

Level Up Audio Project – Episode 1

Resilience and Environmental Justice: CAUSE

- Voice-over Welcome to *Level Up*, a FEMA audio project for practitioners where communities share their stories about building resilience and reducing risk from a disaster.
- So often we focus on the ability of our infrastructure to survive in disasters, but at the end of the day it is the resilience of our people that matters most. In this episode, we speak with Lucas Zucker from CAUSE about how planners and policymakers can reduce the impact of disasters on their most vulnerable communities by acknowledging them, listening to them, and inviting them to the decision-making table.
- Lucas Zucker, CAUSE My name is Lucas Zucker. I'm the policy and communications director of CAUSE, the Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy.
- We do community organizing for social, economic and environmental justice, in the central coast of California, particularly Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties.
- Asia King, FEMA Thanks for joining us today. Let's start by hearing about CAUSE's work.
- Lucas Zucker, CAUSE CAUSE really got started out of the living-wage movement. We're advocating for a living wage and better working conditions for low-wage workers.
- We do everything from immigrants' rights to affordable housing. We also, a little over a decade ago, started working on environmental justice.
- Asia King, FEMA And what do you mean by low-wage workers?
- Lucas Zucker, CAUSE Our region, a lot of our membership is agricultural workers, as well as workers in the hospitality and service industries.
- That's everyone from farm workers working in the fields, picking strawberries, lemons, to workers cleaning hotels as housekeepers, to working in the back of the house of restaurants, individual housekeepers or caregivers, or gardeners in, in private homes.
- Asia King, FEMA Can you tell me about what the central coast is like? Because when I think of this area, I think of beautiful beaches and small college towns, vineyards and wineries and beautiful hillside mansions. I don't necessarily think about how these beautiful places are actually maintained. What else should I be considering? Why does CAUSE do work in what seems to be such a magical place?

Lucas Zucker, CAUSE People imagine our region, they think of driving through and seeing all the beautiful scenery and don't often think of the people, right? So, so beautiful vineyards means farm workers who are, who are picking those grapes, right? Beautiful beaches means immigrant workers who are cleaning those hotel rooms. Both Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties are both majority people of color population and have some of the highest percentages of, of undocumented immigrants in the State of California, as well as the country.

The reality is that immigrant labor is, is often really kept invisible, right? Whether that's farm workers, kind of isolated in rural areas, or that's domestic workers who kind of come in to clean a hotel room while you're not there. Or the back-of-the-house restaurant workers, washing dishes and cooking food, that you don't see because you see the waiters in the front of the house.

That work is often “invisibilized” and made unseen, under-valued. And yet those immigrant workers are some of the people most impacted by disaster.

Voice-over So in order for this beautiful place to exist and be economically viable, laborers need to be able to work and get paid, and all of that got disrupted by the Thomas Fire, a massive wildfire that affected Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties in December 2017 and January 2018. It destroyed over 1,000 structures and caused over \$2.2 billion in damages.

Asia King, FEMA I understand that CAUSE only started to be involved in disaster relief after the Thomas Fire. Can you tell me how that came to be?

Lucas Zucker, CAUSE When that hit our region, we at first didn't think of ourselves as people who needed to be first responders. We thought of, “Well, there's a disaster response plan ... that's not what we do ... that's not our area of expertise.” And what we saw is all these areas of work that we work in, whether that's workers' rights or housing or immigrants' rights or transportation or environmental health, all being impacted by this disaster. And particularly our communities often being left behind or neglected by the official response.

I think of it this way, I don't think it's always a malicious thing, but I think when the, you know, when the Titanic is sinking and you've got a certain amount of lifeboats, right? There are people who get lifeboats last. I think the people who get lifeboats last in our communities are the ones who are often most invisible, the ones who are often most disconnected from government agencies or a civil society.

Voice-over Lucas is right: disaster response agencies, and FEMA in particular, require disaster survivors to present social security numbers, housing deeds, rental agreements, and other documents to receive assistance. Financial assistance is dependent on residency status. This can mean that someone who is not a resident, someone who can't prove their home occupancy status, may not receive any disaster aid at all.

- Lucas Zucker, CAUSE When you think about natural disaster, the way it impacts outdoor workers, like farm workers, construction workers, those are some of the most heavily hit, as well as some of those hospitality workers. When you think about basically the complete shutdown of tourism during a time of disaster, or the evacuation of wealthy homes that might be right on the coast or in the hillsides, prone to wildfire. Those workers end up out of work.
- So you've got millions of people who are already often, often living paycheck-to-paycheck because of the low wages that they're paid in our region, particularly compared to the high cost of living, who then in a disaster are really left out of the resources to be able to bounce back or make it through.
- Asia King, FEMA Yeah that sounds like a huge problem. What can local communities do to help provide financial assistance to these unrepresented workers who might be impacted by a disaster?
- Lucas Zucker, CAUSE If you're in a community where you know that you have a large immigrant population, whether it's a community that's prone to wildfires or hurricanes, I would set up the infrastructure of an UndocuFund now.
- Voice-over The UndocuFund is a collective effort by non-profit organizations, advocacy groups, and local communities to ensure that undocumented individuals and families impacted by natural disasters have the support they need. The Fund assists individuals and families who have lost their homes, wages, or employment due to natural disasters and who are excluded from FEMA assistance and other federally funded safety net programs. CAUSE developed the 805 UndocuFund for Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties to help affected families access other community resources to provide some economic relief.
- Lucas Zucker, CAUSE UndocuFund is, was essentially a bank account – a bank account and a lot of volunteers. And so, so I think setting up the infrastructure really is creating that account.
- I would set up the infrastructure of an Undocufund now and that could be through, say, a local community foundation. Ideally through, immigrant-serving organizations that already have the relationships with the community, where people feel safe trusting them, are going to be able to easily find out about those services.
- Even being able to copy a lot of our model from the UndocuFund in Sonoma County, it still took us several months to set up the 805 UndocuFund.
- Creating your intake form and creating your system for processing people and creating your formula for allocating funds, that takes this administrative work when people need relief now.
- Think, in the moment of a disaster, there's really a surge of interest and public support. And so, there are people wanting to donate from all over. And if that UndocuFund is already set up, then in that moment where a disaster's hitting the national news, people know where to donate.
- If it takes you 2 months to set up an UndocuFund, then by the time that you're open for donations, a lot of that attention has passed and a lot of potential donors, you know have already given somewhere else.
- Asia King, FEMA So it sounds like UndocuFund is a great way to help vulnerable populations during and after disasters, but it isn't addressing the larger problem of mitigating harm before a disaster. What needs to happen in the policy and planning world?

Lucas Zucker, CAUSE Ultimately, at the Federal or State levels, we need disaster relief that's eligible to people regardless of their immigration status. And we know that, in so many very disaster-prone areas and so many groups of people that are hardest hit by disaster, are large numbers of immigrants who are, who are excluded from some of our basic safety net.

Voice-over Disaster response is complex. UndocuFund addresses the financial burden of a disaster, while local hazard mitigation plans address impacts before they happen. As part of the local hazard mitigation planning process, FEMA requires communities to consider vulnerable populations.

Vulnerable populations could be outdoor farm workers, homeless populations, migrant workers, children, elderly, or anyone that has trouble speaking or understanding English.

Lucas Zucker, CAUSE A lot of it does come down to planning.

And so there's a bill in the State legislature right now, and it's about cultural competence in disaster planning. And it's really making sure that when counties are doing their disaster planning that they're doing the culturally competent process that is using all the tools available to engage marginalized communities that often aren't at the table when that planning is done. Anyone who works in any kind of urban planning knows that, you know your city could be 60 percent Latino and the people who show up at that forum are going to be 90 percent white.

Asia King, FEMA Yes, that is unfortunately very common. What can we do about that? How can we make sure communities of color and low-income communities are incorporated into the planning process?

Lucas Zucker, CAUSE That can take the form of targeted town halls in certain neighborhoods or focus groups with certain communities, partnerships with local community organizations that particularly represent those communities.

Some of those community organizations might really not think of themselves as disaster organizations. They might be worker's rights organizations that work with farm workers and they've never thought about, you know, what would happen if a, if a wildfire impacted, thousands of farm workers throughout the region, right? And you know, if there was a meeting on county disaster planning, they wouldn't choose to show up, right? But if there's an explicit effort to reach out to them and say, 'hey, we want to think about how farm workers are going to be impacted by, by a potential natural disaster in this area, and will you help us kind of come up with a plan?' Then I think there's just this greater level of collaboration and greater levels mixing the , the 'lived experience' knowledge that people have, with the technical expertise, that planners or engineers or environmental scientists might have.

Asia King, FEMA
 So, I'm hearing two things. One, that when we do our planning, we need to take a much broader perspective on how land use and development affects not just the people who will purchase the property but the community as a whole. And it also sounds like what you're saying is when we do our risk assessments, for our hazard mitigation plans, we can't just look at the building or the hazards that affect the buildings. More importantly, we need to look at the flow of people through the building, meaning 'who inhabits this building during the day versus at night, who drives to this building, and where do those individuals live, and how is their transportation and employment connected?' It just sounds like our view of risk and vulnerability has been so limited to land use and we really need to open that concept up, open it up to flows of money to economy, to food, and to transportation. It's just much more interconnected than how we're currently dealing with it.

Lucas Zucker, CAUSE
 That is a perfect way to describe it. Yeah, I like to think of our communities are like these webs, right, of huge amounts of interconnection, often with people that we don't even see, right? People who, whose work has been made invisible, whose lives had been made invisible. And, when you pull on any string of that web, all these other pieces start moving too, right? And so when we are looking at a very limited way at land use, at physical infrastructure and thinking about resilience in that way versus kind of social resilience and the way that our communities are interconnected through work, through recreation, through life, through all of these different patterns, we start to see that there's no way you could just map and just say, 'Oh, well, we just only have to think about this, this parcel of land here because that's in the, in the mapped hazard area.'

Asia King, FEMA
 And do you have any recommendations on how to take a 'whole community' approach? How can take what is every aspect of our lives and put it into a plan? What does that mean? What does that look like?

Lucas Zucker, CAUSE
 More than anything, it starts with talking to people.
 'If you had to, had to evacuate suddenly, where would you go? If you had to find out information about a sudden disaster, you know, where would you find out about it?'
 'What does your day-to-day look like?'
 'What, you know, what are the ways that you might be exposed to, to hazards?' And it's really marrying that experiential knowledge with, with the technical knowledge.
 We often say in kind of academic circles that the worst things that happen in disaster are just, you know, exacerbating the existing inequalities. But the beautiful thing about that is that what that says is that the best way to deal with those impacts of disaster isn't through some deep ability to kind of predict every possible impact we could have. It's really going, what is the existing inequalities, that we have now? And how are those things just going to be made worse by disaster?
 If those kind of low wage workers who are having housing struggles, were being listened to in the first place, you know, then that would have built a more resilient community.

Asia King, FEMA
 So say I'm a city planner or an emergency manager. I have to write a hazard mitigation plan to make the community safer. What's the number one thing I should remember to do to ensure that I'm engaging everyone in the community?

Lucas Zucker, CAUSE I'd say really try to 'think outside the box' about, resilience is not just physical infrastructure and property protection, but social resilience and, and health and people's livelihoods and access to information.

Everything in a community is connected, and that people have a lot of 'lived experience' that is incredibly valuable. And although hazard mapping and those, kind of, technical understandings are really important, they have to be combined with essentially a second layer, and that second layer is the experiential knowledge of the social fabric of your community that people do have. They are experts in their own lives and you've just got to talk to them.

Voice-over To recap, Lucas's top three tips are:

Integrate cultural awareness into your hazard mitigation and emergency planning documents. Plan based on how people use and move through a community, in addition to what is built on the land.

Contribute real resources and funding toward engaging the community and learning about their lived experiences. So take time to listen.

Remember that existing issues of inequality are made worse by disasters, so work toward improving people's lives and reducing inequity in non-disaster times. Establish an Undocufund NOW.

Voice-over If you are interested in learning more about CAUSE's work, please feel free to visit their website at: CAUSENOW.ORG.

If you are interested in learning more about hazard mitigation, go to FEMA.gov and search "hazard mitigation."

Voice-over This episode of *Level Up* was produced by FEMA Region IX's Mitigation Division and *Resilience Action Partners*. Your host is Asia King. Many thanks to Lucas Zucker from CAUSE for taking the time to talk to us about Environmental Justice.