



October 10, 2017

President Donald J. Trump  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

On behalf of Oxfam America, an international organization that provides life-saving assistance in humanitarian emergencies worldwide, I am writing to urge you to take further immediate action to help Puerto Rico recover from the destruction caused by Hurricane Maria.

Three weeks after the storm devastated the island on September 20, the situation remains dire, particularly for those in rural areas. The electrical grid was severely damaged, leaving most of the island without electricity; over half of population is still without access to potable water. Communication is spotty due to the loss of 85% of cellphone towers; many roads are still impassable and badly damaged; and lack of fuel for generators means many hospitals are operating at partial capacity.

While we appreciate the federal government's emergency response efforts thus far, and recognize the challenges in disseminating aid quickly, we must do more to avoid further loss of life. As Puerto Rico begins its long road to full recovery, it is also important that the island build back better and that the residents lead the efforts to rebuild to ensure greater resilience. Ocean and air temperatures are rising, leading to fiercer storms and increasing hazards for coastal and island communities, including repercussions from rising sea levels. Puerto Rico will undoubtedly face more severe threats as a result of these trends. Rebuilding efforts must take these unprecedented risks into account.

In considering supplemental or emergency funding for Puerto Rico and additional policy changes, we respectfully urge you to:

- **Quickly request sufficient supplemental appropriations for disaster relief funding specifically for Puerto Rico.** The dollar amount should be sufficient to address the damage, initially assessed at upwards of \$70 billion, and should contain the necessary oversight to ensure that most vulnerable populations' needs are met. The funding should include immediate emergency relief resources, infrastructure repair funds (including

investments in updating the electrical grid to create a more efficient, affordable energy system for the Island), funding streams for rebuilding housing, and economic development tools that allow for a speedier recovery.

Moreover, any disaster relief funding must account for Puerto Rico's ten-year fiscal crisis and *mitigate*--rather than compound--its struggling economic situation. Every effort should be made to provide relief dollars in the form of grants rather than loans. Moreover, we would urge you to work with Congress to instruct the Financial Oversight and Management Board to restore the \$350 million in municipal aid it slashed as part of Puerto Rico's austerity measures.

Finally, FEMA, and all other government agencies responding to the disaster, should provide emergency dollars with no strings attached. The cost-sharing requirements typically stipulated by many government agencies would impede Puerto Rico's ability to access available resources. All agencies' cost-sharing requirements should be waived, and FEMA's already-approved waiver of 180 days should be further extended.

- **Help relieve Puerto Rico's debt.** At over \$72 billion, Puerto Rico's debt liability has resulted in a crippling debt-to-GDP ratio of 68%. The United States government must provide debt relief through erasing all debt obligations to commercial institutions. In the meantime, paying down Puerto Rico's onerous debt should not come at the expense of restoring the island's basic functions. Puerto Rico must use its resources to rebuild hospitals, schools, homes, and roads, rather than siphon them off to creditors. As such, no immediate disaster relief funds should be used to repay debts.
- **Extend the Jones Act Waiver for one year.** We appreciate the Administration's initial ten-day waiver of the Jones Act. However, given the ongoing humanitarian and reconstruction needs, we urge you to extend the waiver for a year. This waiver will expand Puerto Rico's access to oil, food, medicine, clothing, and building materials, and help lower the cost of all imported goods. Waiving the Jones Act will ensure the most efficient use of taxpayer resources and a faster rebuilding effort.
- **Prioritize funding for the most vulnerable to ensure speedy help to those bearing the heaviest burden from Hurricane Maria.** As noted above, the island has faced significant hardships predating Hurricane Maria. Nearly half the population lives below the poverty line--double that of the country's poorest state--and almost 60 percent of children live in poverty. We know that, generally, women, children, and the frail and elderly often comprise a significant proportion of the worst affected people in disasters, and as we complete our initial on-the-ground assessment of conditions, we expect that the situation in Puerto Rico will yield similar results. Therefore, we encourage you to prioritize funding for those most vulnerable in any supplemental request. Humanitarian aid must target the poorest individuals, especially in rural and mountain areas, and incorporate both infrastructure as well as immediate housing needs.

- **Extend FEMA’s 60-day deadline for filing claims for disaster relief.** The loss of power and spotty access to the internet has rendered it nearly impossible for people to assess their property damage and submit claims in the normal timeframe. Given the possibility of an extended outage spanning 6 months, FEMA should extend the deadline for at least an additional 120 days.
- **Support a locally-led response.** We urge you to include language in any supplemental request to Congress that incentivizes funding and hiring local people and organizations first, and to ensure that disaster survivors participate in and benefit from recovery dollars. To the greatest extent possible (as long as it does not lead to unnecessary delays), recovery dollars should be directed to local governments, businesses, local people, and civil society organizations. A locally-led response will help minimize overhead costs and stimulate the local economy, while avoiding the mistakes from previous responses (like Hurricane Katrina). Investing in a locally-led response also includes strengthening the organizational and technical capacity of local partners to respond to, mitigate, adapt, and recover from shocks and stresses. Cities, states, and territories need to be able to anticipate, plan for and reduce disaster risks, as well as to effectively manage small and medium-scale disasters when they occur, without the need for outside assistance. We therefore urge you to ensure the supplemental request includes any necessary directives and language that supports capacity building for municipalities and other local organizations.

In the face of great tragedy, the United States government has the opportunity to exhibit leadership and help begin to reverse the downward trajectory that Puerto Rico has so long experienced. While it is rare for Oxfam to devote resources to emergencies in wealthier countries, we were on the ground during and after Katrina, and have played a strong role in advocating for policies in the Gulf states that ensure local retraining and hiring as communities seek to rebuild. In Puerto Rico, the challenges of the response have again compelled Oxfam America to commit to devoting resources and technical support to help the relief effort. But clearly, many tens of billions of federal dollars will be needed to help Puerto Rico build back stronger.

We urge you to promptly request—and work to help pass--a robust funding package, with the necessary oversight governing the allocation of humanitarian assistance and reconstruction funds. The lives of too many Americans, and the very future of Puerto Rico, are at stake.

Sincerely,



Abby Maxman  
President and CEO  
Oxfam America

CC: The Honorable Elaine Duke, Acting Secretary of Homeland Security  
The Honorable William "Brock" Long, Administrator, Federal Emergency Management Agency  
The Honorable Ben Carson, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development  
The Honorable Mick Mulvaney, Director, Office of Management and Budget  
Lieutenant General Todd Semonite, Commanding General and Chief of Engineers,  
United States Army Corps of Engineers