

# DISASTER RECOVERY IN PUERTO RICO

## AN ADVOCACY AGENDA FOR THE US GOVERNMENT

Hurricane Maria caused widespread devastation across Puerto Rico, including severe damage to the electrical grid that has left most of the island without electricity and over half of the 3.4 million residents without access to potable water. Two weeks into the crisis, the situation remains dire and life threatening, particularly for vulnerable populations and those in rural areas.

While it is rare for Oxfam to take action around emergencies in wealthier countries, the challenges of the response and the great need have compelled Oxfam America to commit to devoting resources and technical support on the ground to help the relief effort. We are committed to doing our part, but we cannot do it alone. Policymakers have the opportunity to exhibit resolute leadership and provide appropriate resources so Puerto Rico can build back stronger.

We call upon the President and Congress to:

- **Fully fund the response and rebuilding effort.**
- **Remove regulatory and financial barriers to recovery.**
- **Provide debt relief to Puerto Rico.**
- **Prioritize a locally-led response that targets and empowers the most vulnerable.**
- **Ensure that rebuilding programs address climate risks.**

### FULLY FUND THE RESPONSE AND REBUILDING EFFORT

**The President and Congress must work together to pass a clean, robust supplemental appropriations for additional disaster relief for Puerto Rico.** Funding must reflect the extent of the damage, assessed currently at \$70 billion to \$90 billion, and should have the necessary oversight to ensure that the most vulnerable populations' needs are met.

The funding should include immediate emergency relief resources, infrastructure repair funds (including investments in revamping an outdated electrical grid), funding streams (such as the Community Development Block Grants-Disaster Relief funds) for rebuilding housing, and economic development tools that allow for a speedy recovery that ensures community resilience is strengthened and climate risks are addressed.

### REMOVE REGULATORY AND FINANCIAL BARRIERS TO RECOVERY

**Disaster relief funds should have no strings attached.** Cost-sharing requirements will impede Puerto Rico's ability to access available resources. We request that the Administration and Congress waive all cost-sharing requirements by any agency, and extend the cost-sharing waiver FEMA issued beyond the 180 days already granted.

**Extend the Jones Act waiver.** Congress and the Administration should work together to extend the waiver for at least a year, with the option to explore a full repeal at that time. This waiver will expand Puerto Rico's access to fuel, food, medicine, clothing, and building materials and help lower the cost of imported goods.

**Extend FEMA's 60-day deadline for filing claims for disaster relief.** The loss of power and spotty access to the internet has rendered it nearly impossible for people to assess their property damage and submit claims in the normal timeframe. Given estimates that the power grid will not be operational for roughly six months, FEMA should extend the deadline for at least an additional 120 days.

### PROVIDE DEBT RELIEF TO PUERTO RICO

**Lift crippling debt burden facing Puerto Rico.** At over \$72 billion, Puerto Rico's debt liability has resulted in a crippling debt-to-GDP ratio of 68 percent. The US government must provide debt relief through erasing all debt obligations to commercial institutions. Furthermore, paying down Puerto Rico's onerous debt should not come at the expense of restoring the island's basic functions. No immediate disaster relief funds should be used to repay debts. Every effort should be made to provide relief dollars in the form of grants rather than loans.



**OXFAM**  
America

1101 17TH ST, NW  
SUITE 1300  
WASHINGTON, DC  
[oxfamamerica.org](http://oxfamamerica.org)  
(202) 777-2900

**Instruct the Fiscal Control Board to restore \$350 million in municipal aid.** Congress should instruct the Financial Oversight and Management Board to restore the \$350 million in municipal aid it slashed as part of Puerto Rico's austerity measures.

#### PRIORITIZE A LOCALLY-LED RESPONSE THAT TARGETS THE MOST VULNERABLE

**Include language in the supplemental to ensure federal funds prioritize local actors.** Puerto Ricans are already responding to the crisis. Any funding bill should contain language directing federal agencies to fund and hire local people and organizations first, and ensure that disaster survivors participate in and benefit from recovery dollars. To the greatest extent possible (and as long as it does not lead to unnecessary delays), recovery dollars should be directed to local governments, local businesses, local people, and local civil society organizations. Report language should also support capacity-building and technical assistance to first responders in order to build local actors' future capacity to deal with crises.

**Incorporate language that prioritizes the most vulnerable.** Any supplemental appropriations bill should include language explicitly prioritizing funding for the most vulnerable. Humanitarian aid must target the poorest individuals, children, and the elderly (especially in rural and mountain areas), and address both infrastructure as well as immediate housing needs. Appropriate accountability measures through HUD and FEMA should be instituted to ensure that money is allocated commensurate with needs.

#### ENSURE THAT REBUILDING PROGRAMS ADDRESS CLIMATE RISKS

The severity of Hurricane Maria (as well as Harvey and Irma) was exacerbated by the warming temperatures of ocean and air. In addition, natural landscape protections have been eroded over time. Efforts to recover, restore, and rebuild must include measures that consider climate risks, and result in more resilient communities and landscapes.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT: MICHELLE STERNTHAL, SENIOR DOMESTIC POLICY ADVISOR  
(202) 777-2900 | [MICHELLE.STERNTHAL@OXFAM.ORG](mailto:MICHELLE.STERNTHAL@OXFAM.ORG)

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America

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