

Much needed changes in disaster recovery planning and policy in Puerto Rico

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Introduction. Puerto Rico's capacity as a country to succeed in these times of climate change has been continuously tested. September 2022 marks the 5-year anniversary of Hurricane María — an event that changed the livelihoods of millions of Puerto Ricans in countless ways. While social, economic, and environmental problems in Puerto Rico began long before hurricanes Irma and María struck in 2017, the availability of billions of dollars of federal funds for hazard mitigation and disaster recovery presented an opportunity to become more resilient. But as the recent experience with Hurricane Fiona has shown, Puerto Rico is not better prepared to deal with shocks and stresses than it was five (5) years ago.

Hurricane Fiona and other recent events have shed new light on Puerto Rico's extreme structural vulnerability to socio-ecological shocks and stresses, mainly due to the precariousness of public infrastructure and the increasing social inequality. Despite the availability of billions of dollars of federal funds for hazard mitigation and disaster recovery, these ills have not properly addressed. Puerto Rico needs to correct current trends in order to transition into a more just and humane recovery. This requires transforming deeply rooted tendencies of top-down, centralized planning styles into more bottom-up planning processes that lead to community empowerment and equitable distribution of resources. Research and empirical findings suggest three key issues that must be addressed: (1) lack of meaningful community participation, (2) minimal capacity building, and (3) wrongful prioritization of compliance over planning¹. Findings also suggest that a great deal can be improved through (a) an equity-oriented interpretation of federal guidelines and the exercise of bureaucratic discretion, and (b) enabling networks to build local capacity for community and economic development.²

Public Participation. Disaster recovery literature agrees that one of the most important aspects in recovery planning is organizing public participation. Public engagement helps practitioners document and understand vulnerabilities, impacts, needs, and priorities, all which populate the details of recovery plans. Also, evidence suggests that public engagement in institutional recovery planning processes is important because plans are unlikely to succeed if imposed from outside or lacking broad community support.³

Since the development of the first CDBG-DR Action Plan in 2018, local organizations have urged the Puerto Rico Department of Housing (*hereinafter*, Vivienda) to create guidelines that ensure a just recovery by prioritizing real and timely participation. Yet Vivienda's approach to citizen participation has been managed in a way that avoids real community engagement and empowerment. In compliance with

¹ Torres-Cordero (forthcoming). The (Not So) Invited Spaces of Participation: The Case of Post-María Puerto Rico. *Journal of the American Planning Association*.

² Torres-Cordero (2020). Cordero, A. L. T. (2020). What Is Possible? Policy Options for Long-term Disaster Recovery in Puerto Rico. *Centro Journal*, 32(3).

³ Schwab, J. (Ed.) (2014). Planning for Post-Disaster Recovery: Next Generation. (Planning Advisory Service Report 576). *American Planning Association*.

HUD requirements, Vivienda developed a Citizen Participation Plan. The plan is centered around informing citizens about the recovery programs and funding opportunities, and different ways in which citizens can access public information. Planning literature, however, describes this level of involvement as tokenism⁴. Under these conditions, particularly when information is provided at a late stage in planning, people have little opportunity to influence the program design.⁵

Also, in compliance with HUD requirements, Vivienda created a Citizen Advisory Committee. This group includes representatives from different local organizations who have indeed advocated for greater equitable distribution of funds and community engagement. Yet, this approach to community involvement has very limited impact on increasing community engagement and empowerment.

Capacity Building. An important step towards developing adequate and sustainable citizen participation in post-disaster recovery is to enhance the existing planning capacities of local governments and communities (or develop new ones). To facilitate this, CDBG-DR action planning must be attentive to local capacity and aim to mitigate planning vulnerabilities through participatory processes, complementing multiple programs rather than positioning them for competition.

In Puerto Rico, having the Municipal Recovery Planning (MRP) program compete with City Revitalization program limits local capabilities to engage in both programs effectively and adequately. And without sufficient engagement from municipal planning practitioners and local communities, the prospect of building greater planning capacity at local levels diminishes, resulting in turn in less opportunities for increasing resiliency and climate adaptation. This problem extends to the Whole Community Resilience Planning (WCRP) process. Given that communities need either to partner with a nonprofit organization or a municipal government to be eligible for WCRP funds, having all three programs compete is detrimental. This also reduces the chances low-income and marginalized communities have to engage with invited spaces of action.

Planning over Compliance. For many local practitioners, MRP is more a compliance requirement than a planning opportunity for most municipal governments, as evidenced by their level and type of engagement. Although the program itself is designed to prioritize compliance and grant management over planning, this might also reflect the limited planning capabilities many municipalities in Puerto Rico have. In any case, the limited engagement from municipal practitioners, stakeholders and communities perpetuates traditional centralized, top-down planning structures which in turn limit community engagement and empowerment. Regarding WCRP, complying with program requirements is too burdensome and time-consuming. Communities had to partner with registered nonprofits with the organizational qualifications to deal with all compliance issues and capable of carrying out participatory community planning. Few organizations have these capabilities. These conditions tilt the balance towards big nonprofits that already have sufficient capacity instead of prioritizing the development of new planning capacities among less resourced groups.

⁴ Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216-224.

⁵ Arnstein (1969, p. 219).