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Hurricane Sandy Hints at the Perils of Global Catastrophe

By [Seth Baum](#)

It takes a lot to bump the United States election out of the national spotlight one week before election day. Hurricane Sandy was that big, a direct blow to the most heavily populated region of the country. But all the attention going to the northeastern U.S. has a sad consequence: we're overlooking the devastation Sandy caused in Haiti. This situation offers an ominous warning of what could happen if catastrophe were to affect the entire planet.

This story is very personal for me. I live in New York City, and I do research on [global catastrophes](#). While my neighborhood (Harlem) never lost electricity, this past Thursday and Friday I ventured to the area of Lower Manhattan that did. The area was much quieter than normal – clearly many people had left town. Of the remaining local residents, some reported enjoying the simpler life of “camping at home” and candlelit bars, while others were sick of it and wanted things back to normal. I even saw one woman frantically trying to care for an elderly neighbor who had run out of food and lacked the strength to go outside without her building's elevator. This is a difficult situation, but as I know from my research, it could have been a lot worse.

Meanwhile in Haiti, things may be worse. It seems sadly inevitable that we have the worst storm to hit the northeastern U.S. in a very long time, and it is disaster-stricken Haiti that may have been hit the hardest. At least 60 [Haitians have died](#) from Sandy. The U.S. has more deaths, but these are spread across a much larger affected population. Meanwhile Haiti may now have [200,000 homeless](#) from Sandy, many of whom were still living in makeshift homes built following the 2010 earthquake. Its cholera outbreak [could be worsened](#) by the floods. But [most worrisome](#) is the large loss of crops. Haiti has an agriculture-oriented economy. The crop damage is [prompting concerns](#) about food shortages. For all the destruction in the U.S., it's not at risk of running out of food.

Despite the dire situation in Haiti, U.S. aid efforts are concentrated on the U.S. side of the storm. A [giant benefit concert](#) was held for the American Red Cross. Other domestic aid charities have also reported a spike in donations, whereas international charities [report receiving much less](#). It is quite reasonable for the U.S. to focus on helping its own country, but it is nonetheless unfortunate that this focus could leave Haitians to suffer.

Haiti should get the aid it needs. The U.S. should even be able to help. Yes, we have our own recovery to attend to, but we are a large and wealthy country, most of which was not hit by the storm. Even if the U.S. does not contribute, the rest of the world could, just as it did following the 2010 Haiti earthquake and every other major disaster of recent years. The propensity for countries to help each other out in times of great need – even when those countries are otherwise at odds – is among the most uplifting features of the international system.

But a global catastrophe could thwart the international assistance paradigm. Just as the U.S. is now less

able to aid Haiti, a global-scale event could leave each country devastated and with nowhere to turn for help. Each country would have to attempt recovery on its own. Each region within a country may be left to its own devices. Without external assistance, the challenge of recovery would be much more difficult.

No hurricane, however large, will ever cause so great of a global catastrophe. But other events could [1]. Some come from nature, including supervolcano eruptions and large asteroid impacts. But these events are relatively rare, happening no more often than once every 50,000 years. The most urgent come from human activity, including nuclear war and pandemics. Pandemics could come from nature or from bioengineering, but either type of pathogen would be spread by human trade and travel. The worst-case nuclear war and pandemic scenarios are plenty bad enough to prevent international and inter-regional aid. Other processes like climate change and biodiversity loss can cause global disruptions and help trigger global catastrophes.

In the event of a global catastrophe, each region could be left on its own. There would be no benefit concert, no international aid. If a region runs out of food supplies, its residents simply start dying. Rural Haiti may actually fare better than urban New York City, since Haitians are able to grow their own food. New York City without food supplies is a scary thought. A societal breakdown and collapse of law and order is possible, though also not inevitable. Research on the effects of resource scarcities on conflict and violence paints a mixed picture: sometimes scarcities bring more conflict, but not always [2]. Either way, this sort of global catastrophe poses challenges that go far beyond those of Hurricane Sandy.

Fortunately, we do have tools we can use to rise to the challenges of global catastrophe. Building local self-sufficiency can be crucial if external aid becomes unavailable. Preparations like stockpiling food and water help people endure catastrophes of all sizes. [Research](#) on specific threats and cross-cutting issues can clarify what we're up against and point to smarter opportunities to both prevent global catastrophes and recover from them if they occur. And experience with local catastrophes can often be extrapolated to the global scale, as is the case with Hurricane Sandy. As the recovery from Sandy proceeds, we should work towards building society's resilience to both local and global catastrophes.

References:

[1] Bostrom, Nick and Milan Ćirković, 2008. [Global Catastrophic Risks](#). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[2] Nordås, Ragnhild and Nils Petter Gleditsch, 2007. [Climate change and conflict](#). Political Geography, vol. 26, pages 627-638.