



On the Ground in Puerto Rico

A Population Left Behind, A Monumental Task Ahead

By Enrique Fernández-Toledo, Erin Cohan, Winnie Stachelberg, Angela Hanks, Laura Jimenez, Connor Maxwell, Cathleen Kelly, Michael Madowitz, Kristina Costa, and Brent Woolfork July 11, 2018

Earlier this year, the Center for American Progress created the Puerto Rico Relief and Economic Policy Initiative.¹ The program was created to focus on immediate-term hurricane response efforts for Puerto Rico, with an eye toward long-term planning, economic recovery, and solvency. CAP's commitment to Puerto Rico is permanent and institutional. In order to inform and expand our work, a delegation of 14 CAP staff visited Puerto Rico in late May to gain a firsthand understanding of the issues and challenges facing the island and its residents.

It was an intensive learning and emotional experience for every member of our delegation. We returned with invaluable new insights and a renewed sense of urgency and purpose to serve as a resource and ally to the people of Puerto Rico.

Our trip agenda was ambitious and challenging, and we set out with the following goals: to visit municipalities across the island that had been devastated by hurricanes Irma and Maria; to meet with community leaders; to visit community-based organizations providing direct services to Puerto Ricans; and to meet with government officials, policymakers, activists, and experts in many of the fields in which CAP will pursue policy work. Our visit allowed us to witness firsthand the creative and courageous response to the crisis by brave individuals and hard-working, close-knit communities. In all, our delegation participated in more than 30 distinct events and meetings during its visit to Puerto Rico.

We learned not only about the magnitude and depth of the destruction unleashed by Hurricane Maria, but also about the terrible and very real cost in pain and suffering that the people of Puerto Rico have had to endure due to an unacceptably slow and insufficient federal response to the emergency needs of this population of American citizens. Furthermore, it was abundantly clear that Puerto Rico continues to face severe structural, public policy, economic, and fiscal challenges; island residents faced these challenges well before Maria made its devastating landing and will continue to face them absent effective policy responses.²

Taking in Maria's destruction across Puerto Rico

Our delegation traveled to Toa Baja, a municipality located in the northern coastal plains of the island, just west of San Juan, and home to roughly 78,000 people. We visited the Villa Calma community, a sector of the Ingenio neighborhood of Toa Baja located in what once was a sugar cane plantation. It is home to roughly 1,000 low-income people and is low-lying and thus prone to flooding. There, the delegation met with Carmen Milagros “Milly” Chévere, an extraordinary community leader. When Hurricane Maria caused a wall of floodwater to rise to the tops of roofs in her community, Chévere led more than 350 residents to the safety of a public school building. She broke open the gates so residents could take cover in classrooms, where, for four days, they survived on food from the school lunchroom, before being discovered by government first responders. The community itself has since organized its own recovery efforts.

The Villa Calma community served our delegation lunch, cooked in a solar-powered community kitchen that, following the hurricane, was built by volunteers to serve the community and reconstruction workers. We were joined by the mayor of Toa Baja, Bernardo Márquez García, who shared his own perspective on recovery efforts and the federal response. He also discussed what additional steps are needed, including dredging the Rio de la Plata. The lack of adequate maintenance of the river was one of the causes of the flood that nearly drowned Villa Calma and some other Toa Baja communities.

CAP staff also visited the municipality of Loíza, a town on Puerto Rico's northeastern coast, located a short distance east of San Juan and Carolina, with a population of 26,000. It was founded by formerly enslaved Africans during Spanish colonial times and is home to one of the island's largest Afro-Puerto Rican populations. There, we met with a local community leader, Modesta Irizarry, and with ASPIRA Puerto Rico's executive director, Adalexis Ríos. Irizarry and Ríos showed our colleagues the extent of the local damage from Maria and shared community-led efforts to rebuild their lives. Irizarry also explained how systemic racism against Afro-Puerto Ricans perpetuates housing, unemployment, and education problems in Loíza. To many residents, Hurricane Maria merely exacerbated long-standing issues and revealed them to the global community for the first time.

Members of the team also visited Playita, a low-income and low-lying San Juan community situated on the edge of a lagoon that was severely flooded during Maria. Playita is in the east part of Santurce, San Juan's largest and most populated district. Flooding was exacerbated as powerful pumps sucked floodwaters out of the nearby higher-income neighborhood of Ocean Park and deposited the water into the lagoon.³ Many residents of Playita have received little or no federal aid because they could not produce home titles or because their houses were deemed too structurally unsound to rebuild.⁴

We also traveled to the mountain municipality of Morovis, about an hour west of San Juan and home to 31,000 residents. We met with Mayor Carmen Maldonado González, who shared the harrowing stories of destruction and survival in her town as well as the efforts that her constituents and local government are undertaking for reconstruction. González took us to see a destroyed hydroponic farm that, before Maria, provided 50 jobs for Morovis residents. In the next few months, her municipality will be working to rebuild it and hire most, if not all, of its former workers.

Speaking with affected Puerto Ricans

Our delegation visited Caño Martín Peña, a tidal channel that runs through the middle of San Juan. Over the years, the channel has narrowed due to pollution, debris, and silt buildup, creating a dangerous environment for nearby residents, including a frequent and disturbing flow of sewage-infused water throughout the entire area.⁵ We met with representatives from Proyecto Enlace, an impressive community-led effort focused on urban, ecological, social, and cultural redevelopment.⁶ Enlace follows a model of equitable development, resiliency, and participatory democracy and engages local residents in its work. These communities lack basic infrastructure and face public health and safety challenges directly associated with the environmental degradation of this ecosystem, which has only worsened following the recent storms. During Maria, more than 1,000 homes in the community surrounding Caño Martín Peña suffered significant damages. By investing in the restoration of the surrounding ecology and much-needed infrastructure, Enlace is working hard to transform that hardship into an opportunity for economic development and increased resiliency.⁷

We also traveled to the municipality of Adjuntas, located on the island's central mountain range and home to nearly 18,000 residents. There, we visited Casa Pueblo, a community-based organization that focuses on sustainability and resilience while protecting the environment.⁸ During the aftermath of Maria, Casa Pueblo and its volunteers were first responders in Adjuntas, setting out on foot in order to get to needy residents; using their solar radio station—the only operational radio following the storm—to communicate; and, for weeks, providing use of their satellite phone so residents could get in touch with their loved ones.

Casa Pueblo is continuing to help the residents of Adjuntas and surrounding areas achieve complete sustainability through alternative sources of energy—especially solar. We had lunch at a local lechonera that had been all but destroyed by Maria but has been rebuilt with support from Casa Pueblo, who helped to make it entirely solar-powered. We also visited a local barbershop where Casa Pueblo helped to install solar panels, lowering the shop's power costs to around \$5 per month and thus enabling the small-business owner to continue operations throughout the recent blackouts.

Learning from government officials, activists, and community leaders

Throughout the week, our delegation also met with several government officials, policymakers, and policy experts. We met with the mayor of San Juan, Carmen Yulín Cruz, and learned more about the hardships that the city's residents faced in the immediate aftermath of the storms as well as Cruz's experience interacting with various federal agencies. She outlined the titanic response by citizens, local nonprofits, and her own city government to alleviate the suffering and commence the rebuilding process.

We visited the Capitol, where we spent the morning meeting with members of the Puerto Rico Legislative Assembly, including members of leadership, from both chambers and the two main political parties—the New Progressive Party and the Popular Democratic Party. We heard about the challenges that continue to face the Puerto Rican people, from an insufficient and slow federal response to the hurricane to ongoing issues resulting from the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA)—the federal law enacted by Congress in 2016 as an attempt to address Puerto Rico's fiscal problems.⁹ Among other provisions, the law created the Financial Oversight and Management Board (FOMB), a body composed of unelected members appointed by the U.S. president from a list of candidates submitted by Congress; it is tasked with the oversight of fiscal decisions for the island. The oversight board remains unpopular among both Puerto Rican residents and elected officials.¹⁰

In addition, members of our delegation met with the Puerto Rico Department of Housing to discuss the department's plans to spend the first tranche of the \$20 billion of Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.¹¹ Community advocates and mayors have expressed deep concerns that the department only allowed 15 days for public comment on the draft plan to spend the initial \$1.5 billion of the CDBG-DR funds. Based on disaster rebuilding needs and priorities on the ground, this timeframe is insufficient for communities, grassroots groups, and mayors to carefully review and comment on the plan.

CAP staff also met with officials from the Puerto Rico Institute of Statistics (PRIS) to get an overview of the quantity and quality of available data resources. We gained insight into how Puerto Rico's official statistics are collected, where individual data sets are housed, and some of the challenges that researchers are facing outside the commonwealth.¹² We also spent time with representatives from the workforce division of the Department of Economic Development and Commerce of Puerto Rico and from the Center for a New Economy—a think tank focused on economic development in Puerto Rico—in order to discuss their latest economic policy research and analysis and to find ways to work together. Finally, members of our delegation met with representatives from the Puerto Rico Energy Commission (PREC), an independent and specialized public regulator of the island's energy sector, which is under threat of dissolution due to a proposal by Puerto Rico Gov. Ricardo Rosselló.¹³

Several members of our delegation attended meetings focused on civil rights and policing, where they were joined by Puerto Rico's bar association, the Colegio de Abogados de Puerto Rico; the Puerto Rico chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU); and Puerto Rico-U.S. relations experts from the political science department of the University of Puerto Rico. CAP staff also met with the local American Federation of Teachers (AFT) chapter, Asociación de Maestros, and officials from the Puerto Rico Department of Education to discuss decades of dysfunction in Puerto Rico's educational systems; the need for thoughtful, accountable rebuilding; and the desperate need for human talent on the island.

Our delegation sat down with experts from the Legal Aid Clinic of the University of Puerto Rico to discuss the barriers faced by those in need of federal disaster assistance as they attempt to access disaster support from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).¹⁴ And we met with Puerto Rico's premier independent investigative journalism institute, Centro de Periodismo Investigativo, as well as representatives from the Environmental Law Clinic of the University of Puerto Rico and Conservación ConCiencia, a local nonprofit organization that combines community organizing with science-based ecological conservation efforts.

The road ahead

In the future, CAP plans to develop concrete policies to address the major challenges and opportunities that our delegation was exposed to during its visit. Over the course of the week, the following key themes emerged:

- **The colonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico is not working.** Despite strong and conflicting opinions on how to address the issue, there is consensus that Puerto Rico's current relationship with the United States is the source of decades of challenges that were only further exacerbated by these massive natural disasters.
- **Resources are not getting to the people who need them most.** Due to a variety of factors, this appears to be a combination of inaction by the Trump administration and Puerto Rico's central government. In addition, FEMA and other agencies tasked with providing federal aid have been ineffective on the ground because of language barriers, unclear criteria, and arduous amounts of paperwork that have prevented people from receiving the critical resources they need in order to survive and rebuild. Funding and material resources need to get to mayors and community-based organizations who have consistently acted as direct and immediate service providers to the people they represent.

- **PROMESA is having major consequences.** The control board is unpopular for a variety of reasons, including lack of accountability and transparency. Many of the people we met with expressed frustration that the economic recovery plan appears to be overly optimistic and generic and misses key opportunities to address challenges specific to Puerto Rico. Addressing these consequences is important, as requirements in the PROMESA statute suggest that the relationship between Puerto Rico and the Financial Oversight Management Board (FOMB) will continue for many years to come. Members of the civil rights community are also alarmed that courts have used PROMESA to place dozens of civil rights cases on hold, purportedly, in order to provide the commonwealth with breathing room as it recovers from the financial crisis.¹⁵
- **Puerto Rico is not ready for hurricane season.** Hurricane season officially began on June 1, putting people across the island on edge. Many homes, schools, and businesses have yet to be repaired, and the island electricity grid is still highly vulnerable to outages. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) forecasts that this year’s hurricane season is likely to be “near- or above-normal,” with the potential for up to four major hurricanes.¹⁶ Efforts to rebuild homes, the electricity grid, roads, and other infrastructure will need to take into account more powerful hurricanes and heat waves, a rise in sea level, and flooding fueled by climate change.
- **Women are the leaders of the recovery in Puerto Rico.** Everywhere we went, we heard heroic stories of women putting their own safety, bodies, mental health, and personal finances at risk to help save others. Their strength in the face of unimaginable adversity left an impression on our entire delegation.
- **Inequality is an entrenched problem in Puerto Rico.** Economic and racial inequality have existed in Puerto Rico for decades and were only worsened by Hurricane Maria. We heard repeatedly that the storm exposed and exacerbated the deep poverty and inequality on the island—problems that have been ignored for far too long.

Shortly after we returned from Puerto Rico, Harvard University released a study that projected that approximately 4,645 people have died because of Hurricane Maria.¹⁷ We were incredibly heartbroken, but not surprised, to hear what we already knew based on speaking to dozens of Puerto Ricans: Thousands died in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria due to a lack of and/or interruption of critical, life-saving services. Much of this devastation and death was avoidable, and unless we continue fighting for the people of Puerto Rico, we are all complicit. Now, as the current hurricane season picks up, we do not have time to waste.

We saw and admired the tremendous strength, resilience, and steely determination of the Puerto Rican people to overcome the incredible challenges that they face daily—some man-made, many not. We left Puerto Rico saddened by the pain of its people and outraged by the federal government’s neglect.

But we also left with a strong sense of commitment and determination to help make a difference in our fellow citizens’ futures. CAP will continue its work developing bold progressive policies to help Puerto Rico; to advocate alongside and on behalf of the unheard residents; and to hold accountable those responsible for mismanagement and prolonged suffering.

Enrique Fernández-Toledo is the director of Puerto Rico Relief and Economic Policy at the Center for American Progress. Erin Cohan is vice president and chief of staff at the Center. Winnie Stachelberg is the executive vice president for External Affairs at the Center. Angela Hanks is the director of Workforce Development Policy at the Center. Laura Jimenez is the director of standards and accountability for K-12 Education at the Center. Connor Maxwell is a research associate for Progress 2050 at the Center. Cathleen Kelly is a senior fellow for Energy and Environment at the Center. Michael Madowitz is an economist at the Center. Kristina Costa is a senior fellow for Energy and Environment at the Center. Brent Woolfork is a director of Government Affairs at the Center.

Endnotes

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