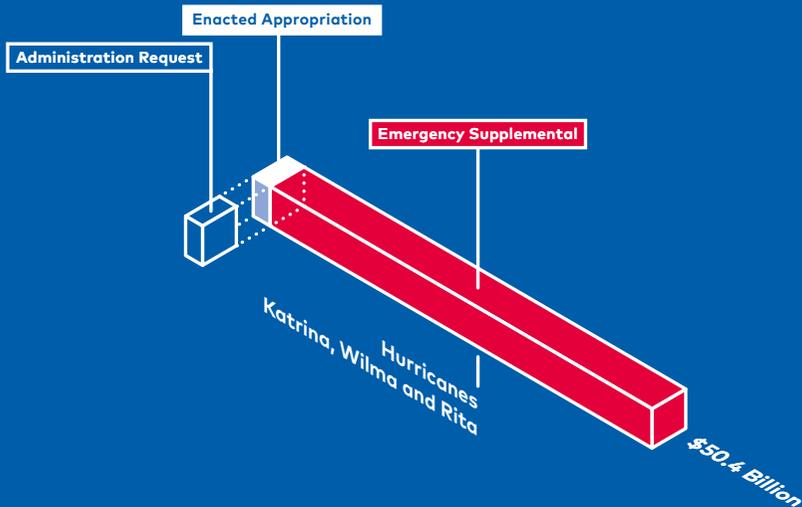




Disaster Relief Fund 2005



When the world ends, storms surge over the country and the global economy collapses, one should be prepared: survival kits and guides promise professional preparation in case of emergency. Self-organization is the watchword of the hour. Whereas in the circles of the so-called »preppers« a politically right-wing-oriented retreat to the individual in the »fight for survival« is sometimes propagated, a second line of »reaction preparedness« amid ecological and economic emergencies is explicitly concerned with social commitment. Not least of all, digital social networks often facilitate the coordination of large-scale relief efforts. From a small group of scattered helpers, an overwhelming sign of solidarity can emerge overnight or within just a few hours.

Whereas in the early 20th century disaster relief was the responsibility of the state, now it is being increasingly delegated to civil society. This development does not have an exclusively positive effect. The importance of spontaneously formed relief operations by volunteers is an ambivalent development. The crisis confronts us with a dilemma: on the one hand, there are more and more citizens' initiatives committed to providing people with services of general interest and able to promote cohesion in society; on the other, though many of these initiatives are successful, they legitimize the state's withdrawal from the social sphere by proving that people can survive in a self-organized manner. This problem can be found in various areas of society in which citizens' initiatives take over former state responsibilities, from organizing communally administered day-care centers in Poland to rescuing refugees in the Mediterranean.

Since the beginning of the 1970s, the industrialized nations have been plagued by ever-greater shocks caused by economic crises. In 1971, in response to rapidly falling profits in industry and the collapse of oil prices, President Nixon decoupled the US dollar from the gold standard and linked it to speculative gains in the stock market. Since then, we have lived in the era of financial capital, in which crisis-ridden states have regularly invested large sums of money to cushion the banks. In order to balance their financial deficit, these same states have cut back considerably on social spending. We are therefore experiencing the crisis mainly as a surge in austerity, or the shortage of public spending on services of general interest ranging from health to education to pensions.

Therefore, one can only speak of the creative potential of crisis if social initiatives not only work palliatively to alleviate the symptoms of the crisis but also find effective ways of sustainably attacking its roots—the state and its handling of capital—forcing it to transform itself.

How we deal with this dynamic of crisis depends on the current political situation. Since the 1970s, we have been experiencing above all the spectacular failure of neoliberal attempts at a solution. It remains to be seen whether alternative, left-wing ways out of the crisis can be found in the coming years.