

A NEW FRONT LINE: COMMUNITY-LED DISASTER RESPONSE LESSONS FOR THE COVID-19 MOMENT

Ginny Goldman and Anna Fink, April 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the COVID-19 scenario unfolds, we examine valuable models of success as well as missed opportunities from prior moments of disaster. In early 2020, Amalgamated Foundation examined community-led disaster responses from the 2017 Hurricanes Harvey (Houston), Irma (Florida), and Maria (Puerto Rico). In this crisis, as in all disasters, the problems and disparities of our society are exacerbated and accelerated. The limitations of both public and private sector market failures are amplified as are the structural inequalities that undermine the speed and thoroughness of recovery. We hope that the insights from this examination can serve to inform and strengthen collective response to the pandemic.

A New Model Emerges at the Speed of Trust

Our research revealed a new model for community-led funds in disaster response:

- Community-led funds were anchored by a set of allied organizational leaders with pre-existing, deep local relationships who were able to collaborate and move nimbly.
- Decisions on the allocation of resources were made by local leaders who knew first-hand where highest needs exist; were accountable to a constituency; and acted with urgency.
- Leaders kept their eyes on long-term needs, looking beyond immediate response, and focusing on just recovery and systemic change.
- Funds direct aid, legal support, community outreach, and long term work including multi-year organizing, advocacy and voter engagement.

Five imperatives to build responsive, accountable systems for weathering the next “storm.”

Whether the next storm is a hurricane, pandemic or a human-made disaster, our discussions with on-the-ground activists demonstrated to us that responsive disaster relief – driven by community-led funding – can be most impactful when guided by these *five imperatives*:

1. **Respond to and Provide for the Immediate Needs of People.** *Community-led funds should be fully funded in order to fill in gaps where conventional aid organizations either move too slowly or leave out the hardest to reach.*
2. **Create the Mechanisms to Capture and Deploy Charitable Donations in Real Time.** *The relationships, technology and administrative capacity must be in place in order to be ready to flip the switch to capture and deploy resources.*
3. **Identify Systems Failures Quickly and Advocate for Interventions and Repairs.** *Community-based organizations serve an essential role of ensuring the proper functioning of larger disaster relief systems, and developing temporary interventions that lead to long-term solutions.*
4. **Move Ambitious Demands for Federal Funds: A Plan and a Price Tag.** *This requires that national and state-based groups have the capacity and skills to pivot quickly to follow the money at every stage to ensure greatest impact.*
5. **Amplify and Accelerate Demands for Systemic Change.** *These are moments to invest in solidifying organizations leading the charge to solve the root causes of our country's biggest problems.*

A Next Level Social Change Ecosystem: Facing COVID-19 and Beyond

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds in the U.S., we are witnessing the same post disaster patterns emerge at an unimaginable scale. To support community partners who have the vision and capacity to drive major systemic change in this time of crisis requires an increased level of urgency, collaboration, funding, and imagination. We hope that by incorporating these ideas into the philanthropic response to the pandemic, communities and our society as a whole can emerge stronger:

- **Solidify organizations leading the charge year-round, not just when disasters strike.** Invest in vehicles that will endure and continue to translate lessons across crises.
- **Recognize that a perpetual state of recovery is the new normal.** Catalyze strategies to transform our outdated disaster recovery system into one aligned with new realities.
- **Look toward the women who are leading, and fund them.** Women, and in particular women of color, are stepping up in major roles, collaborating and innovating, and will continue to do so with or without recognition or resources.
- **Build relationships with intermediaries who have technology, administrative capacity, trust and accountability** to capture and move money toward frontline community-based organizations.
- **Invest in the year round democracy and voter engagement work** to continually shift the policies and practices that threaten vulnerable communities and undermine an equitable recovery.

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“It is a civilizational wake-up call. A powerful message—spoken in the language of fires, floods, droughts, and extinctions—telling us that we need an entirely new economic model and a new way of sharing this planet.”

Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*

INTRODUCTION

Moments of disaster – be they health, climate, or economic – provide a window into the fundamental frailty of our systems. Disasters amplify existing public and private sector market failures and the structural inequalities that undermine the speed and thoroughness of recovery. Yet at the same time, these disasters offer the philanthropic, public and private sectors a unique moment of opportunity to rebuild and reinvest in a more equitable future. As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds at an unprecedented magnitude of speed, scope and scale, it is critical to examine and employ models of success, lessons learned, and missed opportunities from prior disaster events.

In early 2020, recognizing that climate change presented new imperatives for a strategic response to more frequent and devastating natural disasters, the Amalgamated Foundation embarked upon a review of community-led disaster responses seeking to explore the following:

- Key elements for success in fundraising and disaster response;
- How to strengthen the model in preparation for more frequent disasters; and
- What, if any, centralized infrastructure would facilitate better results in the future.

Not anticipating just how quickly and thoroughly COVID-19 would consume the United States, this project quickly pivoted to focus on key lessons that could be instructive in the current moment. Many lessons can be learned from previous responses to climate disasters and the unprecedented level of federal resources that will soon flow into communities across the country. While much of this research is still in process, this paper provides a first glimpse of examples from 2017 hurricanes including Harvey (Houston), Irma (Florida), and Maria (Puerto Rico) that may serve to inform and strengthen collective response to this pandemic.

THE POST-DISASTER ENVIRONMENT: PATTERNS OF REPEATED EXPERIENCE

In 2017, Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico were forced to respond to back-to-back hurricanes in just over six weeks, resulting in a combined \$92 billion in damages.¹ Many familiar disaster relief patterns emerged that we continue to witness time and again, and are detailed below.

The generosity of Americans is at its peak, as people rush to give.

Immediately following a disaster, emotions run high and individuals contribute what eventually amounts to many millions of dollars. Everyday people who are often far from the epicenter of the crisis are willing to collect large sums to help distant communities. These dollars overwhelmingly flow to large, traditional charities like the American Red Cross and the United Way, and to funds established by high profile leaders such as former presidents, local mayors, and celebrities. For example, in 2017 the American Red Cross raised \$524.5 million to assist residents affected by Hurricane Harvey, a further \$97 million for Hurricane Irma, and \$71.7 million for Hurricane Maria. Celebrity-led funding efforts including the Hand in Hand Hurricane Relief Fund raised over \$62 million to help hurricane victims in Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico. Though well-intended, these funding mechanisms are often slow-moving and not grounded in the impacted communities.

Deployment of major federal funding is triggered.

Billions, and at times, trillions, of relief-related federal dollars come into play after a disaster. For example, following the 2017 hurricanes, U.S. Congress passed two Disaster Relief packages and FEMA allocated nearly \$35 billion in recovery for three storms. Communities were slated to receive funds for emergency response, rebuilding roads and transit networks, food aid, medical supplies, and housing and community development. State and local governments are responsible for administering these federal funds through local programs that provide assistance to individuals and families. But this system is designed to serve middle-class homeowners – not renters, people experiencing homelessness, or immigrants. As former FEMA director Craig Fugate put it, “[t]he system is really designed for the middle class. It’s not designed to take care of pre-existing conditions.”²

¹ Some argue actual damages are much higher than federal government estimates since federal calculations exclude the impact on vulnerable populations

² Danny Vinik, ‘People Just Give Up’: Low-Income Hurricane Victims Slam Federal Relief Programs, Politico, May 29, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/05/29/houston-hurricane-harvey-fema-597912>

Racial and economic disparities are exposed and exacerbated.

Disasters expose immense pre-existing racial and economic inequality, and exacerbate problems that millions of Americans living on the margins face on a daily basis. Poverty, housing insecurity, food shortages, inaccessible transportation, insufficient healthcare, and problems that the poor, working class, and communities of color already experience are worsened in the face of a disaster; and, the already weak systems that address these obstacles are further debilitated. This pattern is even more stark in states and U.S. territories where a history of colonialism and disinvestment in fragile economic systems are stretched to breaking point. Allocations of federal disaster relief funding intensify structural and racial inequities, such as wealth gaps, that predate the storms.³

Following Hurricane Harvey, for example, Houston's dire homeless situation grew much worse. Ordinary citizen volunteers waited for hours in line to help out at Houston's GRB Convention Center (the main shelter designated for those flooded out of their homes). Once inside, they saw 10,000 individuals huddled across the Center's 123,000 square feet. Many of the people inside the Center experienced homelessness well before the storm. The city's Coalition for the Homeless reported a 14.9 percent increase in people needing housing after the storm, and 18 percent of the homeless surveyed in 2018 said their homelessness was a result of Harvey.

Tenuous community trust in government and corporate interests is exacerbated.

The tenuous relationship between community, corporations, and government quickly becomes a focal point as Americans look for help and leadership on a broader scale. The questions of which services should be provided by the government versus private entities are heightened as the stakes for survival are raised. Where the government has structures for accountability, scale, and uniformity in the provision of desperately needed services, corporate actors often see an opportunity to make money and gain public approval. Existing, broad distrust in both government and corporations can hamper the recovery process and make it more chaotic. Furthermore, federal disaster programs take too long to roll out and have too many requirements that prevent people from getting the help they desperately need. Often, there are many layers of government working on the same problem, across multiple agencies and state, local, and federal boundaries. Government is supposed to be able to help people in times of crisis, and its failure to do so, especially for those most vulnerable, threatens the very foundation of our democracy as people's faith in government is further eroded.

Disaster capitalists pounce.

Corporate actors seize times of crisis to realize a pre-existing agenda made possible by the fragile post-disaster atmosphere: privatizing entire school systems, acquiring vast swaths of land for massive gentrification and development deals, or swooping in to manage enormous federal contracts when underfunded local bureaucracies do not appear to be up to the task. For example, Puerto Ricans suffered for 11 months without electricity after Maria knocked down 80 percent of the island's utility poles and

³ <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/insult-injury-natural-disasters-and-residents-financial-health>

transmission lines. Sensing opportunity for profit, many companies including Duke Energy Corporation, Exelon Corporation, and PSE&G Services Corporation sought to privatize the state-controlled Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA), though the deal has continued to hit severe roadblocks to date. In Houston, when 204,000 properties were damaged following Harvey, billion-dollar Wall Street funds including Tricon Capital Group and Cerberus Capital Management snapped up thousands of properties for dimes on the dollar – pushing out local families, driving up the cost of housing over the long term, and making it impossible for county government agencies to buy land in order to protect flood-prone areas from future disaster.

In each of these instances, corporate actors were poised to seize on these crises in order to increase their scale and scope of influence including the privatization of entire school systems and the purchase of large swaths of property that ultimately drive post-disaster gentrification.

A NEW MODEL EMERGES AT THE SPEED OF TRUST

In 2017, in response to a series of hurricanes, a new type of community-led disaster response model emerged. This model was anchored by three funds: the Harvey Community Relief Fund, the Irma Fund, and the Maria Fund – which collectively raised more than \$12 million⁴. Writer and activist Adrienne Maree Brown encourages organizers to move at the “speed of trust”. That in a constantly changing world it is our ability to focus on critical connections more than critical mass — that building relationships allows us to build the resilience necessary to shape a new society.⁵ It is exactly this level of deep trust and long-standing relationships among partners through common organizing efforts, prior disaster recovery, and political campaigns that set in motion radical collaboration on the ground to successfully initiate new vehicles able to function at the pace required by incredibly challenging post-disaster environments.

Each Fund benefited from the leadership of women (particularly women of color) who had a history of community empowerment work, on-the-ground intelligence, commitment to accountability, and national relationships. As community leaders of base-building organizations focused on broad community and economic empowerment, these women were not driven by core organizational mandates or funding directives, but by a deep dedication to relief, recovery, and a long-term vision for change. While each effort was tailored to unique regional circumstances, they shared common elements and collectively point to a new model for community-led funds in disaster response.

⁴ Fund leadership and partners listed at end of this report.

⁵ Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds, Adrienne Maree Brown, 2017

Community-led funds were anchored by a set of allied organizational leaders with pre-existing, deep local relationships who were able to collaborate and move nimbly.

Our fund was governed by seven community organizations who formed the steering committee and decided how to dispatch resources quickly. Deep trust among organizations in our state was the only reason we could stand it up so quickly.

Andrea Mercado, Executive Director New Florida Majority

Decisions on allocation of resources were made by local leaders who knew first-hand where highest needs exist, were accountable to a constituency, and acted with urgency.

We'd been down this road before through other storms, we knew the neighborhoods and the people who would be left behind and funded the groups who would get the help where it needed to go. This allowed us to immediately jump off with legitimacy, speak in one voice quickly putting out our positions on recovery to the press with clear demands out of the gate about recovery dollars and equity.

Chrishelle Palay, Director Houston Organizing Movement for Equity

Leaders kept their eyes on long-term needs, predicting where resources would be required past immediate response, and were ready to fight for just recovery and systemic change.

We invested in a set of movement leaders who had a vision for building power in Puerto Rico. What you see now is alignment and collaboration among incredible leaders on the ground after Maria; we must continuously invest in order to sustain through these moments, to survive from one disaster to the next and advance our learning to keep growing.

Xiomara Caro Diaz, Executive Director Maria Fund

Allocations for grant distribution were calculated in four categories: direct aid, legal support, community outreach, and long-term work including multi-year organizing, advocacy and voter engagement.

FIVE IMPERATIVES TO BUILD RESPONSIVE, ACCOUNTABLE SYSTEMS FOR WEATHERING THE “STORMS”

In order to move from a reactive mode to a responsive stance that increases community voice and self-determination over time, organizers, advocates, public officials and supportive funders have a responsibility to develop the tools and capacities to accomplish five main imperatives in short order. These imperatives hold true, whether the next storm is a hurricane, pandemic or a human-made disaster:

Respond to and provide for the immediate needs of people.

Community-based disaster funds provide a conduit to community organizations who can easily identify where the greatest needs exist. Almost instinctively, without instruction –

and usually without sufficient assets – local community members rise up to take care of one another, developing creative systems to provide financial resources to individuals in need, circumventing the arduous process and red tape of government and mainstream charity assistance.

In Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria, millions of people subsisted for weeks without sufficient food and cut off from essential services like electricity and telephone connections. The Maria Fund supported the opening of a communal space with an industrial kitchen and a landline to receive calls from community leaders from across the region. The Fund coordinated teams of volunteers to rescue people and open roads, cooked for groups of up to 300 people at a time, and supported local leaders who picked up food to feed entire neighborhoods.

Similarly, in Florida, when thousands of homes were without power after the hurricanes, community groups like Organize Florida and New Florida Majority activated hundreds of volunteers to distribute sandbags and food, provide rides to shelters, host community barbecues, and canvass neighborhoods with information about services available in their areas.

In Houston, Familias Immigrantes y Estudiantes en la Lucha (FIEL), canvassed apartment complexes with large concentrations of undocumented immigrants, provided assistance in navigating FEMA requirements, and alternative options for those not qualifying for federal aid. While performing this work, FIEL discovered undocumented renters in dangerous, mold-infested apartments who chose to stay rather than risk leaving without their deposit and with nowhere else to go. FIEL and the Texas Organizing Project involved Houston's housing and health departments to secure deposit returns and assist with housing transition plans to safe, new locations. When necessary, these organizations worked with the media to put pressure on landlords who refused to negotiate with tenants, and enlisted attorneys from Rio Grande Legal Aid (also a Harvey Fund grantee) to support their legal claims. While FIEL would not have met guidelines for most recovery grants following the storm, the Harvey Community Fund ensured that resources would move – knowing full well that major nonprofits would not know which apartments to go to first, much less work as creatively or as nimbly to assure needs were met.

Community-led funds are positioned, with adequate resources, to fill in gaps where conventional aid organizations either move too slowly or leave out the hardest to reach.

These efforts have the potential to save lives and build community and trust for the long haul, well after the immediate rescue and response phase. These efforts also provide an opportunity to capture stories and document lessons for better preparedness.

Create the mechanisms to capture and deploy charitable donations in real time.

When disaster hits, legacy organizations like the American Red Cross have the name recognition and platform to immediately activate as default recipient for ordinary

Americans' generosity. In truth, the overwhelming majority of funds contributed to help communities recover from disasters flow through national (or even international) organizations rather than local funds or entities. For example, in 2017 the American Red Cross raised \$693.2 million to assist those affected by Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria. The few exceptions to this rule tend to be funds set up by celebrities or former politicians who utilize their star power to attract streams of revenue and corporate donations which can receive brand benefit from association. After Hurricane Maria, for example, Jennifer Lopez, Marc Anthony, and Alex Rodriguez hosted a massive fundraiser telethon for Puerto Rico that raised at least \$35 million, and Houston's Mayor and County Executive raised \$114 million in response to Harvey.

Community-led funds represent a different value in a disaster. They are well-positioned to quickly support grassroots groups that are able to reach those often left behind, both during and after the storm. In Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico, this community-led rapid response model was successful because a group of networked, trusted leaders from the front lines stepped up to establish these funds – and because a set of national philanthropic and progressive leaders provided immediate support via platform development, fiscal sponsorship, amplification, and hand-to-hand fundraising.

For example, Amalgamated Foundation sparked the initiation of the Harvey Fund, which enabled Houston's local leadership to move nimbly through fund setup, host webinars to enlist support, and provide technical assistance necessary to amplify the plan. MoveOn immediately joined in, mobilizing its extensive membership list to raise \$475,000 from 7,000 members in a matter of days.

Strong networks of support between leaders on the ground and national allies are essential to credential and amplify the local funds at a nationwide scale in order to raise additional resources and to provide the administrative and financial support needed to house and manage these funds throughout the grantmaking cycle. The establishment of the Maria Fund in Puerto Rico provides a strong example of this. The Center for Popular Democracy (CPD) mirrored the locally established Harvey and Irma funds, and enlisted island-based leadership to establish a fund under the local leadership of Xiomara Diaz. An advisory board was quickly formed, engaging Puerto Rican leaders residing in the mainland U.S. with deep ties and commitment to the island. CPD used its media and online prowess to attract small dollar donations and celebrity relationships like Scarlett Johanson, who with the cast of The Avengers staged a reading of Our Town that raised \$500,000 for the fund.

Relationships, technology, and administrative capacity must be in place in order for local leaders to be ready to flip the switch. Performing the tasks necessary to capture and deploy resources as a crisis unfolds adds additional levels of stress and difficulty for local leadership. This technical work and oversight processes can, and should, be set up on the front end. Creating a centralized support system for this work would allow funds to get off the ground more quickly and nimbly, capture increased donations, manage incoming funds, and report on outcomes as efficiently as possible during a

crisis. This includes tools, technology, platforms, fiscal agreements, and approval processes for groups well-positioned to receive funds, and cultivation of relationships with media and influencers who can be deployed to expand the impact of the fund and position it as an alternative to traditional aid agencies.

Identify systems failures quickly and advocate for interventions and repairs.

During disasters, government agencies like FEMA, as well as large NGOs like the American Red Cross, kick into gear to serve the needs of people at magnitudes required by crises. However, despite repeated experience providing such aid, there are continual challenges in the capacity for these systems to adequately predict and prepare for what is needed on the ground. Though they may be successful in serving high-income and middle-class families, businesses, and homeowners, the constituencies most in need – including low wage workers, renters, immigrants, and elderly people – are often the hardest for these systems and entities to reach.

The community-led fund model enlists multi-issue groups, especially those engaged in electoral and voter engagement, and brings them to the table as soon as disaster strikes. With their ears to the ground, these groups are best suited to quickly gauge the situation and identify gaps, challenges, and needs in the community. These local leaders are well-positioned to monitor and address inevitable system failures spanning from issues in federal fund distribution processes to labor violations. Too often, this role is considered an ancillary benefit to the work of large NGOs and government agencies, yet it is critical and often it is these community-based organizations who must step in to provide necessary information and support. These groups are not equipped nor are they seeking to replace the government's role in these situations, however they are uniquely positioned to monitor and draw attention to major cracks in the system. They are able to develop temporary interventions that lead to long-term solutions, exposing systems failures and pointing to models that can be scaled and resourced to solve major problems for low-income communities of color following disasters.

Community-based organizations serve an essential role of ensuring the proper functioning of larger disaster relief systems.

In Florida after Hurricane Irma, community groups played a critical role in ensuring access to benefits, ultimately achieving major administrative changes. As disaster food stamp benefits became available, thousands of individuals arrived in person to apply, waiting in lines that stretched for hours around parks, malls, and other facilities. According to New Florida Majority and the Resistance Force, “Tens of thousands of people stood in long lines in Broward, Miami-Dade, and Palm Beach Counties, desperate to receive D-SNAP benefits. The crowds were so large in Broward and Miami-Dade that processing sites were shut down early at the request of law enforcement; at a single site in Miami, officials estimated that 50,000 people had arrived. The situation was hardly better in Palm Beach County, where the line at one

processing center had grown to 3,000 people by 7:00 a.m. and people waited up to 12 hours simply to be interviewed.⁶

The Miami Workers Center, New Florida Majority, Community Justice Project and Floridians with Disabilities filed a lawsuit to challenge the structure of these processing centers. As a result, an estimated 160,000 people were able to reopen their applications for D-SNAP, vulnerable Floridians were permitted to apply over the phone, and an additional \$4 million in benefits was allotted to those applicants previously denied.

Ambitious demands for federal funds: a plan and a price tag.

Once a disaster is declared, the federal government's process of budgetary allotment is initiated. This arduous process, involving the U.S. Congress, the White House, and multiple federal agencies, determines how big the recovery budget will be, which jurisdictions will administer what kinds of programs, and most importantly, which individuals and groups will be the primary beneficiaries of these all-important funds.

Federal disaster funding for housing recovery, social services, and infrastructure investment is often the largest source of funding a community sees for these activities in a generation. For example, following Hurricane Harvey, Houston received \$1.3 billion for housing recovery alone, more dollars than the city invested in housing in the prior 30 years combined.

Federal disaster relief moves in multiple phases: immediate crisis mitigation, support for people and communities in rebuilding, and (possibly) support for community resiliency and preparedness. The disbursement of such funds, however intentional or inadvertent, has historically increased the racial wealth gap⁷ favoring homeowners and business owners (overwhelmingly white and middle- or upper-income) over renters and low-wage workers (overwhelmingly communities of color).

The community-led fund in Houston was able to challenge this norm, drawing on an ecosystem of relationships in the city that was prepared from many years of working together through hurricane recovery. They were able to deploy quickly, relying on the fair housing expertise of Texas Appleseed and Texas Housers whose actions forced FEMA to include the true impact of the storm on socially vulnerable populations in their damage estimates, which in turn challenged the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's methodology for determining how much aid jurisdictions receive. They worked in partnership with the city's progressive Director of Housing and Community Development who was appointed with the strong support of grassroots groups like the Texas Organizing Project. Together, they ensured that \$2.5 billion remained under local control, rather than flowing through the state which has a history of discriminatory disaster spending. Their work also resulted in historic equity guidelines directing 80

⁶ A PEOPLE'S FRAMEWORK FOR DISASTER RESPONSE: Rewriting the Rules of Recovery after Climate Disasters; January 2020; https://resilienceforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/report_jan_v8.pdf

⁷ <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/insult-injury-natural-disasters-and-residents-financial-health>

percent of the city's housing recovery funds to low-income families.⁸ The newly formed HOME coalition then joined with labor groups in a months-long negotiation with the city to apply workplace standards, a minimum \$15/hour wage, and insurance benefits to all workers on more than \$300 million in multifamily construction projects.⁹

National and state-based groups require skills and expertise to pivot quickly and track how money is moving and for what purpose. This requires having plans in place and ecosystems that can be activated to follow the money at every stage ensuring it makes the greatest impact.

Successful collaboration between organizers, advocates, and local government leadership is unusual and is the result of long-term organizing investments prior to the storm. And yet, due to an inherently flawed federal disaster recovery system and underdeveloped capacity at the local and state level to create “off the shelf” dream plans and budgets in advance of crises, we tend to miss opportunities when disasters strike to “go for broke” when federal coffers open up.

A moment to amplify and accelerate demands for systemic change.

The aftermath of Hurricane Maria provides a stark example of the massive systemic failures that precede and are laid bare during a disaster. Puerto Rico demonstrates untenable limitations of current disaster relief mechanisms. A U.S. territory for more than a century and a colony with virtually no political power, for a decade prior to Maria, Puerto Rico experienced severe economic contraction, exploding debt, and austerity measures that left the island's infrastructure an empty shell. Hospitals and schools were shuttered, and estimates show government agencies cut the public workforce by 40 percent.¹⁰ Then the storm arrived.

For years, organizations based in Puerto Rico and on the U.S. mainland ran comprehensive campaigns to tackle the debt crisis, demand accountability from banks and corrupt politicians, put an end to austerity measures, and increase representational power for Puerto Ricans. Following Maria, many organizational leaders sprang into action in unexpected ways, including providing immediate response and mutual aid, and fighting for relief and solutions.

Construyamos Otro Acuerdo (Let's Build Another Agreement), a project supported by the Center for Popular Democracy, began amplifying the voices of pension holders and advocating for a fair financial plan to put Puerto Ricans first by mounting pressure on the Fiscal Control Board. This work brought public scrutiny and attention to some \$9

⁸ <https://recovery.houstontx.gov/updated-draft-guidelines-expand-program-eligibility-for-housing-relief-for-harvey-victims/>

⁹ <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/New-Houston-worker-protection-program-launched-13789924.php>

¹⁰ <https://forgeorganizing.org/article/we-fight-back-thrive-not-survive-bargaining-common-good-puerto-rico>

billion that the government stashed away – a so-called “surplus” achieved through stark austerity measures which the government intended to use in paying off debt that was structured to extract wealth from the island by hedge fund managers and bankers. The campaign succeeded in pressuring public officials to take steps toward diverting portions of the fund for needed public services instead, including the current COVID-19 response. In fact, during this health crisis, the island’s oversight board announced that they are considering taking pension cuts off the table in upcoming debt deals – long a core demand of the campaign.

These are moments to solidify organizations leading the charge on system root causes of our country’s biggest problems.

The community-led Maria Fund focused on support for visionary leaders and their organizations and is exponentially stronger today because of relationships built, cooperative outcomes achieved, and investments made to manage the storm’s impact. The Fund’s work has also lifted up issues like affordable housing, access to education, and financial corruption which were present before the storm, and built ongoing centers of activity, mobilization, and advocacy for long-term policy and structural change. Organizations like the Teacher’s Federation, Ayuda Legal, and Construyamos Otro Acuerdo turned the tragedy of Maria into an opportunity to expose problems, increase outreach and membership, and ultimately increase community power for lasting change.

A NEXT LEVEL SOCIAL CHANGE ECOSYSTEM: FACING COVID-19 AND BEYOND

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds in the U.S., we are witnessing the same post-disaster patterns emerge, at an unimaginable scale. As a social change ecosystem, there is an immediate imperative to build and fortify a next level system of disaster response that will carry us through the pending economic fallout alongside global health crises and the unfolding reality of persistently frequent climate change events. These are critical moments to leverage national attention and provide opportunities to secure billions of dollars in support of practical solutions to serious problems. Community-led organizations, voices, ideas, and agendas must be front and center in the disaster relief debate, and social change funders have an obligation to support quickly and for the long haul the community partners who are seizing these moments to drive major systemic change. To do so requires an increased level of urgency, collaboration, funding, and imagination keeping these guideposts front of mind:

Solidify organizations leading the charge year-round, not just when disasters strike: Invest in vehicles that will endure and continue to translate lessons across crises. Lend space to design and build the types of organizations that we have not yet imagined.

Recognize that a perpetual state of recovery is the new normal: Catalyze strategies to overhaul a long-outdated disaster recovery system that is woefully insufficient for the times we face.

Look toward the women who are leading and fund them: Women, and in particular women of color, are stepping up in major roles, collaborating and innovating, and will continue to do so with or without recognition or resources.

Build relationships with intermediaries: Identify and collaborate with organizations that have the technology, administrative capacity, trust, and accountability to capture and move money toward front line community-based organizations.

Invest in the year-round democracy and voter engagement work: We must continually work to shift those policies and practices that threaten the health and viability of vulnerable communities and undermine equitable recovery following a disaster.

As philanthropic and community leaders begin to grapple with the extent of the current pandemic, inequities in the healthcare system, and the global economic fallout for workers and communities, these lessons and models become all the more critical. It is our hope that this report contributes to “bending the arc of recovery and resilience toward justice.”¹¹

¹¹ Jerry Maldonado, Ford Foundation

COMMUNITY LED FUND MODELS; TEXAS, FLORIDA, PUERTO RICO

Harvey Community Relief Fund

Participating organizations included the Texas Organizing Project, SEIU Texas, Workers Defense Project, Faith in Texas, Texas Housers, and Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid. Chaired by Ginny Goldman and housed at the Texas Organizing Project Education Fund. In addition to moving grants to dozens of local organizations, the Fund seeded the HOME (Houston Organizing Movement for Equity) Coalition led by Chrishelle Palay, which continues to advocate for long term equitable recovery.

Hurricane Irma Community Relief Fund

Steering Committee Members included The New Florida Majority Education Fund, Organize Florida Education Fund, Faith in Florida, Central Florida Jobs With Justice, Florida Immigrant Coalition, Dream Defenders, and Make The Homeless Smile (now the Smile Trust). Led by Andrea Mercado of Florida New Majority and housed at the Miami Foundation.

The Maria Fund

Founding organizations included Taller de Salud and G-8 Grupo de los Ocho Comunidades de Aleduñas al Caño. The María Fund Advisory Committee consisted entirely of Puerto Ricans living both in Puerto Rico and in the United States. Led by Xiomara Diaz and initially housed at the Center for Popular Democracy, The Maria Fund is now an independent organization with Ms. Diaz serving as Executive Director. The Fund supports building a strongly aligned ecosystem of social justice leaders, organizations, and initiatives for long-term power building in Puerto Rico, including ongoing response and recovery to disasters.

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Liz Wolff, Texas Organizing Project
Sarah Labowitz, formerly Houston Housing and Development Department
Andrea Mercado, New Florida Majority
Stephanie Porta, Organize Florida
Saket Soni, Resilience Force
Kevin Conner, Public Accountability Initiative/Little Sis
Maurice Weeks, Action Center on Race and the Economy
Amy Morris, Amplify Fund
Melody Baker, Amplify Fund
Jerry Maldonado, Ford Foundation
Alicia Sanchez Gill, The Emergent Fund
Rebekah Saul-Butler, Grove Foundation

Anna Fink

Anna Fink is Executive Director of the Amalgamated Foundation, where she leads the foundation's grant-making and donor advised fund services. Anna began her career as an organizer and has 20 years of experience in public policy advocacy and philanthropy. She has developed and led major philanthropic efforts focused on women, immigrants' rights and democracy and justice. She served as a senior advisor on innovation and philanthropy to the president of the AFL-CIO, and has built collaborative funding efforts supporting social justice and workers rights. Anna was a trustee of the Berger-Marks Foundation and currently serves on the boards of the National Employment Law Project, The Workers Lab and New Media Ventures. She was named a 2019 Philanthropy Forward fellow by the Aspen Institute and Neighborhood Funders Group.

Ginny Goldman

Ginny Goldman is an organizer and political strategist with 20 years of experience building and leading successful racial and economic justice organizations. She serves as an advisor to elected officials, philanthropic organizations, grassroots organizing movements and political campaigns in Texas and across the country. Goldman is the co-founder and former executive director of the Texas Organizing Project (TOP), the leading voter-turn-out organization in the state having secured millions in community investments while advancing health care, criminal justice and immigration reform. During Hurricane Harvey Goldman raised and shepherded over \$3 million to local organizations for equitable recovery. Goldman has co-chaired the transition committees for Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner and Harris County executive, Lina Hidalgo, and served in senior leadership roles on Beto O'Rourke's and Cristina Tzinzun-Ramirez' US Senate races. She serves on the boards of the national Women's March and Planned Parenthood Texas Voters.