



Puerto Rico: ‘Without civil society, the government cannot handle an emergency in a timely and effective manner’



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 Mary Ann Gabino, Senior Vice President of the Puerto Rico Community Foundation (PRCF), an organisation that has been serving the Puerto Rican community for 32 years. The PRCF is the only community foundation in Puerto Rico, and the first of its kind in Latin America and the Caribbean. Having donated US\$60 million, it functions as a bridge between the global philanthropic community and the territory of Puerto Rico.

1. Why did the recent hurricanes have such terrible effects in the Caribbean, and specifically in Puerto Rico?

Puerto Rico already had weak infrastructure. Its energy, water and roads systems had weakened as a result of many years of neglect. Since before the passage of the hurricanes, we also had a telecommunications system that, despite being relatively new, was quite fragile, possibly because in recent years too many private companies had entered the market and, in their eagerness to cater to a rising demand, they did not foresee Puerto Rico’s geographic fragility in the face of atmospheric events.

In addition, it is my understanding that we have paid very little attention to the effects of climate change. The great droughts that we had in the past have left great sedimentation and plant material in many water reservoirs, which has caused rivers and streams to grow and find ways out of their natural course. The erosion of our coasts has become increasingly apparent, and as a result of this the sea has come increasingly close to many communities, which in many cases were already vulnerable. In this context, the natural disaster that we experienced recently, which hit our island with unexpected fury, was worsened by human inaction in the face of the deterioration of an infrastructure that not only did not withstand the onslaught, but also has not yet been fully restored.

2. What was the toll of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, and what are the prospects for reconstruction?

We must remember that before hurricanes Irma and Maria hit – we actually had two hurricanes, which hit within a week of each other - Puerto Rico was already going through a fiscal crisis, which resulted in a debt of more than US\$72,000 million and an economic recession that was into its 11th year. The effects of this crisis were visible: an unemployment rate of 10 per cent, a 40 per cent labour force participation rate and the migration of nearly 400,000 people to the USA between 2010 and 2016.

This situation was aggravated by the passage of the hurricanes, which left the island without power, water or communications, and its residents lining up for fuel and food supplies. Today, in January 2018, about 40 per cent of citizens still have no power. More than 200,000 Puerto Ricans have left the island since Hurricane Maria, and some 31,000 people have lost their jobs. It is estimated that approximately 250,000 houses were affected. It goes without saying that recovery on the island will take time - certainly more than a year - and that it will take a lot of willpower to rebuild and renovate its infrastructure.

3. Was the government response to the emergency adequate and sufficient?

I don't want to pass judgment on the government's action, since doing so at the moment would be more divisive than constructive. I prefer to talk instead about the role of civil society. Because there is no doubt that the passage of the hurricane made it clear that in emergency circumstances such as those we are living in, the government alone does not have the capacity to act immediately and effectively. That is why it must incorporate civil society into a comprehensive plan to address disaster situations.

4. What role did civil society play in the face of the emergency?

Puerto Rican society reacted immediately. In fact, starting on the first day when the Puerto Rico Community Foundation (PRCF) reopened after the hurricane, approximately eight to 15 organisations came to us every day. At first, they came to request support to clear the way and open access through neighbourhood and state roads blocked by landslides, which had left many areas totally isolated due to lack of communications. First of all they tried to restore communications among people. They also needed to supply hot food to communities. The food that they planned to distribute would for many people be the only hot dish of the day; hence the emergence of many community kitchens, along with collection and distribution centres for food and other necessities.

Some organisations that requested our help immediately started thinking about the long term. Such was the case of an organisation in the city of Yauco – which was in fact the first one to arrive at our office – that asked for help not only to open a road, but also to dig a water well to supply the community. Very soon the opening of community wells and the

strengthening of community aqueducts would become a strategic focus area for the Foundation. This decision was not made randomly but by taking into account the potential of civil society to organise around the provision of water in the communities. Similarly, there was an organisation in Salinas that told us about the possibility of creating a solar micro-grid. In other words, community-based organisations, driven by representatives of the communities, were telling us that it was possible to build alternative infrastructure from the ground up.

In sum, after hurricanes Irma and Maria hit, the PRCF managed to raise US\$9.3 million. In the immediate aftermath, US\$1.3 million was delivered to around 80 non-profit organisations that in one way or another serve one of the 78 municipalities that make up the territory of Puerto Rico. In addition, we managed to distribute food and other supplies to approximately 73,000 people through 28 organisations that functioned as collection and distribution centres. Some 210 water purifiers and 54 power generators were also distributed.

Over the next two years the PRCF will focus on five areas of renewal that are of the utmost importance for Puerto Rico. In the first place, we will support the strengthening of community water infrastructure. Second, we will advance strategies to promote agriculture with the aim of achieving a certain degree of food security. Third, we will promote the establishment of renewable energy infrastructure to supply power to the communities. Fourth, we will provide support to community housing development organisations to contribute to the construction and rehabilitation of damaged or destroyed homes. Finally, we will promote and strengthen community incubators to boost economic development.

5. Has civil society in Puerto Rico received enough solidarity and support from abroad?

The world in general, and the Puerto Rican diaspora in particular, responded immediately to the emergency situation on our island. By the first Monday after Hurricane Maria hit, our foundation had received hundreds of emails and about US\$15,000 through our website, although we had not yet made a call for help or provided instructions for donating. Money came from the USA, Belgium, Canada, Spain and various countries in South America, accompanied by other demonstrations of support. International civil society - individuals and families - has so far contributed more than US\$100,000 towards recovery.

Before the emergency, we used to receive only about US\$500 a year through our website. This changed completely in the wake of Hurricane Maria. Misfortune brought out the best in people. In addition to sending money, many people volunteered or expressed their solidarity by sending groceries and other goods. I particularly remember this lady who phoned from Texas on the Monday after the hurricane because she wanted to send baby formula. As I was uncertain of how to handle such cargo, I asked her how many boxes she wanted to send and she told me that it was in fact eight pots: she had just had twins and

wanted to share some of what she had. I still receive messages from people who volunteer to come and offer their time, and we are trying to channel that help even though circumstances keep changing on a daily basis.

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