



**Hurricane Maria: 'Civil society, within and outside Puerto Rico, came to fill the vacuum left by the insufficient state response and played an unprecedented role'**



*On 20 September 2017, Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico. Its passage revealed not only the failures of government response but also the resilience, capacity and integrity of civil society. CIVICUS speaks with José Iván Vega, a professor at the University of Puerto Rico - Mayagüez (UPR-M) and the Director of the Business and Economic Development Centre (CNDE) at the University.*

**1. Why did the recent hurricanes that hit the Caribbean have such terrible impact? In the case of Puerto Rico, what was the toll of Hurricane Maria, and what are the prospects for reconstruction?**

It is clear that the Caribbean is having stronger and more frequent hurricanes, which many scientists attribute to climate change. Although I am not a scientist and cannot prove categorically that the strength of the hurricanes is due to climate change, the truth is that both things are indeed happening. In the case of Puerto Rico, within just a week we had Hurricane Irma, which happily made a last-minute northwards turn and barely grazed our northeast, where it nevertheless left a lot of people without electricity; and Hurricane Maria, which cut us through the middle, as we say in Puerto Rico. Maria entered through Yabucoa, a town in the southeast, crossed the entire central part of the island, and left through the north, somewhere between Barceloneta and Isabela.

When it hit, the hurricane was Category 5 and carried winds at 155 miles (250 km) per hour. Shortly after it made landfall, the official instruments used to measure wind speed were destroyed, so we lack official estimates issued by the weather service; the data that we have comes from individuals who had measurement instruments and from measurements made from airplanes and other methods. It is estimated that the winds kept steady at 150 to 160 miles per hour, with gusts that in mountainous areas may have reached 200 miles (320 km) per hour, causing appalling destruction.

We were really very scared. I had lived through other hurricanes, including Georges in 1998, which also crossed the island through and through and brought winds of 115 miles (185 km) per hour, but Maria does not compare with anything I had seen before, in either strength or duration. Maria hit the island for 12 hours straight.

We had been warned and were prepared for a hurricane, and the loss of life directly attributable to the hurricane was of just a few dozens. What had not been foreseen,

however, was that the electric supply would be interrupted almost entirely and that communications would collapse throughout the island. Telecommunications are in the hands of large private companies with large economic and technical resources – AT&T, Claro, Sprint and Verizon – and nobody thought that the entire system could collapse. However, as a result of the hurricane we lost 95 per cent of the supply of electricity, heavy floods left many areas isolated and telecommunications failed, so financial institutions also stopped working. The drinking water supply became problematic. In the mountainous areas there were populations that remained isolated for about a month and there are locations that today, more than three months after the hurricane, still have no electricity.

This is where the [official statistics](#) diverge from other sources regarding the numbers of victims. In the weeks following the hurricane, the collapse of hospitals, and of the health care system in general, resulted in hundreds of additional deaths. There were hospitals that lacked power for several days and were therefore unable to care for patients. People died in their homes and in nursing homes as the oxygen supply on which they relied failed. In sum, many died due to lack of attention and supplies. Many people, in the range of thousands, were later evacuated to the USA to receive intensive or specialised care.

Hurricane Maria was the worst natural disaster that affected Puerto Rico over the past century. It caused enormous devastation: according to the government's estimates, material damage amounted to US\$95 billion. The reconstruction of infrastructure – hospitals, schools, bridges and roads – will take years. Even before the hurricane hit, we faced an economic crisis that had already lasted for a decade, with high unemployment and emigration rates of a level unseen since the 1950s. After the hurricane hit, there was a [mass exodus](#) to the USA, and especially to Florida, where we have been quite welcome. It is estimated that Puerto Rico has since lost close to 200,000 of its inhabitants, and will lose many more. Right here at the university, even though we are located in an area that was comparatively little affected, I have several students who left because their parents lost their jobs or businesses. The mental health of the population has also been affected; it will take us some time to recover. Today, a hurricane alert would cause a state of collective hysteria.

## **2. Was the government emergency response adequate and sufficient?**

The state government of Puerto Rico clearly failed in terms of contingency plans. As they did not foresee that communications could collapse, they did not establish an alternate communications system, and therefore were unable to coordinate the immediate response effectively.

After the first week, however, the state government gradually recovered by activating the National Guard and coordinating with municipal governments, which also began to play their role.

Meanwhile, the prominent role played by the mayor of San Juan, [Carmen Yulín Cruz](#), helped reveal to global public opinion the fact that, contrary to what the official discourse said, the situation was not in the least under control. Indeed, at that time we were barely trying to survive with the basics, without power and communications, dedicated to gathering water, food and fuel. Carmen Yulín had a lot of media exposure because President Trump attacked her and she defended herself. She is an opposition leader who speaks perfect English, can express herself very well and does not cower into silence before anybody, so she became an excellent spokesperson at a time of great need.

### 3. What role did civil society play?

Civil society came to fill the vacuum left by the insufficient state response and played a role of a prominence that I had never seen before. It showed great resilience and an enormous ability to do much with quite little.

When everything stopped working, the remaining communications were left in the hands of a couple of AM radio stations whose antennas were still standing and which worked on power generators, as well as with [kp4 radio amateurs](#), who have short wave equipment and are trained to provide services to the community in emergency situations. For two or three weeks the population resorted almost exclusively to these methods to locate relatives and send messages and offers or requests of help.

When speaking about civil society in Puerto Rico, we need to refer not only to civil society on the island itself but also to the civil society of the diaspora. Puerto Rico is home to 3.5 million people, but there are between 5 and 6 million Puerto Ricans living outside the island, mostly in the USA, many of whom have families back on the island. It is my impression that the Puerto Ricans of the diaspora preferred to channel their aid through civil society rather than through the government, because the image the government conveyed was one of ineffectiveness and there was greater confidence that civil society would be capable of providing timely assistance to those in the most need. As a result, several initiatives were launched to channel assistance from the diaspora through civil society, or through alliances integrating government and non-government actors. And, as can be observed on the websites of all these initiatives, civil society has been very careful in reporting on the funds raised and spent.

Such was the case of [Puerto Rico se levanta](#) ('Puerto Rico rises'), a civil society initiative that included some government entities as well as private companies, aimed at helping businesses recover. I took part in this initiative, and one of the first things that we did was deploy to relieve and attend to immediate needs, such as the distribution of electric generators that would allow businesses to function again. It is also worth mentioning the fundraising and distribution of funds for reconstruction undertaken by [ConPRmetidos](#), a well as the [Shop HirePR](#) initiative, which is basically a directory of online stores owned by Puerto Rican entrepreneurs that allows customers overseas to place their orders. Additionally, the website allows users to connect with Puerto Rican freelancers, with the ability to work remotely. The objective of this initiative, aimed mainly at the diaspora, is to boost the local economy and create jobs, thereby contributing to long-term economic recovery.

Additionally, at the University of Puerto Rico, where I run a support centre for social and innovative entrepreneurs, we organised a programme to provide training to community organisations so that they can improve their accounting and financial management in order to obtain 501(c)(3) status, which allows organisations to receive help and donations from foundations and other organisations in the USA.

Civil society has also played a prominent role at the community level. In fact, the social fabric emerged stronger from the emergency. As emergency care in the most isolated areas was so slow to arrive and turned out to be so insufficient, there was lots of local self-organisation instead. Neighbours who did not know one another before got organised to coordinate emergency assistance, aid distribution and water supply. Churches were very active in promoting the community response.

#### **4. Did Puerto Rican civil society receive sufficient solidarity and support from abroad?**

The call by Carmen Yulín, along with interventions by Puerto Rican celebrities and political leadership, had a mobilising effect. The Puerto Ricans of the diaspora, many of them desperate to get in touch with their loved ones on the island, mobilised contacts and resources so that the federal government of the USA would provide a quick and forceful answer. They managed, for instance, to mobilise the Army Corps of Engineers and to have a hospital ship sent, which provided care for about two months. In states with a large Puerto Rican population, Puerto Ricans appealed to their representatives in Congress, some of whom travelled to the island. And lastly, they managed to bring in the President of the USA – with the somewhat unfortunate results that we have all seen on television.

Also in the USA, some of our best known artists, such as Jennifer Lopez, Marc Anthony and Ricky Martin, became involved in fundraising efforts, most of which were channelled not through the government but through civil society organisations. In Washington DC a '[Unity March for Puerto Rico](#)' was held to demand the cancellation of Puerto Rico's debt and assistance for reconstruction from the USA, and was endorsed by numerous Puerto Rican celebrities.

Although the most natural connection that Puerto Ricans have is with the USA, due to the fact that we are an unincorporated territory of the USA and we are US citizens, fundraising activities also took place in other part of the world, such as in London, but were generally led by members of the diaspora. Apart from that, I think that not much support has been received from international or foreign civil society - possibly because of our political relationship with the USA, which either hinders it or discourages it, insofar as the international community assumes that the USA is taking care of the issue.

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