research and analysis in this paper are products of collaborative data collection. SRL members pool data in addition to releasing as much data as possible under a creative commons license via www.superstormresearchlab.org. We approach data collection and writing collaboratively, employing consensus-based decision-making and a flat organizational structure. The first draft of this paper was shared with a community of interviewees, leaders from community-based organizations, other researchers, and the general public at our public event Superstorm Research Lab: One Year On, held on November 11, 2013. The final version of this white paper includes feedback from the panelists, workshop leaders, and audience members at that event.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

If we think of Hurricane Sandy as the extreme weather that hit the New York City region on October 29, 2012, then the storm was one of the worst in the country's history, killing dozens of people, affecting hundreds of thousands, and inflicting as much as \$75 billion in economic losses. But if we think of Hurricane Sandy as the multitude of crises that followed the event, then it's clear that each locale—and perhaps each person—had its own unique confluence of crises, and its own “Sandy.” Homeowners on Staten Island trying to deal with insurance claims; residents of public housing in Coney Island trying to navigate highrise apartment buildings with no electricity; city officials trying to balance the budget this new fiscal year: each faced their own disaster.

Yet, despite this wide range of needs, obstacles, and crises, Superstorm Research Lab (SRL) has found that responses to Hurricane Sandy consistently cluster into two types according to how the issues have been defined and understood. We tell A Tale of Two Sandys to characterize these two genres: on one hand, the crisis was seen as a weather event that created physical and economic damage, and temporarily moved New York City away from its status quo; on the other hand, Hurricane Sandy exacerbated crises which existed before the storm and continued afterwards in heightened form, including poverty, lack of affordable housing, precarious or low employment, and unequal access to resources generally. Even though there was crossover and blurring between these two Sandys, the stakeholders that tended towards the first understanding of Sandy included New York City's government, elite institutions, and large NGOs. Community-based groups, affected residents, many volunteer first responders, owner-operated businesses, and some NGOs tended towards the second. In this white paper we describe these two Sandys and discuss their implications for response, recovery, and justice.

This report is based on 74 interviews with policymakers, environmental groups, volunteer first responders, and residents affected by the storm; ethnographic observation; analysis of public reports from government, community-based organizations, and other groups; qualitative analysis of canvassing forms and data; and a review of the academic literature on disaster response. As a framing document, A Tale of Two Sandys does not cover all aspects of the crisis, but selects certain case studies for their exemplary nature. Its primary purpose is to propose a sophisticated, accurate, and useful way of understanding the inequalities entwined with Sandy's aftermath and to enable ways to address them.

The Two Sandys division reaches deep into the politics, economy, and everyday life of post-Sandy New York, from housing, to aid, to climate change.

Summary of findings

- There have been **two different ways** of understanding and responding to the crises of Hurricane Sandy. One tends to see Sandy-related crises as problems following **directly from storm conditions** and to approach response efforts as means to restore the pre-storm status quo. The second sees Sandy as exacerbating a **chronic crisis** characterized by poverty, low and precarious employment, and a lack of access to resources such as transportation, healthcare, and education. We call this the Two Sandy phenomenon.
- While some groups portrayed elements of both Sandys, proponents for each group are mainly divided among **elite, powerful actors, and residents, community-based groups, and owner-operated businesses** on the ground.
- Top-down, elite aid is characterized by **finite programs with deadlines**, while grassroots and community aid often takes a **longer view**.
- **Equity and equality** are often used interchangeably in NYC disaster recovery discourse about resilience, yet are opposing concepts that result in mutually exclusive forms of aid and response.
- The use of **non-emergency population categories**—everyday stakeholder categories such as homeowners or students—rather than **indicators of vulnerability**, reproduces inequity and vulnerability in disaster relief.
- Some forms of disaster response, such as rebuilding loans that increase debt burdens, produce their own **second-order disasters** and can move formerly resilient populations into more vulnerable positions.
- Since Sandy, government discourse and action towards climate change has shifted from **prevention to adaptation**.
- Top-down mandates for recovery create a **mode of participation** where the people most affected can only **react** to those in power, rather than work in **partnership** to set recovery agendas that meet community needs.

These findings are not unique to New York City's response to Hurricane Sandy (Solnit 2010; Knowles 2012). The disjunction between elite and community concepts and needs, as well as many other findings outlined above, have occurred in other disasters in other places at other times. As such, this white paper works to identify these trends and find meaningful points of intervention to amend them.

INTRODUCTION

I really felt like there's been two New Yorks since the storm, like the one that's been completely turned upside down since the storm and the one that's going about business as usual. And I think it's been hard for me to spend time in the business as usual one without just kind of wanting to shake people and be like, 'Do you understand that people half an hour away from here are living in mold and you can do something about it if you just like put on some gloves and get out there?'

- New York City resident and volunteer first responder

I think there were two pretty separate disasters happening in Red Hook at the same time—the one being thousands of low-income people living without heat, or hot water, or power, and then there was also a bunch of businesses that were really badly damaged. And some of them were small business owners, a lot of small business owners who had very few resources, and then some bigger businesses, and so I think that whereas—life is pretty much back to normal in the Red Hook houses. Some of those businesses have reopened, but I think there's a bigger difference in their lives from before the storm to now, than there is in the lives of people who were living in the houses.

- Red Hook resident and director of a community-based organization

Disasters always produce multiple crises. The way individuals and groups experience a disaster—and the impact the disaster has on their lives—varies according to geographic location and demographic characteristics such as socioeconomic status, personal history, and differential access to resources before, during, and after the event. Hurricane Sandy, which tore through the New York region in late October, 2012, exemplifies this reality. The storm affected hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers in various ways, from temporary power outages to long-term loss of housing. Fifty-three New Yorkers died. Now, a year later, the majority of those affected have seen their lives return to normal. Yet, there is presently broad consensus that hundreds of New Yorkers still haven't been rehoused, thousands are dealing with economic insecurity resulting from the storm, and even more suffer from enduring physical and mental health problems. What's more, for many affected areas whose residents and businesses were already struggling economically

prior to the storm, a return to the status quo hardly represents a victory. As illustrated by two excerpts from our interviews above, the fact that Sandy was experienced in very different ways by different groups was not lost on New Yorkers.

The reality of one disaster with multiple crises is at odds with the ideal underlying disaster relief, where the goal is to bring everyone out of their distinct crises into a shared recovery. Unfortunately, the ideal of a shared, universal recovery is a myth. Exploring Sandy's troubled aftermath, Superstorm Research Lab (SRL) discovered that even though there were many different conceptualizations of and responses to the disaster, they tended to cluster into two genres. Over and over, elite and dominant groups such as New York City's government, elite institutions, and large NGOs framed the disaster as a discrete weather event that created structural and economic damage, and temporarily moved New York City away from its status quo, while affected residents, volunteer first responders,

community-based organizations, and owner-operated businesses talked about ongoing social and economic conditions, not limited to single moments of destruction, that began before the storm and continued afterwards. These included pressing problems of poverty, lack of affordable housing, precarious or low employment, and unequal access to resources in general. We call this the Two Sandys phenomenon, and it characterizes the divergent definitions of crises and the plans meant to address them across the whole of New York City and surrounding area.

To be clear, the Two Sandys phenomenon is a cultural frame for understanding the effects of Hurricane Sandy rather than a way to map concepts onto individual groups. Not all members of elite institutions focus on restoring New York City's status quo, and not every affected resident spoke about wealth inequity. In fact, some individuals and organizations contain a mix of the Two Sandys. For example, one high-ranking city official wanted to ensure that undocumented workers in the city received special aid given their lack of access to many official response mechanisms, but FEMA declined this differential support (SRL interview). Yet, at the same time, FEMA worked closely with Occupy Sandy, which co-organized many of the relief hubs, and tended to offer targeted support to undocumented workers. Thus, the Two Sandys phenomenon is an analytical framework which helps us to identify distinct patterns in the way disaster was defined, and these definitions tended to cluster around how elite, top-down organizations versus grassroots, bottom-up groups conceptualized the disaster and recovery, while noting that individuals within these groups may subscribe to either (and sometimes both) definitions as the groups intersected with each other in the aftermath of the storm and continue to do so today.

The Two Sandys division reaches deep into the politics, economy, and everyday life of post-Sandy New York, from housing, to aid, to climate change, though the schism has its origins well before the storm (Wallace & Wallace 1998; Cutter 2006; Yohe 2010). This division threatens to stretch into the future as many Sandy survivors continue to recover,

as inequalities of disaster vulnerability persist, and as climate change exacerbates the threat that extreme weather poses to New York City. Each of these problems can be diminished through a city-wide commitment to social, economic, and environmental justice. Doing so will require, first, taking stock of the problem.

This white paper describes the Two Sandys problem, both in initial experiences of the storm as well as subsequent recovery efforts, and uses this framework to analyze the main debates in recovery taking place in New York City. Our analysis has been informed by extensive research on the storm's impact on New York City and surrounding area, including:

- Seventy four (74) interviews across four groups: policymakers and government officials, NGOs and CBOs and other institutions involved in relief and recovery efforts, professional and volunteer first responders, and affected residents;
- Ethnographic observation of affected residents, volunteer respondents, activist groups, and policy meetings;
- Analysis of policy and research reports by government agencies, NGOs, and CBOs (a full list can be found at www.superstormresearchlab.org);
- Qualitative analysis of canvassing forms and data used by the City of New York and by grassroots first responders;
- Review of the academic scholarship on disasters (reflected in the bibliography at the end of this report).

The report is organized as follows. First, we provide a vocabulary and framework through which to analyze the Two Sandy problem. Then, we look at some of the ways that multiple Sandys were produced in seemingly innocuous choices concerning how to identify vulnerable populations, as well as timelines for aid and recovery. We then move to a case study of housing and rebuilding, particularly on Staten Island. Finally, we end with a city-wide analysis of how the Two Sandy problem is manifesting in urban climate change politics.

EQUITY AND DISCONTENT

Interviewer: When social scientists talk about the impact of a storm like Sandy, often they talk about it in terms of inequality between races, classes and genders.

Interviewee: Horse shit. Never. I've never seen it and I've worked storms all over the country, nobody that I know of or I've ever been associated with thinks like that. That is people who want to start crap. I have never been involved where you think of poor versus rich, black versus white. I've been telling people for years storms do not differentiate between Republicans and Democrats. You respond the same way no matter who they are. The problem is in the poorer neighborhoods it's a little more difficult to get back on your feet because they don't have the resilience, the money in the bank, the borrowing ability to go out and get the money you need to rebuild your house, buy new stuff for your apartment. It's not there. And that, I think, is the fundamental issue.

- New York State emergency manager

A major tension in disaster response and recovery is that, even if everyone is treated equally during the event (which may or may not happen), the burdens of disaster are not borne evenly. In Hurricane Sandy, this unevenness reflected the city's spatialized economic inequality. The New York City area is one of the most economically unequal metropolitan areas in the United States, and this income inequality has increased in recent years (New York City Comptroller 2012; Weinberg 2011). Moreover, urban planning in the post-war era relocated many of the city's poorest residents to the coastline, the part of New York City hardest hit by Sandy (Mahler 2012).

Interviews with residents heavily affected by the storm revealed ubiquitous concern with the difference in post-storm services received by rich versus poor. People talked about watching FEMA trucks drive by to wealthier neighborhoods with more single-family homes and fewer rentals, as homeowners talked about renters having an easier time of recovery (SRL interview). City officials anticipated scrutiny of their treatment of people of different income and race categories. Fearful of "another Katrina," they sent canvassers to knock on the doors of what one official called "our minority friends" (SRL interview). As the opening quote above explains, disparate burdens in the wake of

crisis are not usually intentional neglect and every effort is made to distribute aid equally, but uneven recovery persists nonetheless, often along lines of socioeconomic status. Thus, the root problem in equitable disaster recovery is not the actions and intentions of individual actors. Rather, the problem is systemic, and extreme events highlight and reproduce inequities that existed before the storm. This section starts with a definition of inequity and its relationship to terms used in disaster discourse such as vulnerability and resiliency. It then details the kinds of interventions that can address inequity and those that do not.

Equity versus equality

[We] said, 'Look, we're looking to see if we have the capacity to feed everybody, faculty and also families. We don't know if we can, but it's something we're looking into.' So, then this guy says, 'I really think you should plan to have the Public Safety vans bring food to the people in outlying areas.' So I said to him, 'Well, where do you live?' He said, 'I live in the Bronx.' And I said, 'But you had power in the Bronx. Why...why would we have brought you food?' And he said, 'Well, that's just fair. If the people down here are getting food, why wouldn't we?'

- High-ranking administrator at an NYC university

The concept of fairness quoted above was not uncommon after Hurricane Sandy, although it was rarely expressed in such extreme terms. Some city officials said that Sandy was the storm that equalized everybody overnight, but of course some areas had power and food while others did not. Moreover, those most affected by the storm were affected differently depending on pre-storm vulnerabilities and resilience.

The Red Cross defines vulnerability as the diminished capacity of an individual or group to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact of a natural or human-made hazard (IFRC 2013). Vulnerability is usually associated with poverty, “but it can also arise when people are isolated, insecure and defenseless in the face of risk, shock or stress” and so includes impoverished social networks as well (IFRC 2013). Resilience refers to the ability to prepare and plan for, absorb, recover from, and more successfully adapt to adverse events (Cutter et al 2013). It also involves, “at a deeper level, consideration of the complexity and interconnectedness of systems” such as social, economic, and political systems (Thayer et al 2013, p 2; also see Buckland 1999). This means interrogating the complex structural reasons why high vulnerability and low resilience cluster in certain geographical areas and within particular populations. For example, in Far Rockaway, an area that already had low access to healthy food before the storm, stores were not open and there was no access to cars or public transportation, the situation was particularly dire. One resident explained, “We didn't have any power, any stores. Even if you had money, it was useless because you couldn't buy

anything. Nothing was open. So I really went two or three days without eating until they brought the Red Cross and stuff out here” (SRL interview).

Interventions, whether via policy or immediate aid, must address these differences in vulnerability and resilience for a just recovery. That is, for equitable versus equal allocations of aid. Here, equality refers to fair exchange, where each individual or group receives the same quantity of goods. Equity is about fair or just allocation, where greater needs receive greater attention and resources with the goal of bringing everyone to similar levels of vulnerability and resilience. The even distribution of risk over groups in a population is called “dispersive equity” (Fishburn and Sarin 1991). For example, equal aid would ensure everyone gets two loaves of bread—the foundations of the quotes that opened this section—while equitable aid would provide people with as much bread as they need. Dispersive equity would aim to ensure everyone has two loaves of bread in their cupboards before disaster hits.

Equity in disaster is further complicated because immediate relief and “build it back” plans can fail to achieve dispersive equity by attempting to make things the same as they were before the storm. In best case scenarios, such plans reproduce the Two Sandys phenomenon, as people with little resilience are in the same vulnerable position as before the storm. At worst, uneven aid can put populations in even more vulnerable positions for the next disaster (see, for example, section 5 on the case of increased debt post-Sandy). Thus, equitable recovery must address systemic causes of vulnerability and low resilience, rather than focus



exclusively on technological fixes that put sandbars and new flood zones in place, but fail to address the social and political foundations of uneven risk. As will be discussed in the next section, a commitment to equitable aid alters both the content and the timeframe of disaster relief and recovery work. As a director of a community-based organization that became a relief hub after Sandy explains:

“The obvious thing to say about the storm in low income communities like Red Hook is that it was this very graphic sort of speed-up lens into the kind of grinding need that’s always there, so people in Red Hook always need jobs. There’s always income insecurity. There’s always crappy food supply, lousy schools, no good public transportations daily, right? All those things got really magnified during the storm, and there was a lot of attention on addressing them in the short-term. In the long-term there’s still no high school in the neighborhood. There’s still—people don’t have jobs” (SRL interview).

The Two Sandy framework clarifies these issues. If equality informed recovery logic of elite institutions after the storm, the concept of equity directs attention to the specific experiences—and needs—of recovery at the individual and community level (Cook 1983; Culyer 2001; Pratto et al 1999). Interviewees and CBO public reports consistently point out inequity rather than equality as a key problem within disaster response resource distribution. This frame reverses some top-down decisions to recognize, and then dismiss, pre-storm vulnerabilities as basis for recovery aid. For example, some people without housing after the storm who were placed in hotels had been either homeless or marginally housed before the storm. Rather than extending equitable aid to raise affected New Yorkers to less vulnerable positions overall, those with highest vulnerability due to chronic lack of housing were excluded from assistance altogether (Coalition for the Homeless 2013).

The concept of equity directs attention to the specific experiences—and needs—of recovery at the individual and community level.

AN ANALYSIS OF AID

If inequity in disaster response and recovery is systemic, rather than the result of deliberate individual or group action, then how does it come about? This section looks at a selection of seemingly benign but high-impact ways that top-down responses to the storm by elite institutions produced or reproduced uneven vulnerability and low resilience.

Stakeholders versus vulnerable populations

About FEMA, I can tell you they came a few times. As a result of the hurricane we had cracks in the walls. FEMA didn't pay too much attention to that, they said it's personal, but it's Projects here so they [management of building] need to take care of it and FEMA isn't responsible. And we were registered. In general, let me tell you that when our houses were in management independently everything would be fixed instantly.

- Coney Island resident

One of the major dilemmas facing disaster aid is the mismatch between inherited everyday social and spatial categories, such as “homeowner” and “renter” or “Brooklyn” and “New Jersey,” and how disasters consistently cross and defy those systems of organization. Institutions whose daily activities do not include emergency response—from federal and state governments to educational centers to community-based organizations—have an overwhelming incentive to take the categories and jurisdictions they use in their everyday activities

and apply them to disaster relief. Hurricane Sandy was no exception. The problem is that this approach unjustifiably privileged some groups over others. In some cases, the decision was deliberate. For example, the first iteration of New Jersey's state action plan directed far more aid resources at homeowners than renters, when both were, and continue to be, homeless (Fair Share Housing Center 2013; Coalition for the Homeless 2013). In other cases, pre-existing categorizations meant that vulnerable populations were overlooked.



Photo “Occupy Sandy” by Victoria Walker licensed under CC BY-ND 2.0

For example, when an NYC university organized emergency aid for its resident population, it focused on undergraduate students on campus, but not those in campus faculty housing whose residents included small children, the elderly, and people

with disabilities. Using categories or jurisdictional boundaries created for non-crisis routines is efficient, but can exacerbate, or even create, disparity.

Definitions of crisis and effects on aid

This is three freaking months, if you haven't found a place to be warm in three freaking months you don't need the city's help; you've already figured it out. [...] At some point the responsibility of government has to stop somewhere and you as Joe Blow citizen need to figure out how to do your own thing.

- NYC government official

I mean recovery is a loaded word when you're talking about places that have been screwed over before the storm like Coney Island. There's not going to be a point where you come up and say 'all right, now the recovery is finished and it's good.' You've got 60,000 people living in high-rise housing projects without adequate services whether it is health care services or [building] sanitation services.

- Volunteer first responder

Different first response groups in NYC identified the main crises caused by Hurricane Sandy differently. Consistently, government officials made clear demarcations between storm effects and other, more systemic problems, focusing on evacuation successes and failures, immediate and short term sheltering logistics, fuel and transportation problems, changes in access to healthcare following the closure or evacuation of hospitals, and barriers to rebuilding (City of New York 2013b). In the city's After Action Report, for example, the identified areas of concern are all issues which started a few days before the storm, and can be addressed by technical fixes in the near future. And while city and state governments have devoted a substantial amount of planning efforts to long-term reconstruction after Sandy, the bulk of

these efforts have focused on protecting rather than changing the social status quo. The NYC Special Initiative for Rebuilding and Resiliency (SIRR), for example, proposes new developments in Manhattan to address the "shortage" of office space (City of New York 2013a).

However, advocate, grassroots, and community-based groups consistently saw Hurricane Sandy and its effects as a punctuation mark in a much longer, chronic crisis of wealth inequity and unequal access to resources. Income insecurity, a lack of access to education, unaffordable housing stock, and widespread debt -- the long-term trauma of poverty and insecurity -- are disasters in and of themselves (Erikson 1995). For many communities, "back to normal" does not mean recovery, but a return to

Different first response groups identified the main crises caused by Hurricane Sandy differently. Government officials made clear demarcations between storm effects and other systemic problems, while groups on the ground saw the storm as a punctuation mark in a much longer crisis.



Photo “Sailors assist with Hurricane Sandy clean-up.” by Official U.S. Navy Imagery licensed under CC BY 2.0

poverty and vulnerability. Thus, grassroots groups such as Alliance for a Just Rebuilding, a coalition of faith groups, labor unions, community groups, and policy and environmental organizations, frame recovery in terms of good jobs, affordable housing, renewable energy, accessible health care, and community consultation for recovery plans rather than returning New York City’s status quo (Alliance for a Just Rebuilding 2013).

The differences between the two genres of recovery concerns not only the type of aid, but also its timeframe. Government programs are characterized by deadlines for aid applications, implying that the crises began all at once on October 29, 2012, and that certain needs will end by the deadline. While some city and state recovery plans address what they see as long term problems in New York City, such as a lack of office stock, these are not framed as Sandy-related problems, but a sort of recovery “bonus,” and the underlying premise of elite responses is that New Yorkers are moving through the crisis at a similar rate. Yet, even for something as material as housing repairs, some people fled New York City after the storm and throughout the winter, and returned to flooded, mold-infested buildings six months later during the summer. If deadlines are needed for program efficiency, rolling deadlines or open enrollment would be more appropriate for these realities. Some grassroots and community-based organizations,

such as Occupy Sandy, see the recovery in terms of years and even generations to address systemic issues such as wealth inequity. This definition of recovery also extends the geographical area of a chronic disaster beyond hard hit areas into parts of New York City that remained dry during the storm, but that can be classified as vulnerable populations in an ongoing crisis.

This is not to say that government and other elite methods of organizing aid during Sandy were wantonly neglectful. Indeed, the trends outlined here are common across many disasters in various countries (Solnit 2010; Knowles 2012). This tale of two Sandys and the resulting dual genres of disaster aid are premised on long term, systemic inequities produced and reproduced by economic, social, cultural, and historical forces. Many government actors are aware of the systemic roots of the Two Sandys problem, both within and outside of disaster scenarios (Lu 2010). New York City can be a more sustainable city, and even a leader in the field, by rebuilding infrastructure, programs, and funding in ways that achieve dispersive equity by addressing uneven burdens of social, economic, and environmental harm for all neighborhoods and populations.

HOUSING: REBUILD, UNBUILD, OR BUILD BETTER?

Thank God they finally stopped running those commercials because I wanted to shoot the TV. 'Repair. Repair, rebuild, get home.' And so this is what people were doing. This is why they maxed out their saving accounts, their credit cards, their 401K. Everything that they could possibly pull from to get themselves back in their homes.

- Staten Island resident

The housing situation has been compounded. We have a housing problem period, in New York City, but now it's really compounded by homeless people. Now we have homeless people as a result of Sandy and we have a continuing shrinking affordable housing market. That's a disaster if I've ever known one. The next Mayor is going to have to address housing. And with a particular view of preventing climate change impact on that housing. So if they build exactly where they were before, that's pretty much Einstein's definition of insanity.

- Executive Director, environmental justice organization

Housing is a complex case of the Two Sandy problem because of the way the issue manifests in an ongoing debate—particularly on Staten Island—over whether rebuilding is the best strategy to meet people's present and future needs. There has been some success in overcoming the Two Sandy divide, but also lingering failure.

Rezoning and recovery

Some argue for redeveloping damaged structures in a more storm-resilient way, while others would prefer to limit rebuilding and development in flood-prone areas. State officials—at the urging of a number of residents—have been making the latter case, and the City of New York the former. As the state and the city negotiate over which areas should be eligible for redevelopment and which should return to open space, many residents remain in limbo, caught between clashing government visions of recovery.

The neighborhood of Oakwood Beach on Staten Island is a rare example of community members and government working together fruitfully. A group of nearly two hundred homeowners met

shortly after Sandy and collectively decided they wanted to move rather than rebuild. Together, they successfully lobbied for a government buyout of the neighborhood. Governor Cuomo declared their homes part of an “enhanced area” that the state would convert to a public park or wetlands to protect from future flooding and storm surge.

Soon after Governor Cuomo announced in January that he intended to buy out damaged houses (Kaplan 2013), hundreds of other homeowners along the South and East Shores of Staten Island formed groups to press for buyouts in their own areas. Yet, such aid is far less certain for these new groups in nearly every other devastated shorefront community on Staten Island: the buyouts have

recently been extended to Ocean Breeze (State of New York 2013), but New Dorp Beach, Midland Beach, and Crescent Beach, among others, have not yet been taken up on their petitions for buyouts. In these cases, it has proven difficult for community groups and government to transcend the Two Sandy divide.

These areas may only be eligible for New York City's alternative to the state buyouts, a plan that would enable, rather than prohibit, redevelopment. "The city is vehement about wanting to redevelop the waterfront," a state official explained in an

A legacy of challenges

Staten Island's confused, contradictory housing recovery process is only one way that the mishandling of post-disaster housing is creating an entirely new crisis for many New York City residents—including renters, NYCHA tenants, and immigrants, in addition to homeowners. A report by Strike Debt (2012) shortly after Sandy found that most aid to individuals occurred in the form of loans, and thus will "ultimately make long-term financial burden the precondition for 'recovery.'" Many homeowners SRL interviewed, some of whom were already "under water" on their mortgages, have incurred substantial debt to rebuild their homes. Others have gone into foreclosure, unable to afford mortgage payments in addition to paying rent for temporary housing. This temporary housing was required because the city declined FEMA trailers to house displaced people, and municipal programs housing displaced people in hotels recently ended.

Residents who chose to rebuild in flood-vulnerable areas face expensive elevation requirements and sharply increased insurance rates, particularly as national flood insurance subsidies are phased out under the Biggert-Waters Flood Insurance Reform Act of 2012. Costs remain uncertain, since the FEMA flood maps that determine insurance rates and rebuilding requirements are being revised, and final maps are not expected for at least another year at the time of this writing.

SRL interview. To accommodate this drive for development, the City's Build it Back program offers individual residents, as opposed to neighborhoods, an "acquisition for redevelopment" rather than a buyout. It remains unclear who will be eligible for this assistance. At the time of writing, only one home has been bought through the City program. Some who initially wanted to relocate have been unable to wait any longer for a place to live under either program, and have rebuilt or are returning to live in houses that are moldy or structurally damaged.

For renters, and those displaced from their homes, there is an acute lack of affordable housing. A survey of renters on Staten Island by Make the Road New York finds that rents have increased and that overcrowded apartments are more common since Sandy (report is forthcoming 2014). More residents are now living with mold that will produce long term health effects. Thus, conflicting policies and timelines, alongside a lack of communication, continues to contribute to delays and confusion. Housing recovery is now compounded by a "second Sandy" in the form of a financial crisis centered on debt-based aid, foreclosures, and steep insurance and rebuilding costs, as well as the health effects of living in substandard housing. For these populations, the effects of Sandy are as acute now as they were a year ago. Even if many homeowners possessed higher resilience in the immediate aftermath of Sandy, they are now in a significantly more vulnerable position for the next extreme weather event. All of our interviewees, regardless of their position, agreed that there will be a next time.

CLIMATE CHANGE: MITIGATION TO ADAPTATION

Climate change is now in the city's DNA.

- City government disaster relief officer

After Sandy, high profile figures in the public sphere suggested the storm would transform climate politics (Hansen 2012; Barrett 2012; Borenstein 2012). Yet, our interviews found that for the most part, people who were already concerned about climate change continued to be so, and those who were not, continued not to be even if they were persuaded that climate change played a role in the storm. Careful attention to the problem was largely restricted to government actors and other policy experts, with some exceptions among community groups and individuals that do not possess the same resources to make large scale changes to climate politics compared to municipal government and its allies. Global warming remains a looming threat to the city.

A failure to address greenhouse gas emissions

The Two Sandys phenomenon in climate politics is fostered by city government setting the agenda for the city's climate politics while failing to engage the broader population in the problem. After Sandy, this meant that the city's shift in emphasis to adaptation (efforts to limit NYC's vulnerability to climate change impacts) sidelined the fundamental need for the city to show leadership with regard to mitigation (reducing the magnitude of climate change itself). The mayor and city council still have a responsibility to reduce emissions of the greenhouse gases that contribute to climate change, but so far their actions have fallen far short of what was promised even in the city's own climate change plans (City of New York 2007).

In May 2007, Mayor Michael Bloomberg released an ambitious, multi-decade plan for the city called "PlaNYC 2030". The plan's top priorities were to help prevent or lessen the effects of global climate change by cutting the city's greenhouse gas emissions (mitigation), and, to a lesser extent, making changes in systems and infrastructure

in anticipation of global warming's effects (adaptation). No community group representative sat on either of the two climate-oriented panels that Bloomberg established, and environmental justice groups were hardly consulted during the important phases of drafting the plan (City of New York 2008; Rosan 2011). In the years after PlaNYC's release, the sustainability initiatives that gained the most attention—such as bike lanes, park improvements, and tree-planting—were debated with little reference to climate. Climate change as such began to fade from the public discourse, even as policy experts within government and in some institutes and NGOs stayed focused on the problem.

After Hurricane Sandy, most interviewees from policy-oriented sectors said that the storm had changed the conversation, putting climate change at the top of the public agenda. But we found little evidence of this, especially with respect to taking action to reduce New York's contribution to the global problem. The city's own Special Initiative for Rebuilding and Resiliency (SIRR) report

generally ignores the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (City of New York 2013a), even though SRL interviews with climate change experts demonstrate that mitigation and adaptation complement and enhance one another. Moreover, the two principal community-rooted responses to SIRR—one from the Alliance for a Just Rebuilding, and the other from the Sandy Regional Assembly—prioritized doing more for lower-income and non-white New Yorkers in the rebuilding process even when they also devoted space to reducing emissions (Alliance for a Just Rebuilding 2013; Sandy Regional Assembly 2012). A union representative reported in an interview that although change was on the minds of their organization’s members, jobs and healthcare would remain their top priorities. Technically, mitigation remains on the agenda, but it has drifted dangerously far from the spotlight.

Serious mitigation measures may pose a threat to powerful interests. Social scientists have found that when it comes to responsibility for emissions generated indirectly by consumption, emissions correlate closely to wealth (Chakravarty et al 2009). Counting emissions associated with airports also makes a big difference—especially in cities with large tourism industries. Putting a city like New

York in global perspective, the shift away from exploring ways of reducing the emissions for which NYC is responsible and towards safeguarding residents from flooding, looks like an abdication of responsibility to the wider world. The city’s emissions will continue to harm people in places like the Philippines and Bangladesh, even if efforts are made to protect the health and safety of local residents.

Many groups, like New York’s Urban Green Council, have advocated for combining adaptation and mitigation (Urban Green Council 2013a). Urban Green has also highlighted how New York University’s co-generation plant not only evinced resilience during the storm—the power stayed on in a number of key buildings when the main grid shut down—it also significantly cut the university’s carbon emissions by recycling energy (Urban Green Council 2013b). Broader social policy can also address mitigation in surprising ways. Policies like Mayor-elect Bill de Blasio’s proposed tax on New Yorkers earning half a million dollars or more could reduce what climate justice scholars call “luxury emissions” (Agarwal and Narain 1991) by reducing the consumption of the very wealthy.



The Two Sandys phenomenon in climate politics is fostered by city government setting the agenda for the city's climate politics while failing to engage the broader population in the problem.

Solutions from the grassroots

Transcending the Two Sandy problem could also mean combining the resources of government and elite groups with the creativity and energy of people and groups presently outside those circles. New Yorkers affected by Sandy, community groups, and some NGOs have understandably been preoccupied with engaging government agendas for rebuilding-- agendas with an almost exclusive focus on adaptation. This puts them in a reactive position. Nevertheless, some grassroots groups have seized the opportunity to engage creatively in a broader set of climate politics.

For example, Uprose, an environmental justice organization in Sunset Park, hosted a climate justice youth summit for young people of color in July, seeking to funnel discontent with extreme weather's impact into a broader campaign on climate. Elizabeth Yeampierre, Uprose's executive director, said that poor people of color were disproportionately affected by the direct and indirect impacts of Sandy and need to take leadership, not just in building a community-wide movement, but also in pushing the US climate movement in general to be more diverse (SRL interview).

Another example is El Puente, an environmental justice organization based in Williamsburg that helped organize an Encuentro in Puerto Rico in the Spring of 2013 to take advantage of Puerto Rico's diaspora to apply long-term political pressure on politicians to take stronger action on curbing emissions. The focus was on organizing in Chicago, New York, and Miami, where the Puerto Rican community has leverage with the Democratic Party.

A third example has been the widespread work within Occupy Sandy to create a grassroots movement to address climate change in terms of wealth disparity and the fossil fuel industry, most concretely with the Wildfire initiative (a long-term community-based social justice organization) which was founded in Far Rockaway).

These small groups confront challenges in engaging with the large-scale politics of preventing the worst impacts of climate change. But leadership from below is as important as leadership from above. Indeed, it will prove crucial to forcing governments, corporations, and large civil society groups to take urgent measures to help prevent climate change.



Photo "Breezy Point, NY - After Hurricane Sandy" by Christopher D. Sondi licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

CONCLUSION

This white paper has illustrated some of the diverse ways that two competing logics of recovery—the Two Sandys phenomenon—have shaped the Hurricane’s aftermath in New York City. The Two Sandys problem is systemic. It does not follow from individual choices and intentions, but rather from large-scale, deeply entrenched social structures. This means that while short-term responses to the disaster are vital to alleviate immediate suffering, true solutions to the Two Sandys problem must be systemic solutions. This requires shifting the discussion away from arguments that “the government messed up,” towards the reasons elite aid across disasters and throughout the last several decades tends to respond in ways that often do not line up with the needs of people on the ground.

Thus, this white paper moves away from the countless conceivable technical fixes for disaster towards something that has received much less attention: the cultural tendencies to understand disaster in two fundamentally different ways. If we make progress on this cultural macro-level, the technical specifics will follow. Uneven vulnerability and a lack of distributive equity is the prime issue for disaster planning and response to address. Addressing unequal access to education becomes an appropriate disaster plan. Building and maintaining access to affordable housing becomes a disaster plan.

This paper has also sought to demonstrate that the less visible Sandy manifested in all manner of grassroots leadership and organizing—a chaotic but energetic series of responses. This warrants more attention. Grassroots and community organizing is not just an expression of frustration and suffering, but also a source of hope for a more equitable recovery and more widespread resiliency. This will mean addressing the structural roots of inequality that Superstorm Sandy helped lay bare, and which elements of the recovery helped reproduce them. Our hope is that telling A Tale of Two Sandys can all help all New Yorkers better understand their situation and clarify their options.



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