

Climate experts have long warned that global climate change will result in an increase in the intensity of major storms such as hurricanes. Hurricane Maria, the biggest storm that Puerto Rico has seen in 85 years, bisected the entire island and devastated the infrastructure and its people. Carmen Yulín Cruz, mayor of San Juan, Puerto Rico, stated that the hurricane crisis has left the country “practically paralyzed” and many people died as a result of it. During the storm, the electrical grid as well as the 15+ Superfund sites were severely damaged. After the hurricane, a study documented that the recovery efforts by the United States government to rebuild the damaged infrastructure in Puerto Rico, compared to other hurricanes that hit the United States in 2017, were remarkably deficient. Is this disparity another example of environmental racism and historical intervention by the United States in Latin America. Environmental racism occurs when marginalized communities, such as Puerto Rico, are disproportionately exposed to toxins and denied access to ecological benefits such as clean air, water, and natural resources. This is the crude reality Puerto Ricans live in. Communities such as these have limited protection and loose legislative enforcement with combating environmental hazards. This research will examine Puerto Rico’s struggle as a “territory” of the United States of America, a poor, underrepresented minority population and how slow, non-existent or ineffective recovery efforts were. There will be a comparison to other recovery efforts in the United States as well. The disaster facing Puerto Rico is exacerbated by long-standing environmental justice and debt issues. Corporations and governments who drive climate change through emissions and deregulation then also profit in the aftermath of climate-exacerbated shock events like hurricanes. The Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority signed a \$300 million contract with a little known two-employee company named Whitefish Energy, from Trump Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke’s hometown, to restore Puerto Rico’s power grid. With a lot of political uproar this decision was withdrawn and left the country lacking power. In my presentation, I will show the current state of recovery in Puerto Rico two years later.