

OPINION

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How Foundations Can Make a Difference After Puerto Rico's Latest Natural Disaster

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RICARDO ARDUENGO/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Soon after the New Year, Puerto Ricans woke up to a new reality: The earth had shaken so hard it pushed most of us out of bed. With power out and the island in total darkness, we took to the streets to speak to our neighbors about what was happening and how to respond. We quickly learned that the shocks we felt came from a 6.5-magnitude earthquake, something virtually unknown in Puerto Rico, as the last major earthquake was in 1918. It was not long before another quake hit, and then another. Since then, we have been hit by thousands of small earthquakes and aftershocks.

Surveying the damage, and skeptical of local government's ability to respond, those from less-affected areas took aid to those hardest hit in the south. They had learned the lessons of Hurricane Maria, which laid waste to the island two years ago, when people waited in vain for government relief. This time, everyday Puerto Ricans

rushed to help. Some of us joined caravans to devastated areas and saw the damage firsthand: people living in tents and parking lots, coping with extreme heat. They told us no one from government agencies had visited. They did not know if it was safe to return to their homes. They were traumatized by the constant shaking of the earth. The feeling of helplessness and abandonment that followed Hurricanes Irma and Maria was creeping back.

Foundations and nonprofits on the island have played a key role, mobilizing quickly to help. But as Puerto Ricans working in philanthropic institutions based in the United States, we have sometimes seen confusion among major grant makers about their responsibility to respond in moments like these.

Often, we have had to borrow, beg, and even move money from different programs within our institutions to fund critical work on the island. Some of us have managed to create permanently funded programs (like the Open Society Foundations' Puerto Rico Project), while others have established grant-making priorities that include Puerto Rico (such as the support for Puerto Rican diaspora communities under the Ford Foundation's Cities and States effort). Still others have moved emergency funds, as the Nathan Cummings Foundation did in the aftermath of Maria. And yet we continue to feel the burden of educating our colleagues internally and within our philanthropic networks about the island's challenges — and convincing them that Puerto Rico matters.

Addressing the Cause

As we dig out from this latest disaster, we call on our colleagues in philanthropy to step up again and consider giving to groups on the island struggling with the effects of earthquakes that have deeply damaged infrastructure and disrupted Puerto Ricans' daily lives.

The good news is the pathways for philanthropic support are clearer than ever. Social-justice groups on the island are more organized and better coordinated than before Maria. After the twin natural disasters, and man-made challenges such as Congress's 2016 imposition of a fiscal oversight board that ignored the voices of Puerto Ricans, those on the ground are in a better position to build on the decades of amazing work to defend human and civil rights, prevent displacement, protect critical land, and safeguard access to education, retirement benefits, and fair wages.

The efforts of these activists helped topple Gov. Ricardo Rosselló in the summer of 2019, in a surge of civic engagement fueled in part by his government's incompetent response to Hurricane Maria. These same activists have now revealed that Rosselló's successor, Gov. Wanda Vázquez, has been hiding critical emergency aid from earthquake survivors. The tactics, creativity, and strength of the Puerto Ricans who marched to demand change have inspired movements across Latin America and the United States.

We hope they will inspire our fellow grant makers, too, and build on the solidarity we have seen in the two years since Maria, during which philanthropic giving has increased sixfold. But the island needs more help than ever. Those thinking about giving now should understand that their impact will go further if they support groups that are addressing the causes of Puerto Rico's current crisis, which is ultimately political.

The Maria Fund, created after storms Irma and Maria to help the island rebuild, also supports a growing network of grassroots organizations working to defend our land from disaster capitalism. In the two years since its founding, the fund has given grants to more than 40 groups, gathered over 70 members of the social-justice community in Puerto Rico, trained dozens of community organizers, and supported campaigns to defend pensioners and push for the audit of the billions of dollars of debt that plagues the island. In the process, the Maria Fund is not only building grassroots strength on the island, it is also helping us realize the dream of a Puerto Rico by and for Puerto Ricans. We have an opportunity to calm the political storms and prepare for future natural disasters in a way that puts community first.

Organizations on the island stand ready to work with grant makers and donors based elsewhere to help rebuild and repair what is broken in Puerto Rico — and give its people the agency they need to make a better tomorrow.

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