

Oxfam America verbal testimony, House Committee on Natural Resources full committee hearing on *PROMESA Discussion Draft – Day Two*, delivered by Adi Martinez Roman, October 30th, 2019.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, and staff, for giving us this opportunity to talk about federal recovery funds coordination and Section 11 of the Discussion Draft.

Oxfam is an international non-profit, non-partisan organization that for decades has delivered disaster and development assistance around the world. Our work has taught us that effective and lasting recovery and development is dependent on empowering local people and communities to claim their rights, fight injustice and hold their government and private sector accountable.

The challenges that we see in Puerto Rico are very similar to challenges we have worked to solve in many other communities that are recovering from disasters and lifting themselves out of poverty.

Mr. Chairman, I have lived all of my life in Puerto Rico. After the hurricane hit I continued as director of the Fundación Fondo de Acceso a la Justicia and plunged into getting resources for legal assistance teams who travelled to rural, poor and disenfranchised communities on the island and who - to this day - are struggling to access recovery assistance. In my work at Oxfam I remain tightly connected and consult daily with communities and civil society leaders in Puerto Rico and I can tell you that our low income and marginalized communities are facing critical challenges that impede their recovery and puts them in “harm’s way” in the face of future disasters.

We believe our recovery must be equitable, transparent and effective. Oxfam America is uniquely independent because we take no US government dollars – and we have for years been a leading voice on Capitol Hill for policy solutions aimed at achieving effective, transparent and accountable US assistance. Those approaches and solutions need to be applied in Puerto Rico. I’d like to submit for the record an Oxfam Report entitled “To Fight Corruption, Localize Aid” together with other documents that show support to my statements.

Mr. Chairman, we have seen over and over again around the world that extreme centralization of the kind seen in Puerto Rico invites corruption and leads to

ineffective and poorly prioritized spending. It does not take advantage of the local community's historical and institutional knowledge.

We are an evidence based organization and we strongly believe that there is *nothing* more powerful or effective to combat corruption and ensure that federal dollars really meet people's needs – than to give voice to community leaders. They know best what they need, and in Oxfam's experience around the world, they are by far the most effective and reliable voices pressing for good governance, accountability and transparency.

We know that in the face of corruption, Congress and federal agencies often propose further centralized controls. In Puerto Rico, these include the withholding of funds, the assignment of independent financial monitors, while other policy makers suggest the intervention of the Fiscal Oversight Management Board. The legislative proposal being discussed here today also includes the appointment of a Reconstruction Coordinator.

It is important to establish immediately that the whole discussion of federal recovery funds coordination or any legislation thereof should be separate from the PROMESA law or its amendments. Also, it is clear to us that civil society in Puerto Rico overwhelmingly rejects the idea of greater centralization and the continued disconnect from those who matter most – the PEOPLE. Oxfam's core message to the committee and the US Congress is that in our experience, *those measures will not* solve the challenges at hand, and *will not* yield the results we all seek.

Mr Chairman, we believe this moment is a critically important opportunity for the US Congress to demonstrate that it is listening to civil society in Puerto Rico.

A fast-growing list of civil society organizations and supporters has endorsed the concept of a civil society working group as an alternative for the coordination of recovery funds. Note that on our current "endorsement" list are organizations that represent hundreds of smaller organizations – United Way of Puerto Rico, Grupo G8, PRODEV and VAMOS, among others. Also, we are submitting draft language to create a Civil Society Task Force that has been developed in dialogue and with the direct input of many of these and other groups. As we work with

partners on the ground to socialize the Task Force idea and get input, the support list continues to grow.

The Civil Society Task Force would consist of 11 elected representatives from across civil society, and 4 highly experienced professionals who would be embedded in each key recovery agency, FEMA, HUD, COR3 and Vivienda.

As asked by the groups endorsing the concept, this Task Force would:

First: Advise and advocate for transparent, accountable and effective decisions and outcomes that address urgent needs and achieve equitable and resilient recovery in Puerto Rico.

Second: Oversee processes to (1) ensure stakeholder participation and incorporation of stakeholder input and (2) ensure the voices of women, elders, the disabled and marginalized communities are heard and addressed.

The embedded representatives will be the main support to the Task Force in the execution of its duties within the agencies, which include, among other things:

- Promote agency and regional collaborative actions,
- Oversee proper stakeholder analysis,
- Monitor violation of human rights, and
- Eliminate barriers to participation of local organizations and businesses.

It is important to note that the 4 embedded representatives would serve for one year, with the possibility of term renewals if re-nominated unanimously by the Task Force. Other Task Force members would be elected to serve for three years, unless the sector they represent decides in their assembly established procedure that their mandate should be revoked. This to ensure the answerability of these persons to the groups represented, which is a key element of this proposal.

In closing, the urgency for recovery in Puerto Rico makes these considerations of utmost importance. We urge you to work with us and civil society leaders in Puerto Rico to achieve our common goals by quickly introducing and fast tracking House passage of civil society task force legislation -- separate from PROMESA reform – to kick start our way to an empowered civil society ensuring transparent,

accountable and effective and equitable recovery in Puerto Rico.

I look forward to answering any questions and continued work with committee staff to make this a reality.

Thank you.