

Analysis of pre- and post-disaster management and recovery in Puerto Rico from Hurricane Maria

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Hurricane Maria, similar to other recent emergency events, continues to remind emergency management of the continuous threats communities encounter. Years prior to Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rico was experiencing dire economic conditions which accelerated when the government declared bankruptcy in 2014. Austerity measures were put in place to confront the growing public debt resulting in higher taxes, a crumbling infrastructure, and economic restrictions impacting pensions and other social services. On top of these economic struggles, Puerto Rico experienced catastrophic damages from Hurricanes Irma and Maria. The aftermath of these storms and the subsequent experiences with seismic events and the COVID-19 pandemic are reminders of the complexities emergency management is currently facing. As the frequency and intensity of major weather events continues to rise there is a need for a holistic understanding for emergency managers to better mitigate, prepare, response, and recover to disasters and emergency situations.

This special issue provides such understanding. Grounded on the nexus between energy, water, and food, this collection of manuscripts explores the emergency management challenges faced in Puerto Rico in relation to several areas of inquiry, including housing, agriculture, the hospitality industry, communication, health and mental health, public health, and access to healthcare services. These studies not only identify some of the challenges faced in these contexts but provide recommendations and tools to use in future emergencies.

It touches on disaster population displacement, of particularly importance to Puerto Rico, which has seen its population decline from 3.7 million in 2010 to 3.3 million in 2020 with an accelerated exodus after Hurricane Maria. Other topics include disaster planning and response to vulnerable populations such as those in correctional facilities.

The issue also raises awareness of inclusive governance for long-term recovery plans and processes. In addition to practical guides and outreach tools to handle other hazards triggered by Hurricane Maria such as landslides.

The pre- and post-experience of Puerto Rico from Hurricane Maria, while unique in its challenges and scope, does provide an example of the changing nature of events that emergency management needs to contend with. Economic struggles coupled with the aftermath of hurricanes, landslides, drought, tornadoes, floods, and pandemics reveal how cascading disaster and emergency events provide the context in which emergency management operates. This special issue raises the awareness of this reality and provides a comprehensive look, not only of the challenges, but potential solutions and recommendations on how to deal with the ever-changing nature of emergency management.

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