

COMMUNITY SCIENCE FORUM

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CRISIS CONVENING

In times of rapidly intensifying climate change and resulting storms, how can we protect and support vulnerable communities to ensure an effective response and equitable recovery?



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COMMUNITY SCIENCE FORUM

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NOTES ON LANGUAGE

This Community Science Forum includes pieces in both Spanish and English. While we look forward to producing fully multilingual issues, part of the purpose of this publication, as laid out by Raquela, Jessica, and Luis, is to reach a broader English-speaking audience with stories, histories, and updates from Puerto Rico, and so the articles we've published here are in English for that reason.

ABOUT THE CRISIS CONVENING & NEWARK BARNRAISING

Este artículo fue escrito en colaboración por Liz Barry, Greg Bloom, Willow Brugh y Tamara Shapiro, y traducido por Mariel García

This article was collaboratively written by Liz Barry, Greg Bloom, Willow Brugh, and Tamara Shapiro, and translated into Spanish by Mariel García.

Cada año, hay comunidades que son afectadas por “eventos ambientales extremos”. Éstos pueden incluir huracanes, terremotos, tornados o inundaciones. Por supuesto, hay agencias de respuesta oficial con mandatos para rescatar, alimentar, reconstruir, etcétera; sin embargo, los verdaderos primeros intervinientes siempre son personas que viven en las áreas afectadas: vecinos, líderes comunitarios, etcétera.

La cuestión de quién responde, y quién recibe apoyo por parte de la respuesta institucional formal, es complicada por los patrones en los que poblaciones históricamente marginadas tienden a ser ignoradas o no vistas por actores externos.

Estos patrones se han complicado aun más en las secuelas de desastres recientes a lo largo de las cuales redes de formación espontánea han “llegado” a asistir de maneras que son más rápidas y distribuidas de lo típico en el sector de respuesta formal a desastres, aunque sin la rendición de cuentas a la que las instituciones formales (supuestamente) están sujetas.

A lo largo de estas experiencias, hemos visto con claridad la promesa y el peligro de la respuesta a y recuperación de crisis modernas, habilitadas por tecnologías digitales y redes. Después de la alarmante temporada de huracanes en 2017, se formó una red de personas con interés de mejorar la capacidad de respuesta en desastres para apoyar liderazgo y prioridades locales de manera más efectiva en tiempos de crisis. Ahora estamos llamando a personas que hayan trabajado juntas en crisis como Sandy, Harvey, Irma, María, y otras similares. En esta “Reunión de crisis” en julio de 2018 en Newark, New Jersey, compartimos experiencias y habilidades, exploramos maneras de promover equidad y justicia a través de la respuesta moderna, y construimos recursos para el tipo de asistencia que ofrecemos.

Aquí estaba nuestra pregunta clave: En tiempos de crisis climática, ¿cómo pueden los extranjeros (las instituciones formales de respuesta a desastres, líderes de desarrollo comunitarios de otros contextos, las redes emergentes de voluntarios y las personas que hacen respuesta digital) involucrarse y apoyar a los respondientes locales de la manera más efectiva para promover la respuesta más humana, adaptativa y responsable?

Every year, communities are affected by “extreme environmental events.” These might include hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, or floods. There are, of course, official response agencies with mandates to rescue, feed, heal, and rebuild; however, the true first responders are always people who live in the affected regions—neighbors and community leaders.

The matter of who responds—and who is supported by formal institutional response—is complicated by patterns in which historically marginalized people are often ignored or unseen by outside actors.

These patterns have been further complicated in the aftermath of recent disasters during which spontaneously forming networks have “shown up” to assist in ways that are more rapid and distributed than is typical of the formal disaster response sector—yet without any of the accountability that formal institutions (supposedly) uphold. During these experiences, we’ve seen clearly both the promise and the peril of modern digitally enabled and networked crisis response and recovery.

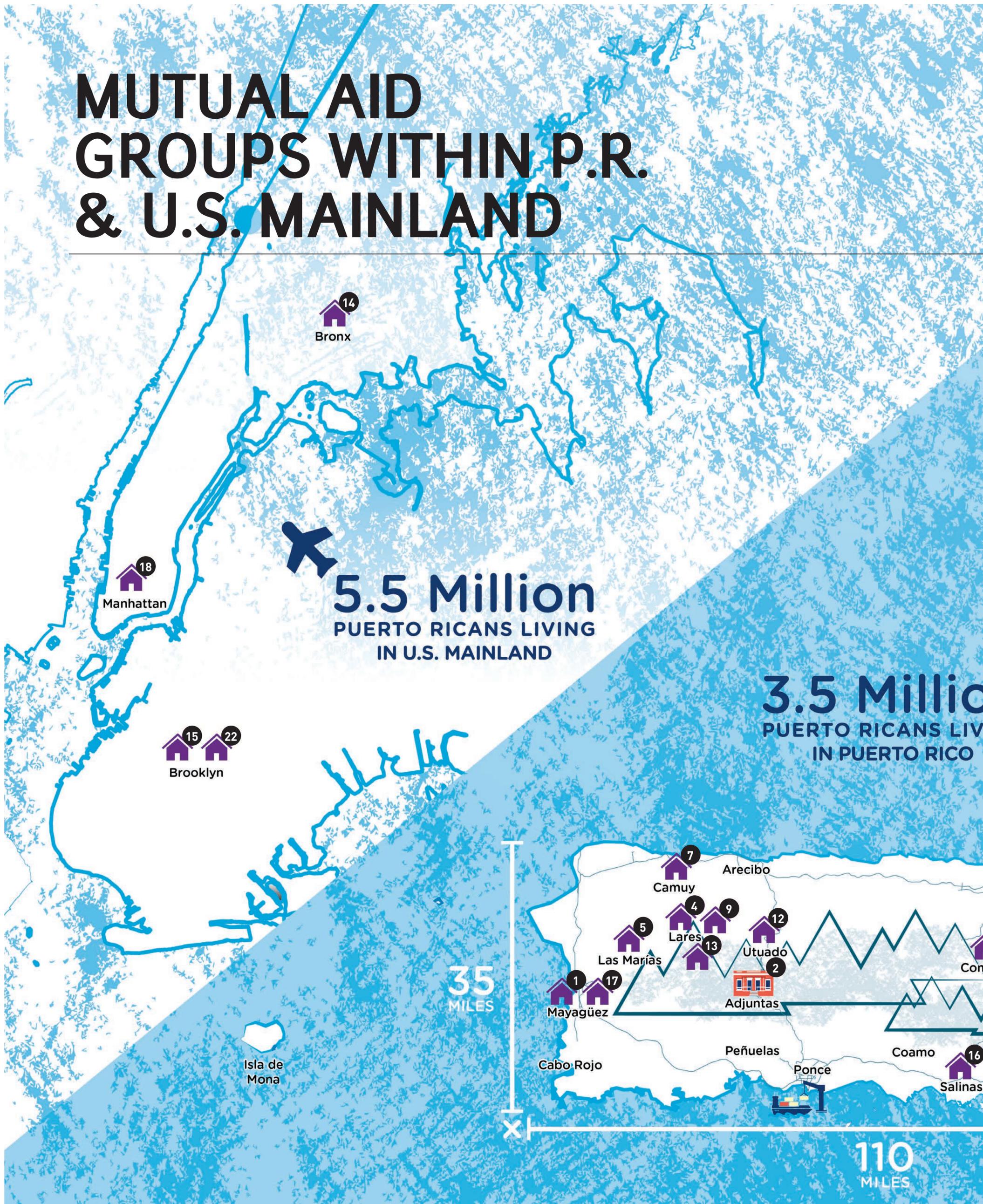
After 2017’s alarming hurricane season, a network of people formed with interest in improving the capacity for disaster response to more effectively support local priorities and leadership in times of crisis. We called for the convening of people who have worked together through crises such as Sandy, Harvey, Irma, María, and the like. The “Crisis Convening” took place in July 2018 in Newark, New Jersey, where we shared experiences and skills, explored ways to promote equity and justice through modern crisis response, and built resources for the type of assistance that we offer.

Here was our key question: in times of climate crisis, how can outsiders—formal ‘disaster response institutions,’ grassroots community organizers from other locations, emergent networks of volunteers on the ground, and ‘digital responders’—most effectively engage and support community-based responders to achieve a more accountable, humane, and adaptive response?



Participants in the Crisis Convening & Newark Barnraising, July 2018.

MUTUAL AID GROUPS WITHIN P.R. & U.S. MAINLAND



FOR US, BY US: A NETWORK OF SUPPORT

On the second day of the Crisis Convening, participants Raquela Delgado Valentín, Luis Rodríguez, Jessica Santos López gave an overview of mutual aid and other efforts in Puerto Rico since Hurricane Maria. This article is adapted from transcript notes taken by Liz Barry, Willow Brugh, and Ayako Maruyama.

People were mobilizing before, during, and after the hurricane. We are here sharing these stories as examples of how the island and its surrounding islands collaborate with the diaspora in Boston, New York, and elsewhere. Sometimes when unrelated people feel like there is something happening on the island, they want to go there. But so many people are already there. In reality, the Puerto Rican network is dense, and we don't have to focus all effort in one place (by physically going to San Juan). Keep supporting the people.

When we knew the hurricane—a Category 5—was coming, people in the diaspora were already in place and having drills about what to do. Many people who were becoming active had previously been active in Occupy Wall Street movement and after Hurricane Sandy—there are many connections there between Puerto Rico and the U.S. I was making sure I was sharing information with family. The Red de Apoyo Mutua Post Maria (post-Maria mutual aid network) was basically a conference call. Phone calls were happening all over New York City. We knew what areas would be extremely affected and we were getting ready to support those regions.

After the hurricane, we knew nothing. Desperation. Anxiety. Most Puerto Ricans in the diaspora suspended their daily lives to be supportive. We collected bits and pieces of information. If you could talk to your mom, cousin, friend—those five minutes had to be extremely strategic: what they needed, what they lost, who they were in touch with. We gathered this into lists: who is missing, what tools do people need, what medicine people need, what roads are not connected, where heavy machinery is needed, where there is no food. Information started to flow.

Because the communication infrastructure was so terrible or nonexistent, you had to do the work yourself. The diaspora started to visit Latin organizations who had gathered information from family members who were able to connect to other family members for five minutes; this was how we pieced together information. We shared information on daily calls. Most of the work that had to be done was emotional support: story circles, healing circles—because people didn't know about their families. It usually meant heavy crying before people could get themselves into a place to talk, then sharing information about what was needed and how it was needed.

Because there was so much information and exchange going on in the diaspora, the many unrelated people who wanted to immediately go to the island could have just connected with us first. We didn't know much, but we were being strategic about what was needed on the island; if someone on the island said they needed something, that's what was taken care of first, not what we decided they needed.

In Puerto Rico there are 3.5 million people living on the island. There are 5.5 million people in the diaspora. You have more people living outside of the island. It's really important to understand that point, because if it

weren't for the diaspora, lots of support would not have been possible. Overall, the five boroughs of New York City are 10% Puerto Rican.

This all connects to the independence movement: El Puente in South Williamsburg, Brooklyn; UPROSE in Sunset Park, Brooklyn; and Loaisaida Center in Manhattan. These organizations are thinking about both social and environmental justice. To help an island with no electricity and no clean water, they have tools to think about what's needed. Don't just send bottled water, but also focus on water filters. Don't just send batteries, send solar lamps. Think strategically, long-term. Think about who we support, and how. People were gathering materials, but there was an issue with distribution. It was a smart and quick response, quite strategic, but because of our colonial situation, all the things that were sent were stuck in ports. We knew that people on the island were moving around and helping each other, creating rescue teams and clearing roads, but we knew they needed tools to do those jobs.

At the same time there was no communication. At the time there was just one radio station functioning. People were calling from all over the island into the one radio station asking, "Is my dad OK?"



Not even the government had communication—for weeks. One of us didn't speak with their dad or sister for a month. The diaspora's big role was to reach each other and tell each other what they needed. Knowing the necessities is still hard. We didn't know if ports were distributing what we were sending. Our communication was a disaster for a few weeks. We couldn't communicate with each other, and had to travel to see each other face-to-face. My cousin in Humacao couldn't see his son or wife across the island in Mayagüez because the roads were closed or didn't exist. They had to rebuild the road to get through.

We were strategizing around how to use planes there, and how to use boats to bring the food. Slowly, boats started to get through with goods. Many of these local organizations didn't stop working—they're still working. There are fundraisers for these items. They're thinking about how to deliver assistance to the islands at this moment.

It is important to say that community/grassroots organizations were doing a good job before Hurricane Maria. After the hurricane, some people in political groups decided to create organizations to decide how to allocate support for the reconstruction. Those groups are highlighted in the map to the left.

Some of the organizations that received relief support after Hurricane Maria's devastating impacts—as well as some organizations that did not receive help—have since undertaken the work of local community transformation in order to not be forced to rely on charity. This map tells the narrative of the emergence of self-reliance on the island by featuring organizations that are following the principles of mutual aid.

To those who are off the island and looking to send direct support to Puerto Rico, please consider financially supporting these projects. If you want to send support through ideas, labor, or supplies, please first ask the people what they need. Contact them, and be patient as they may receive a lot of emails. Please understand that they are working and that many don't have electricity.

A note from the presenters: If you want to coordinate, email us. Tell us what you want to offer, and if there are any restrictions. Be aware that we might not take it if it interrupts our work. We have a suggestion for writing email subject lines: clearly state "I have [this]" or "I know how to do [this]." Concrete offers will stand out in inundated inboxes.

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For more information and a full list of clickable links, please visit publiclab.org/csf14

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MAP INFORMATION

- Brigada Solidaria del Oeste:** Coalition of community-based organizations focused on community empowerment.
- Casa Pueblo:** Non-profit environmental watchdog and community-based organization in Adjuntas.
- Casa-Taller:** Initiative by social practice artist group AgitArte in the neighborhood of Santurce.
- Centro de Apoyo Mutuo Bartolo (CAM Bartolo):** Center to support the neighborhoods of Calvache, Marisoni, Vilella, Bartolo, Rio Pietro y Cerro las Avispas in Lares.
- Centro de Apoyo Mutuo Bucarabones Unido (CAMBU):** Center for community vibrancy in Las Marias, focused specifically on the neighborhood of Bucarabones.
- Centro de Apoyo Mutuo de Caguas:** Center for community vibrancy and social health in Caguas. Hosts social kitchen, educational workshops, and lessons.
- Centro de Apoyo Mutuo de Camuy (CAM Camuy):** Center for community vibrancy in Camuy.
- Centro de Apoyo Mutuo El Panal (CAM el panal):** Center for community vibrancy hosted by La Colmena Cimarrona - Finca Conciencia, whose mission is to promote food sovereignty in the archipelago of Puerto Rico.
- Centro de Apoyo Mutuo Jibaro (CAM JJ):** Center for community vibrancy that supports the neighborhood of Bartolo in Lares. Provides housing, community garden, and agriculture courses.
- Centro de Apoyo Mutuo La Olla Común (CAM La Olla Común):** Center for community vibrancy organized in reaction to government neglect. Hosts social kitchen, community health clinics, and art events in the neighborhood of Rio Piedras.
- Proyecto Apoyo Mutuo Mariana:** Center for community vibrancy. Hosted by ARECMA, a non-profit organization seeking to improve the Marianna neighborhood of Humacao.
- Centro de Apoyo Mutuo de Utuado (CAM-U):** Center for community vibrancy. Hosts social kitchen, community health clinics, and art events in Utuado.
- Centro de Estudios Transdisciplinarios en Agroecología (CAM CeTA):** Center for community vibrancy hosted by CETA, whose mission is to rescue and share local jibaro agricultural knowledge.
- El Maestro:** El Maestro is a sport, cultural, and educational oasis in the heart of the South Bronx, named in honor of Puerto Rican patriot Don Pedro Albizu Campos.
- EL PUENTE:** Latino-oriented organization providing centers for arts and social justice in Brooklyn.
- Iniciativa de eco Desarrollo de Bahía de Jobs (IDeBAJo):** Non-profit organization that battles to preserve the integrity of their communities and develop their social and economic empowerment.
- Instituto Universitario para el Desarrollo de las Comunidades:** Department of University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez Campus. Supports two post-Maria participatory-action research projects led by university students: La Vía in Aguadilla and Finca Escuela, La Perla in San Juan.
- Loaisaida Center:** Organization that addresses the serious economic and social disenfranchisement of poor and low income Latino and Puerto Rican residents while celebrating their cultural contributions to NYC.
- Mujeres de Islas:** Women-led non-profit organization that advocates for sustainable development and community vibrancy in Culebra.
- Rebuild Comerio by Coco de Oro & Defend Puerto Rico:** Collaboration between the artist groups Coco de Oro & Defend Puerto Rico. Initiative that engages youth to document and reinvision Comerio in the complex post-Maria landscape.
- Taller Salud:** Women-led non-profit organization in Loiza. Community-based emotional and physical health clinic for girls and women.
- Uprose:** Brooklyn's oldest Latino community-based organization. Works towards a just urban planning policy that can foster community resilience.
- Urbe Apie:** Community space that promotes the use of art to rehabilitate the socio-economic fiber of urban spaces in Caguas.

PUERTO RICO TIMELINE

1898–2017

1898

The United States invades Puerto Rico. During the Spanish-American War, U.S. forces invade the territory, which was then an autonomous colony under Spanish rule. Puerto Rico is ceded to the United States in the Treaty of Paris, which brings the war to an end.

1900

The Foraker Act establishes U.S. rule. Under United States law, Puerto Rico becomes a territory that belongs to, but is not a part of the country, and has no political agency; Puerto Rico can't decide their own laws, representatives have no voting powers, and Puerto Ricans cannot vote for the president.

1930s

The violent fight for independence. The independence movement grows in the 1930s with the formation of a formal Nationalist Party, and campaigns against monopolies in the sugar and utility industries. The fight intensifies in 1935 after protesters are killed by police in the Río Piedras Massacre at the University of Puerto Rico. E. Francis Riggs, commander of the police force and former U.S. Army officer, is assassinated by two activists from a Nationalist youth organization in 1936. They are arrested and killed at police headquarters without a trial. Pedro Albizu Campos, head of the Nationalist Party, is imprisoned on sedition charges later the same year. The following year, nineteen are killed and over 200 wounded in the Ponce massacre when police open fire at a parade protesting Albizu Campos' imprisonment.

1960s

Community organizing grows. For decades, Puerto Rico is used as a testing ground for the military, who drop hundreds of thousands of bombs, use Agent Orange, and even rent land to foreign countries to bomb. The movement for Puerto Rican independence joins forces with protesters of American military occupiers in the '60s.

2016

PROMESA board appointed. Under the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), President Obama appoints a fiscal control board to help address Puerto Rico's ballooning \$72 billion debt. Residents and local government have no say in the ten non-residents who are appointed to the board, and no standing to audit austerity measures. Public services and pensions are cut, and the airport, utilities, hospitals, and many schools are privatized, leading to increased poverty for residents and increased profits for foreigners.

1902

English established as co-official language. The Official Languages Act names English and Spanish as co-official languages. However, English is the obligatory language used in government, military, and transportation. Officials aiming to increase English proficiency implement mandatory English instruction in Puerto Rican schools, to disastrous effect. The policy is reversed and re-implemented many times over the years.

1917

Puerto Ricans get citizenship—as second-class citizens. As World War I was escalating, an act of Congress made Puerto Ricans U.S. citizens. Men were now eligible for the draft, and were put in infantry regiments with African Americans, unable to fight alongside their white counterparts. With over 20,000 sent to war, industry at home suffered. A new local government structure is established by the U.S., though all laws and votes for elected officials can be overridden by the U.S. government.

1952

Puerto Rico becomes a commonwealth. The United States deems Puerto Rico a commonwealth, or *estado libre asociado* — a “free associated state,” though it is not free, nor a state. Residents can now vote for their own governor and other members of local government, but all votes and elected officials can still be vetoed by the U.S.

1999

Navy bombing kills civilian. A Navy plane veers off course from a military bombing range, dropping bombs and killing a civilian on the island of Vieques. Large-scale protests follow. After four years of demonstrations by Puerto Ricans of all parties, the Navy ends operations on the island of Vieques in 2003. However, decades of bombing and military testing leave behind unexploded ordnance, toxic soil, and the highest sickness rates in the Caribbean.

2017

Hurricane Maria strikes. A Category 5 hurricane makes landfall in September 2017, becoming the worst natural disaster on record to affect Puerto Rico. The storm's destruction reveals the island's crippling lack of resources and infrastructure. The Jones Act, a century-old shipping regulation, bars foreign aid from being shipped to the island. Government contracts go to U.S. organizations that often fail to complete their work. Public schools, shuttered by damage, are transitioned to charter schools.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY BASED RESPONDERS

Adapted from an article by Liz Barry, Greg Bloom, Willow Brugh, and Tammy Shapiro

Hurricane season last year was wild, right? Harvey, Irma, and Maria—each storm spreading more devastation across the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean. Many months later, communities are still recovering—especially Puerto Rico, where our government has outright failed its citizens. Our climate is obviously changing, and the resulting storms are intensifying: tornadoes, floods, even earthquakes (probably unrelated to climate, but now a new threat in areas with heavy fracking).

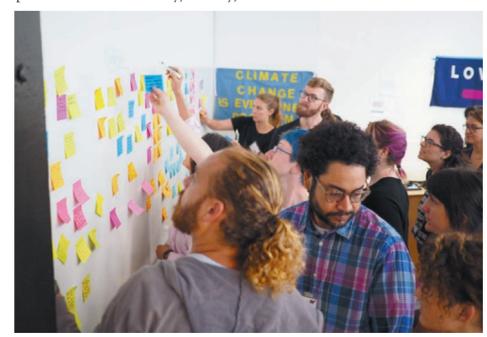
We do not seem to be particularly well-prepared. We've seen a recurring pattern in which official response agencies and organizations fail to deliver with the kind of focus, agility, and execution that we might expect—especially in historically marginalized communities, in which already-vulnerable people are often ignored or even disempowered by outside actors. FEMA notoriously failed in its response to Katrina, while the Red Cross has been repeatedly criticized for its disappointing performance after Sandy, Harvey, and Irma.

Meanwhile, we've also seen that the real first responders to a crisis are the people who live in the affected areas: community leaders who help struggling people face daily crises while just trying to get by, and neighbors who instinctively rise to help their neighbors.

Both of these patterns have deep historical roots, as outlined in Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine*, which examined how formal disaster response tends to address the interests of wealth and business (and entrench their power over the public good), and Rebecca Solnit's *A Paradise Built In Hell*, which highlighted how disasters bring out the best of humans' creativity and compassion for each other.

With the rise of the mobile web, these patterns are further complicated by seemingly spontaneous remote networks that have “shown up” to assist with tasks like crowdsourcing data, volunteer coordination, and more. These networks are more rapid and distributed than the formal disaster response sector; however, they also lack any of the accountability, training, and resources that formal institutions (supposedly) entail. Given our experiences to date, we believe that the promise of remote digital networks needs to be realized through intentional practices, and guided by community leadership—and that without such deliberate practice, these new modes of chaotic response might yield unintentional harm.

Many of us (including the authors of this post) have participated in these emergent responses to recent disasters. We've experienced the rush of “doing it ourselves,” through efforts animated not by charity for the unfortunate, but rather mutual aid with our neighbors. We've seen clearly both the promise and the peril of modern digitally-enabled and network-led crisis response and recovery. We believe it's both possible and urgent to improve our collective capacities for disaster response, so that they may more appropriately support local priorities and leadership in times of crisis. Through these experiences, we have formed an ever-growing network of people who have a shared interest in cultivating a better practice of community-led disaster response.



DECOLONIZATION IS NEEDED MORE THAN EVER

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PUERTO RICO

Know the history of the region. This is something that community-led crisis responders say to those coming into a region impacted by crisis. But most histories are written by the colonizers, and so the role of educator also falls on the shoulders of those fighting to survive.

At the Crisis Convening event in Newark, New Jersey, Puerto Rican participants Jessica, Luis, and Raquela gave a brief history of Puerto Rico to a room of folks interested in community-led crisis response and environmental justice. What follows is adapted from their presentation.

Puerto Rico was colonized by the Spanish for 400 years. Just as the fight for independence was taking hold, the Spanish-American War ended and Puerto Rico fell under United States rule. Our timeline begins there, in 1898. It is a story of resistance, industrialization, imposed poverty and debt, diminished schooling, imprisonment, bombs hidden on beaches, and a growing demand for self-sufficiency.

In 1917, Puerto Ricans were granted citizenship, but in a different category. It meant that residents could receive financial aid for education, but men who did so could be eligible for the draft. Puerto Ricans still couldn't elect anyone who has a hand in American politics: no congressional or presidential votes. While elections for local positions would occur, the U.S. ultimately had veto power to override their votes.

The United States wanted to show that industrialization could help lift a community out of poverty, but that poverty persisted. In 1920, a new fight for independence began. As part of the push back against this fight, the official language of Puerto Rico, including the language of education, was changed to English, forcing many to drop out of school. After four decades of this, it was finally accepted that it wasn't working, and the primary language in education was changed back to Spanish.

In 1952 came a ray of hope. The United Nations was working to bring independence to “non-self-governing territories” and Puerto Rico was reclassified as an *estado libre asociado*, or free associated state—though it didn't become a state, nor was it free.

In the 1920s, more than half of Puerto Ricans were in favor of independence. Now that number is far smaller. This might be attributed to the brutal oppression of the independence movement. There is a well-documented history of persecution, killing, and jailing of Puerto Rican nationalists. Oscar López Rivera, Puerto Rico's longest-held political prisoner, was just released after 36 years.

In the 1960s, organizing against the military complex reached a new height. For decades, the U.S. military had used Puerto Rico to test bombs, contraceptives, and Agent Orange—without consent from residents. They even rented out the region for other countries to bomb! Organizers against these practices joined the existing movements for independence.

The realities of these activities were realized in 1999, when a civilian was mistakenly killed by bombs dropped on the island of Vieques, a site used as a bombing range in military-training exercises. People took to the streets to protest his death, and demanded that the Navy leave the island. It wasn't until 2003 that they actually left. This was a huge win, crossing political lines, generational lines, and transcending those who wanted

statehood versus independence. But after six decades of military exercises, the island is still littered with contamination and unexploded ordnance.

Financially, Puerto Rico has steadily declined since the '70s, amassing \$73 billion in debt. For a century, Ley Jones, or the Jones Act, has kept a stranglehold on the economy, banning shipments from foreign countries, and requiring that all shipments of goods between the island and the mainland be done with ships that are built, owned, and crewed by Americans.

In 2016, Obama put in place a fiscal control board. The Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) appointed seven people who don't live in Puerto Rico to determine how the budget is spent. This put a halt to all investment in infrastructure, and made massive cuts to education, health care, and pensions, and led to the privatization of schools, hospitals, utilities, and the airport. As you might imagine, this has caused further poverty. Hurricane Maria in 2017, further exacerbated the situation. Money is going to contractors who often don't do the work. School closures result in a transition to charter schools. And the profits are going into the pockets of outsiders.



The government has not shown up in a useful way, and so it's up to the community organizers who have been around through these movements to serve the people to Puerto Rico. Incredible work has been done to build community kitchens and farming projects, occupy abandoned schools for housing, and rebuild infrastructure.

This is a moment to build the empowerment movement. Puerto Ricans know they can do things by themselves, for themselves. This is why there is pushback when you ask to help. The best way to help Puerto Ricans is to listen first.

A TRANSLOCAL GATHERING OF SOLIDARITY

This map displays organizations that took part in the July 2018 Crisis Convening & Barnraising

