



WINTER 2018

PUERTO RICO: AFTER HURRICANE MARIA

Many people across the island remain in acute crisis—the roofs blown off their homes, their power still out, the cleanliness of their water supply uncertain.

HOW YOU'RE HELPING



8,533
people with
1,285 water
filters



27,750
people with
11,100 solar
lights



500
people with
legal aid

Oxfam rarely responds to humanitarian emergencies in the US and other wealthy countries. But after Hurricane Maria hammered Puerto Rico in late September 2017, we made the decision to step in when the federal government's response faltered. By lending our broad disaster experience to a handful of local organizations, we have been working to bring relief to the most vulnerable people.

Your support has been invaluable.

While Puerto Rico still faces urgent and massive humanitarian challenges, here's how your generosity, coupled with the expertise of Oxfam and our local partners, is helping.

EARLY SUPPORT

In San Juan, the capital, Oxfam helped provide essential goods to nursing homes, and in 17 hard-hit municipalities around the island, we have supported the work of the Foundation for Puerto Rico to help low-income elderly people meet urgent needs for food, diapers, batteries, and more.

Now, with a full-time local staff of four and a program manager, the short-term focus of our work has been to:

- prevent the spread of waterborne diseases;
- reduce the risk of sexual harassment and abuse of women and children; and
- help families apply for assistance through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

PHOTO: Ada Santiago stands in front of all that remains of her house after Hurricane Maria hammered the hilly community of Cubones. She has been living in her mother's house across the street, but that home has been without running water or electricity. The water filter she is carrying will help her produce a clean drinking supply. *Coco McCabe/Oxfam America*



Water filters

With access to clean water remaining a daily challenge for many islanders, we have been distributing household water filters that can process up to 6,000 gallons of water each before the interior filters need to be changed. With our support, the Foundation for Puerto Rico is purchasing 2,000 of these Berkey filters, and students from the University of Puerto Rico's Department of Public Health are helping us with the distribution and follow-up. During the distributions we provide hands-on demonstrations of the filters along with instruction sheets in Spanish.

Our focus is on communities where people still have no choice but to get their water from streams, rivers, or springs and therefore remain vulnerable to waterborne diseases. We have distributed 1,285 filters to households and community centers in six municipalities including the city of San Juan; we are waiting for the next 700 to be delivered. People have told us that the filters give them peace of mind and that they no longer have to spend a hefty chunk of their income on buying bottled water to safeguard their health.



Solar lights

Almost all rural areas, and some parts of San Juan, remain in darkness—heightening the risk of sexual harassment and abuse of women and children. To help prevent that, and to allow families to get on with their lives in as normal a way as possible, we have been distributing solar lights to households that still lack electricity. People have told us how relieved they are to have a source of light when night envelops their communities.

A new shipment of 10,000 solar lights arrived in mid-December, and the Center for a New Economy is helping us distribute half of them to 2,250 families in 12 municipalities. More municipalities, overlooked by other organizations, are continuing to contact Oxfam to request solar lights and water filters. Due to the high demand, we are ordering another 10,000 lights for distribution.

TOP: Carlos Oquenda Margolla collects water flowing from a mountain spring in Utuado. Without electricity, many community water systems were not functioning after the storm, and families had to turn to springs and streams to supply their households.

BOTTOM: Community members from Villalba joined together to help Oxfam distribute water filters to families in several neighborhoods of the municipality. Oxfam's Carlos Talaba gets ready to pass one of the boxes with filters onto a bus for transport to a distribution site.

OPPOSITE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Directions show people how to assemble the water filters Oxfam has been distributing. During one of the distributions community members practiced priming their filters before taking the devices home.

Coco McCabe/Oxfam America

FEMA applications

With a March 20 deadline looming for applications to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, we are working with the Access to Justice Fund Foundation to ensure that as many families as possible are able to apply for disaster assistance from FEMA. The process has been fraught with confusion for islanders, including language barriers and an initial request that people apply for FEMA benefits through the internet or by phone—neither of which were available in many places after the hurricane decimated Puerto Rico’s power and communication networks.

With support from Oxfam, the foundation, through its Hurricane Maria Emergency Legal Aid Fund, is covering stipends and transportation costs for a host of lawyers and volunteers to fan out across the island and provide legal aid to families. These families are getting help obtaining the documents they need to file FEMA claims as well as support in appealing FEMA’s rejections for claims. The project now includes lawyers from seven organizations working in 50 of 78 municipalities. The goal of the initiative is to reach 19,400 families.

SOME HISTORY: BEFORE AND AFTER THE STORM

A place of stunning beauty, Puerto Rico is known as the island of enchantment—an emerald gem of rugged mountains and pristine beaches all wrapped in a warm Caribbean sea fanned by trade winds. Just 75 miles off the coast lies the Puerto Rico Trench, where the Atlantic Ocean plunges to its deepest point.

A former province of Spain and now a Spanish-speaking territory of the US, Puerto Rico is home to more than three million residents who are also US citizens—a designation that confers only some of the benefits other Americans enjoy. Granted citizenship in 1917, islanders do not have a strong voice in Congress: their elected representative is not allowed to vote, nor can Puerto Ricans themselves vote for president—though they can participate in presidential primaries.

Once dependent on its sugar crop, the island grew increasingly industrialized during the past century, with tourism and manufacturing—particularly pharmaceuticals—becoming the dominant drivers of an economy that has left many behind. In 2016, about 45 percent of Puerto Ricans lived below the federal poverty line. As a severe recession hit, Puerto Rico began a slide toward insolvency, running out of cash in 2016 while facing \$123 billion in debt and pension obligations. In May 2017, the territory filed for a type of bankruptcy protection, forcing islanders to confront harsh austerity measures.

Hurricane Maria (the second storm within two weeks) hit with such intensity, local government officials are estimating the recovery will cost more than \$94 billion. As 2017 drew to a close, more than 1.5 million people—about half the population—still had no power.





PHOTO: COCO MCCABE/OXFAM AMERICA

// Hurricane Maria has put a spotlight on the existing poverty and exclusion that has existed in Puerto Rico. We can look at this as an opportunity to rebuild trust and make real change, allowing the communities' voices to direct the response so our people can feel their most urgent needs are met. //

—Carmen Villanueva (pictured at left), community leader working with Oxfam to distribute water filters in Puerto Rico

Advocacy

Right from the beginning, Oxfam has been a strong and vocal supporter of our neighbors in Puerto Rico. We are continuing to advocate on Capitol Hill for more funding for emergency response on the island and for speeding the aid effort, including hosting a delegation in Washington, DC, of local leaders from Puerto Rico. The delegation, comprising representatives of academia and Puerto Rican nonprofits as well as experts in legal aid, and environmental health and water quality, made their case for the island's recovery directly to Congressional staffers and high-level FEMA officials.

Our advocacy focuses on:

- ensuring federal funding goes directly to on-the-ground organizations that are most aware of community needs and can use the aid efficiently;
- making sure local groups have the tools they need to prepare for the next crisis so that the island will be more resilient to future disasters;

- pushing for careful Congressional oversight and accountability to ensure federal dollars reach the most vulnerable people; and
- ensuring that Puerto Rican leaders are treated as equal partners in the relief and reconstruction process.

Looking ahead

Because of widespread destruction to Puerto Rico's power grid, many parts of the island may not get electricity back until later this year. We are now developing a project with Casa Pueblo, a local organization, to help increase its technical staff and pilot a series of solar-powered systems for rural grocery stores in three isolated communities.

Oxfam has brought in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to provide training on community treatment and testing of water in order to help communities take some control over their situations.

While the Berkey filters provide a good interim solution for people who have no

clean water source, Oxfam is working with other organizations on the island to repair water systems in remote areas, and we are providing solar pumps to ensure sustainable access to potable water.

DO ONE MORE THING

You can speak up for Puerto Ricans now. They are our fellow Americans and deserve the same respect and support that any of us would expect from our neighbors and government in the aftermath of a disaster—especially one as devastating as Hurricane Maria.

Join us in urging our leaders to fund the emergency response, remove obstacles, and get help to Puerto Rico. Learn more at: oxfamamerica.org/puerto-rico.



OXFAM

OXFAM AMERICA
226 CAUSEWAY STREET, 5TH FLOOR
BOSTON, MA 02114-2206
(877) 77 OXFAM

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