

Handout 3: Voices on Puerto Rican Climate Injustice & Possible Next Steps

Puerto Rican Voices:

“[After Hurricane Maria](#), it became very clear that the future of the electric system here in Puerto Rico is a matter of life and death.” (Ruth Santiago, Community and Environmental Activist)

“[Hurricane Fiona is just one more example](#) of the urgency needed to transition to an electrical system that’s resilient and provides people what they need, which is rooftop solar and storage” “Puerto Rico needs something that’s not going to go out every time a major storm hits, because we’re just getting more and more of [these intense storms]....” (Cathy Kunkel, energy program manager at San Juan-based sustainability nonprofit Cambio PR)

“[I wanted to offer communities](#) the possibility of enjoying sustainable and renewable energy Energy independence is essential for people if there is another emergency.” (Ada Ramona Miranda, who helps local community organizers install solar roofs on homes and businesses so they don’t have to rely on the expensive, fragile electrical grid)

“[Community and civil society groups](#) should be part of the decision-making processes to ensure that the electric system serves the public interest and prioritizes more resilient options such as rooftop solar and storage, coupled with energy efficiency and other alternatives to centralized fossil fuel generation.” (Ruth Santiago, Community and Environmental Activist)

[The \[power\] plant](#)—long owned by the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA), a government agency—held the promise of jobs and economic prosperity for the region. But the assurances the government made long ago, ... contrast sharply with the current reality of empty(ing) neighborhoods due to out-migration, mass unemployment, and poverty. There is no end in sight to the disproportionate contamination and pollution that residents seem condemned to endure. (Carmen, a 61-year-old grandmother whose family worked as sugar cane cutters in the area where the island’s power plant was built in the early 1970s)

“[We have a right to live in a clean environment](#) ... Or it is because we are poor that we have to get used to being sick as a result of industrial contamination in our communities? Do we not have the same human rights as the wealthy and white people in this country?” (Carmen, a 61-year-old grandmother, whose family worked as sugar cane cutters in the area where the island’s power plant was built in the early 1970s)

“[In the struggle over coal ash disposal](#), poor and mostly Black communities in Puerto Rico’s hinterlands are being forced to sacrifice their health, and the health of their environment, to support the island’s energy-intensive economy and lifestyle The crisis illustrates two closely connected problems: environmental injustice and environmental racism.” (Anthropology Professor and native of Puerto Rico, Hilda Lloréns)

“[There have been quite a few power outages](#) since [Hurricane Maria in 2017] and so the community center has been able to provide sort of an oasis of light [because it converted its energy source to rooftop solar panels and a battery energy storage system] ... It’s a very low-income community that is

disproportionately impacted by the big power plants.” (Ruth Santiago, Community and Environmental Activist)

“[As a native of the island’s southeast](#), I have been following these developments closely. Historically this region has been a zone of human exploitation and natural resource extraction. In the struggle over coal ash disposal, poor and mostly black communities in Puerto Rico’s hinterlands are being forced to sacrifice their health and the health of their environment to support the island’s energy-intensive economy and lifestyle. (Anthropology Professor and native of Puerto Rico, Hilda Lloréns)

“[We are hearing about environmental injustices](#) that have been happening for decades that we need to resolve urgently And now we have the resources and the will to begin to address some of these concerns.” (Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Michael Regan visiting the island after Hurricane Fiona)

“[We hope we will finally be heard](#) ... I do not want to leave my grandchildren with a community that is getting worse.” (Wanda Figueroa, a resident of the Cataño community in San Juan, detailing her family’s exposure to sewage runoff.)

“[We have had bad experiences](#) with the money we were supposed to receive to rebuild after Maria. Our people don’t believe the promises that are made.” (Wendymar Deliz, secretary of the community emergency response group PASE)

“[The source of the coal ash](#) is a 454-megawatt, coal-fired electric power plant on the southern part of the island in the Guayama-Salinas region. More than half of the area’s residents live below the poverty line, and many identify as Black Most residents rely on fishing to make a living—an industry that is now in jeopardy from the coal ash.” (Anthropology Professor and native of Puerto Rico, Hilda Lloréns)

“[To make renewable energy projects](#) accessible to a large swath of vulnerable and low resourced communities, stakeholders need to each understand their particular role to accelerate the development of these projects. Government and NGOs ... should take on the role of ... mak[ing] the total project cost accessible for communities with scant organic resources.” (C.P. Smith, Executive Director, of Cooperativa Hidroeléctrica de la Montaña -Puerto Rico’s first electric power cooperative)

“[When a storm comes](#) and the power goes out, first responders are in saving mode. It’s not their role to figure out the power situation,” ... [I hope] to continue distributing solar power roofs and battery storage to the remaining 77 fire stations on the island.” (Hunter Johansson, founder of the non-profit Solar Responders, working to install solar panels in fire stations on the island to ensure first responders are able to continue their work when the electric grid fails)

[With infrastructure that was already vulnerable](#), “it’s absolutely imperative that FEMA not fund rebuilding an inadequate system. [Improving the island’s grid would entail] massive new investments in wind, solar, geothermal, and other clean energy sources. Puerto Rico’s year-round sun makes solar an appealing option.” (Judith Enck, former Environmental Protection Agency administrator for Region 2, which includes Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands)

American Voices

[“Once the more immediate crisis has been alleviated](#), Puerto Rico will stare down the daunting task of rebuilding and reimagining what [its] ... defenses should look like. And that should be an opportunity for a complete reimagining of Puerto Rico’s energy system, which uses some of the least sustainable fuels at some of the highest costs in the U.S.

Relying on a single power plant prone to flooding is an unsustainable model.... Microgrids [are] one solution: When a part of the infrastructure goes down, the other ones keep working.” (Otis Rolley, the 100 Resilient Cities regional director for North America)

[“Energy is a lifeline for the people of Puerto Rico](#) to access clean water, food and health services. Yet ... years after Maria, work to rebuild the electric system has barely begun and blackouts are commonplace. Rural communities remain the hardest hit(Sierra Club President Ramón Cruz and Environmental Defense Fund President Fred Krupp)

[“Complicating matters](#) is the premium Puerto Ricans pay for energy that is both dirty and unreliable because of an outdated, centralized power infrastructure. Most electricity is generated from old oil-burning power plants fed by expensive imports, then transported by a fragile, decrepit delivery system. The poor design, with heavy reliance on fossil fuels, adds to high electricity costs and air pollution that harms people’s health.” (Sierra Club President Ramón Cruz and Environmental Defense Fund President Fred Krupp)

[“Clean energy and community leadership](#) are key to a system that will protect the island from the next storm and improve the lives of all Puerto Ricans.” (Sierra Club President Ramón Cruz and Environmental Defense Fund President Fred Krupp)

[“The surest path to lowering rates and stabilizing](#) the finances of the electrical system is to end Puerto Rico’s dependence on fossil fuels The numbers speak for themselves To combat this environmental injustice and make solar accessible to everyone, money from Puerto Rico’s \$13 billion post-Maria federal recovery aid needs to be allocated to create centralized and distributed solar energy, instead of centralized natural gas and diesel plants Creating institutional incentives for low-income families like grants or federal tax credits could help.” (Tom Sanzillo, director of financial analysis for the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis)

[“Regardless of what work you do ahead of time](#), no one can be completely ready for a Category 5 hurricane. But a more resilient grid could help the region be far more prepared to weather one.” (Otis Rolley, the 100 Resilient Cities regional director for North America)