

Puerto Rico Community Foundation

In the wake of the successive hurricanes (especially Maria) that hit Puerto Rico this last fall, there's been a good amount of attention given to the federal government's failure to provide reasonable services.

The largest problem - beyond the failure of federal aid - is that the vast majority of PR services are highly centralized. There are central management systems that distribute into smaller systems, but these central systems collapsed after Maria. Without federal aid, nothing was readily available to fill the void they left and ensure that disaster relief, and reconstruction efforts, were properly managed and orchestrated.

Nelson I. Colon, CEO of Puerto Rico Community Foundation, explains that this system of centralization is a hallmark of colonial control. The outside government – in this case the US federal government – has an interest in keeping the territories' services centralized, for ease of oversight. Standardly, the federal government would have stepped in for disaster relief with Army Corps of Engineers and FEMA and replaced the centralized systems. However, this, quite publicly, did not happen. The result of this is that the smaller systems, serving local “communities,” remained in place, but lacked access to the resources which were standardly provided by the central systems.

Colon explained that in the aftermath of the hurricanes, the groups that took over the management of services in the communities were the non-profits which were already on-the-ground and organized. These groups acted as “community first responders” to ensure that basic services such as food, water, electricity, education, and healthcare stayed functional.

Three examples of organizations that have stepped up are Proyecto Enlace, Peces, and Taller Salud. Proyecto Enlace is a conglomerate of eight neighborhood community groups, originally focused on anti-gentrification, environmental restoration, and poverty reduction. Now they work on getting medical supplies to those in the community who are suffering most from the disaster. Peces was a non-profit school with 100 employees. They are now rebuilding homes and providing basic healthcare needs. Taller Salud is a women's empowerment group that has transformed into a free kitchen.

This incredibly beneficial work is hampered by nature of non-profit organizations. The difficulty many of these organizations face is that their purposes, laid out in their articles of incorporation, do not cover these new roles as community first responders, despite the fact that these organizations are the best placed to serve those roles. So, to facilitate the rebuilding of PR infrastructure, and to maintain necessary services, the Foundation has been issuing high quantity, quick grants to these non-profits.

The Foundation has widely broadcast on radio that they will process any grant proposal within 48 hours, and they have been wildly successful. Normally this would, of course, open the door to potential fraud, but the Foundation has been able to avoid it through simple means: they have worked for 35 years with the non-profits in PR. The close connections they have

maintained with the non-profits allows them to make low doubt, quick grants, relying on their reputational capital. And since the Foundation has been in operation with a sterling reputation for so long, it can bank on that same reputation with outside sources, providing a necessary layer of trust between donors and non-profits.

Additionally, the Foundation is not simply authorizing grants and hoping for the best. They are maintaining an active role in how the grant money is being focused, and in some cases providing additional direction to the rebuilding of PR. A prime example is the electric grid. The Foundation has prioritized electricity for health clinics over homes. Colon says, “Basically... people can live without energy. It is uncomfortable, but you can live without energy. But if you keep the community clinics open, then you have access to health care.” Another example is the refocusing of water access. Initially the non-profits were all seeking access to bottled water. The Foundation provided grants for the drilling of wells, the purchase of water purifiers, and the construction of aqueducts.

Through the funding and organization of these non-profits, the Foundation, and Colon, have envisioned a larger goal. They wish to strengthen the existing non-profits and maintain the connections between them. They do not simply wish to rebuild the prior centralized structure, but want to evolve how the surviving structures on the island interact. The goal is for the 78 municipalities of PR to be self-sufficient and to not only rebuild, but improve.

Cameron Sheridan
University of Oregon School of Law
J.D. Candidate 2019