



A house in Salinas, Puerto Rico, that was destroyed by flooding and mudslides during Hurricane Fiona.

FAST FACTS

- Hurricane Fiona made landfall in Puerto Rico on September 18 as a Category 1 hurricane, dropping as much as 32 inches of rain in some areas, and causing as much as \$1 billion in damages.
- 32 disaster recovery centers are now open across the island to support hurricane survivors; more than 800,000 residents have registered for assistance from FEMA.
- As International Medical Corps moves into longer-term recovery programming, we continue to distribute essential support such as food vouchers, hygiene kits, and psychological first aid in affected communities.

Five years after Hurricane Maria devastated the island, Hurricane Fiona made landfall on Puerto Rico on Sunday, September 18, with maximum sustained winds of 85 mph and torrential rain that totaled as much as 32 inches in some regions. The island's National Health Department estimates that as many as 30 deaths may have been caused by the storm,¹ while almost 400 homes were destroyed or suffered major damage.² According to NOAA, Hurricane Fiona has joined the ranks of weather and climate disasters that have cost the US more than \$1 billion in 2022.³

Nearly four weeks after Fiona, recovery efforts are well underway. Approximately 99% of Puerto Rico's electrical customers and local hospitals have had their power restored, and 98% of households have access to water.⁴ The US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has opened 32 disaster recovery centers across the island where hurricane survivors can apply for FEMA assistance, upload documents needed for their application and get answers to their questions about aid.⁵ The agency's Disaster Survivor Assistance crews are also going door-to-door in municipalities to help residents impacted by the hurricane register for FEMA disaster assistance,⁶ with more than 800,000 Puerto Ricans registering so far.⁷

Puerto Ricans face a number of chronic challenges that are complicating efforts to rebuild their lives in the wake of the storm. The island's population has faced persistent threats of natural disasters, ranking at the top of the Long-Term Climate Risk Index, which lists the states and territories worldwide that are most affected by extreme weather from 2000 to 2019.⁸ The adverse mental health effects that accompany repeated natural disasters is a serious concern for many Puerto Ricans who are still recovering from the devastation of Hurricane Maria and the 2020 earthquakes.

In addition, the hurricane disrupted normal nutrition channels on the island, as grocery stores had to close temporarily and residents had to discard perishable items due to power outages and a lack of generator fuel.⁹ To make matters worse, the island's agricultural industry lost an estimated \$100 million in crops during the storm, including coffee, papayas and plantains—which are key staples in residents' diets.¹⁰ Some Puerto Ricans will face challenges in maintaining proper nutrition, as the island poverty rate hovers around 43% and receives a fixed amount of funding to provide food aid, which

¹ <https://www.preps.pr.gov/>

² <https://www.redcross.org/about-us/news-and-events/news/2022/red-cross-responds-to-devastating-storms-in-puerto-rico-usvi-ak.html>

³ <https://www.noaa.gov/news/ian-is-15th-billion-dollar-disaster-year-so-far>

⁴ <https://www.preps.pr.gov/>

⁵ <https://www.fema.gov/press-release/20221016/fema-disaster-recovery-centers-open-jayuya-and-toa-baja>

⁶ <https://www.fema.gov/press-release/20221011/fema-disaster-survivor-assistance-crews-support-puerto-rico-communities>

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/03/us/politics/biden-puerto-rico-hurricane-fiona.html>

⁸ https://germanwatch.org/sites/default/files/Global%20Climate%20Risk%20Index%202021_2.pdf

⁹ <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/09/29/as-ian-batters-florida-puerto-ricans-fear-being-forgotten-00059377>

¹⁰ <https://news.wqcu.org/2022-09-24/fiona-destroyed-most-of-puerto-ricos-plantain-crops-a-staple-for-peoples-diet>

does not increase during times of crisis, unlike food assistance programs in US states.¹¹

International Medical Corps Response

International Medical Corps is implementing longer-term recovery programming to ensure that individuals and families are well supported as they work to rebuild their lives. Our programming will center on integrated approaches to strengthening emotional well-being, awareness and resiliency, combined with nutrition education and support. Our activities will target affected and vulnerable communities, and provide emergency preparedness training to help communities be ready for potential future crises.

Our teams continue to visit affected communities to perform new and follow-up assessments to identify unmet post-disaster needs. We conducted assessments in Salinas, Toa Baja and Utuado in close coordination with local community leaders who took International Medical Corps team members to see storm-related damage and meet with family members.

Community members expressed a need for cleaning supplies, food and bedding. Access to clean water also continues to be a challenge—and risk—for many families, as many are collecting and using untreated spring water as their primary source. Areas with standing water from flooded springs are becoming breeding sites for mosquitos, compounding health risks for local residents. Household repairs are being performed with very limited resources. Some families want to relocate, but cannot because they have family members who cannot travel due to health issues. Travel itself continues to be difficult: for example, a bridge that had helped provide access to Utuado had been rebuilt after Hurricane Maria but was destroyed by Fiona, again limiting passage. Significant mental health concerns are being expressed by nearly every household we visited; our staff offered emotional support and psychological first aid where possible.

Following the assessments, we distributed bedding and pillows to households in need. International Medical Corps' teams will continue to help families meet outstanding needs directly related to the impact of the hurricane by procuring and distributing essential items, including household cleaning and personal hygiene supplies, drinking water and goods for infants, such as diapers, wipes, baby food and formula.

International Medical Corps will hold a series of community-based Skills for Psychological Recovery workshops that include a session titled, "Mind & Body After Disasters." Workshop participants will receive free material support, with adults receiving \$50 food vouchers and youths receiving a kit of psychosocial first-aid kits. We continue to work closely with the Department of Health, territorial officials, local hospitals and clinics, and partner organizations to identify communities that can benefit from participation in the workshops.

Our teams continue to procure and distribute supplies, including cots and tarpaulins, medical equipment (including biohazard and sharps containers) and a generator that will help Iniciativa Comunitaria (Community Initiative), a local nonprofit in San Juan, keep its doors open and conduct post-disaster health interventions. International Medical Corps also will continue to procure and distribute items that will enhance health facilities' operational capacity, including water, sanitation and hygiene materials, critical medical supplies and other essentials.

International Medical Corps in Puerto Rico

International Medical Corps has been supporting long-term recovery efforts in Puerto Rico since two Category 5 hurricanes, Irma and Maria, struck the island in 2017. When earthquakes shook the island in January 2020, our San Juan-based team responded quickly, providing critical sanitation, hygiene, nutrition and mental health awareness sessions. Within two months, COVID-19 had spread to the island, exacerbating needs among those already vulnerable to healthcare interruptions, ongoing stress and uncertainty, and the mental health effects that accompany repeated disasters. We have continued to provide essential relief supplies and train local first responders and community leaders, strengthening healthcare systems so that they can treat COVID-19 patients and provide vaccinations.



A road beside the Guaonica River in Utuado, Puerto Rico, where a bridge that was swept away by the floodwaters used to be located.

¹¹ <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/hurricane-fiona-4-ways-the-federal-government-can-help-puerto-rico-rebuild-better/>