

# At the Center of the Storm

*San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz  
and the Response to Hurricane Maria*

## *Practitioner Guide*

DAVID W. GILES, ARNOLD M. HOWITT, AND HERMAN B. “DUTCH” LEONARD

### Overview

A case study is a story about how a person or group of people faced and dealt with challenges or opportunities. It is based on desk research and interviews with key actors but does not provide analysis or conclusions. Written from the perspective of the protagonist(s), it is designed to raise questions and generate discussion about the issues they faced. Cases are meant to help participants develop analytic reasoning, listening, and judgment skills to strengthen their decision-making ability in other contexts.

A case-based conversation is a way to anchor a conceptual discussion to concrete examples. It can bring a case to life and allow participants to place themselves in the shoes of the case protagonist(s), while also allowing a variety of perspectives to surface. This guide is designed to help you lead a conversation about the case, “At the Center of the Storm: San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz and the Response to Hurricane Maria.”

### Role of a Facilitator

The facilitator leads a conversation with a clear beginning and end, ensures that everyone is heard, and keeps the group focused. The conversation can be broken into three distinct segments: exploring the case, applying the central questions of the case to your organization’s challenges, and formulating takeaway lessons. Some facilitation tips and tricks to keep in mind are below.

#### **BEFORE the discussion**

Make sure everyone takes the time to read the case. When setting up the room, think about situating participants where they can see you and each other. Designate a notetaker as well as a place where you can take notes on a flipchart or white board. Plan for at least sixty to seventy-five minutes to discuss the case and takeaways and have a clock in the room and/or an assigned timekeeper. Mention that you may interrupt participants in the interest of progressing the conversation.

#### **DURING the discussion**

Encourage participants to debate and share opinions. State very clearly that there is no right or wrong “answer” to the case—cases are written so that reasonable people can disagree and debate different ideas and approaches. Be careful not to allow yourself or others to dominate the discussion. If the

---

This case was developed solely as the basis for class discussion. It was written for the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative, a collaboration between Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard Business School, and Bloomberg Philanthropies. It is not intended to serve as an endorsement, source of primary data, or illustration of effective or ineffective management. Copyright © 2020, 2021, President and Fellows of Harvard College. (Revised 3/2021.)



Attribution-noncommercial-noderivatives. [creative commons](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

conversation is getting heated or bogged down on a particular issue, consider allowing participants to talk in pairs for a few minutes before returning to a full group discussion. Do not worry about reaching consensus, just make the most of this opportunity to practice thinking and learning together!

## Case Synopsis

This case profiles how Carmen Yulín Cruz, Mayor of San Juan, Puerto Rico, led her city's response to Hurricane Maria, which devastated the island in the fall of 2017.

After briefly providing background on the territory's relationship with the rest of the US, Cruz's political career, and the consequences of the economic recession that San Juan and the rest of Puerto Rico endured leading up to Maria, the case details how the hurricane caused unprecedented damage when it slammed into the island. It then recounts how Mayor Cruz and other San Juan officials rode out the storm and began coming to terms with Maria's terrible toll. It stresses the difficulty they faced in getting a sense of the scale and nature of the destruction, given that the storm had brought down almost all communication systems and the island's electrical grid.

Facing so much uncertainty, San Juan officials had little choice but to improvise a response. The case depicts how Cruz and municipal workers self-deployed throughout the city to assess conditions and provide aid. It also illustrates how, over time, they began to more formally organize the city's response, launching and finetuning an array of activities.

Despite the city's efforts, however, support from the territorial and federal governments was slow to materialize, and the limited amount of aid that did arrive proved woefully inadequate. The main part of the case concludes by depicting the tensions associated with this issue, which reached a boiling point when President Trump's Acting Secretary of Homeland Security publicly characterized the response to Maria as a "good news story"—a striking disconnect from what Cruz and others were experiencing on the ground. Readers are placed in the mayor's shoes as she considers how best to respond. Ending at this decision point, the case prompts them to evaluate Cruz's options as she seeks to accelerate the pace of relief while accounting for Puerto Rico's dependency on Washington for aid and support.

The epilogue describes how Cruz chose to proceed. It then depicts the consequences of her decision, focusing on how her actions affected relations between San Juan and the federal government as well as their implications for the overall response.

## Conversation Plan

### Part 1: Exploring the Case (20–30 minutes)

The goal of this part of the conversation is to review the case from the point of view of the people involved. Use the board to notate opinions and reasoning about the core challenges Cruz and her advisors grappled with leading up to, during, and following Maria—and their options for addressing them.

Key challenges and conflicts depicted in the case center around the following issues:

- *Preparing for Maria*

As Maria rapidly developed and moved across the Caribbean, forecasts consistently warned that Puerto Rico lay directly in the storm's path. Coupled with the demands already associated

with recovering from Hurricane Irma, which had struck the island just two weeks earlier, Cruz and her aides faced an especially challenging set of circumstances as they considered how best to prepare. One option was to admit that they were already over extended as a result of Irma and would thus need to rely in large part on external support from other levels of government, namely territorial and federal resources. Alternatively, they could scramble to try and mobilize a robust a city-led response that included building on what they had done for Irma.

- *Determining the extent and nature of damage and connecting with the outside world*  
By taking down Puerto Rico’s electrical grid and its communication systems, Maria made it extremely difficult to mount an effective response. For instance, in the immediate aftermath of the storm, Cruz and the municipal employees with her at the city’s command center were largely unable to reach the outside world. This had numerous implications, perhaps most significantly minimizing their situational awareness of conditions throughout the rest of the city. San Juan officials were thus challenged with setting a course of action, allocating supplies, and establishing priorities while unsure of the extent and nature of the damage or the needs of their constituents. The collapse of the power and communication systems also made it virtually impossible to connect with key partners who the city would otherwise turn to in the aftermath of a major disaster. To overcome these challenges, the mayor and her staff could remain at the command center, trying to activate their existing response plans, while hoping that external assistance might soon arrive. Or they could begin improvising a response by embracing decentralized and ad hoc strategies, expanding and adjusting as circumstances changed.
- *Consoling survivors, supporting city employees*  
Maria’s rain and storm surge clogged city streets with floodwaters and debris, and—along with the storm’s heavy winds—caused significant structural damage to homes, businesses, hospitals, and key municipal buildings. Maria also caused countless injuries and, most tragically, took far too many lives. (A highly controversial and politicized issue, the official death toll in Puerto Rico from Maria stands at 2,975, making the storm one of the deadliest natural disasters in American history.)

In the days and weeks following landfall, Cruz would have to figure out how to console her constituents suffering from this terrible toll while also supporting the many municipal employees who worked tirelessly to support them. How could she best demonstrate that she recognized and understood their pain? Was this an essential role for her to play when she also needed to spend a significant amount of time figuring out how to obtain and deliver resources and address other urgent concerns? Could and should she delegate this work to others?

- *Negotiating with other levels of government*  
Following landfall, it was immediately clear that the territorial government could not provide anywhere close to the level of assistance San Juan and other municipalities on the island required. This meant that the federal government would need to step in and play a major role in the response effort. But federal aid was painfully slow to arrive, and roughly a week after the storm hit, Cruz was shocked to learn that senior federal officials were casting Washington’s role in the response in a positive light, with the Acting Secretary of Homeland Security even calling the effort a “good news” story. Cruz now had to decide if she wanted to continue “playing nice,” as some other officials were doing, or if she needed to take a more aggressive, perhaps

even antagonistic approach. Would doing so force the Trump administration's hand? Or would it backfire and further complicate relations with the federal government and thereby hurt her constituents' chances of receiving the aid they so desperately needed?

**Part 2a: Diagnosis** (20–30 minutes)

This part of the discussion allows participants to analyze and understand how the mayor chose to address the challenges and conflicts raised in the previous section.

- *Preparing for Maria: A scramble to mobilize, informed by prior experience*  
As previously noted, the mayor quickly determined in the lead-up to Maria that she could not plan on the territorial government to come to San Juan's aid in the immediate aftermath of the storm. Thus, she realized, the city had to do what it could to prepare despite already being strained by having to respond to and recover from Hurricane Irma. This would require a certain amount of improvisation and adaptation, given the grave danger Maria posed and the short time to prepare.

Thanks to the experience of Irma, however, the city was, in fact, well positioned to begin preparing for Maria. Cruz decided to remain at the city-owned Coliseum sports complex, where she had already established a command center to oversee the city's response to Irma. She also tasked city employees (as she had done in advance of Irma) with buying and stockpiling a range of critical supplies including medical equipment, fuel, water, generators, and ice. She relayed these and other orders with a sense of urgency, holding a planning meeting with senior staff in the middle of the night and repeating her orders clearly and emphatically in the days and hours leading up to landfall.

Meanwhile, at Cruz's direction, the city also opened several shelters for San Juan residents who lived in flood-vulnerable neighborhoods or who lacked secure housing. The city spread word of the shelter openings by deploying sound trucks and by leveraging an informal network of community contacts, who then relayed the news to their neighbors. Notably, Cruz decided not to rely on the emergency shelter system run by the territorial government, having determined, based on previous experience, that it would be best for the city to run its own facilities.

- *Determining extent and nature of damage: Building situational awareness through improvisation and adaptation*  
Although they had survived Maria within the relative safety of the Coliseum's walls, the mayor and the municipal workers who had sheltered there at first had no idea how the rest of the city had fared. If Maria had been a normal tropical storm, they would have immediately received reports and started connecting with key partners by phone and email. But they now faced a highly unusual challenge: The storm had knocked out almost all means of communication not only in San Juan but across the entire island. Given this—and with the understanding that external assistance would not be immediately available—they improvised their next steps, deciding to leave the safety of the Coliseum and venture out into the streets of the city. They were able to observe firsthand the damage caused by Maria and to engage with survivors, who in turn directly informed them of their ordeals and needs. Cruz and her team then had information they needed to begin providing aid and organizing the city's relief efforts.

Meanwhile, city officials began connecting with representatives of external partners, but again in a largely spontaneous, ad hoc manner, such as when Cruz encountered a team of New York City (NYC) emergency management professionals while out in the field. Unbeknownst to Cruz, NYC Mayor Bill de Blasio had taken the initiative to deploy the team, which would provide San Juan with crucial support in the days and weeks ahead.

- *Consoling survivors, supporting city employees: Prioritizing empathy*  
Directly engaging with survivors allowed Mayor Cruz to connect in a personal and empathetic way with her constituents, and she frequently found herself consoling them as she traveled through San Juan’s flooded streets. The mayor understood the value of these exchanges for the survivors, but they were just as important in influencing her own actions and decisions as she grappled with managing the response. As she would later explain, “There is no substitute for seeing the eyes of the people when they are in pain. . . . You can’t do that from a bunker with air conditioning.”<sup>1</sup> Although she also had to contend with a host of other responsibilities, the mayor prioritized these exchanges, recognizing how fundamental they were to every other aspect of the response and her role in it.

Cruz also realized the importance of supporting her staff, many of whom had been working around the clock since Irma. This meant looking for signs of exhaustion and despair, talking with those who seemed to be struggling, and granting them leave so that they could care for themselves and their loved ones. Although she was connecting on an emotional level with her constituents and staff, she believed it was important that they see her as a pillar of strength during such a trying time. She thus avoided breaking down in front of them, despite her own exhaustion and pain.

- *Improvising a decentralized response*  
The extent and severity of destruction wrought by Maria meant that standard modes of operating were ill suited to the task at hand. This led Cruz to devise a response strategy that featured a considerable amount of improvisation and adaptation and that relied in large part on decentralized and ad hoc processes. As discussed, she and other city employees quickly took to the streets of San Juan to engage and communicate with residents, as opposed to just remaining at the Coliseum and trying to direct operations in a centralized manner from there. This also meant that as city workers converged on the Coliseum, they took on whatever task seemed most urgent, no matter their background or expertise. During the next several days and weeks, the mayor delegated a significant amount of decision-making authority to the municipal workers who spent most of their days out in the field.

Over time, however, the city was able to formalize and routinize many aspects of its response effort, establishing morning and evening check-in and debrief sessions for senior leadership, matching staff to assignments that they were best-suited for, and—with the help of the NYC emergent management team—professionalizing the supply distribution system.

- *Negotiating with other levels of government: Going public*

Responses to crises frequently involve multiple levels of government, NGOs, and the private sector. Because no one entity will likely control the others in a formal sense, an effective response requires that these organizations closely coordinate and collaborate.

During the response to Maria, the territorial and federal governments tried to channel much of that coordination through a Joint Field Office (JFO) located at the San Juan Convention Center. Although they continued to direct their own operations from their command center at the Coliseum, San Juan officials also relied on the NYC Emergency Management team to help bridge their efforts with those being coordinated through the JFO. For her part, Cruz also had several constructive conversations with Trump administration officials as she sought to expedite the delivery of federal aid.

But roughly a week following landfall, tensions between the City of San Juan and the White House threatened to derail any coordination that was taking place. The mayor had become increasingly frustrated with the level of support provided by federal authorities, and she was pushed to the breaking point when the Trump administration began casting its efforts in a positive light, especially after the Acting Secretary of Homeland Security characterized the response to Maria as a “good news story.” Instead of continuing to work behind the scenes and trying to patiently collaborate with federal partners, Cruz decided it was time to go public with her frustrations by organizing a press conference. Although several of her key advisors cautioned that doing so could be politically devastating, Cruz firmly believed that she had no other choice. Her efforts—as well as those of other Puerto Rican officials, including the governor—to “play nice” with the White House did not appear to have helped them gain necessary support.

Cruz’s press conference attracted global attention. Despite triggering the president to attack her directly on Twitter (and subsequent public confrontations with his administration notwithstanding), she remained convinced she had made the right decision. Not only did the federal government significantly expand its involvement in the relief (although it should be noted that it had begun to by the time of the press conference), but other cities and states in the US—as well as many more NGOs, businesses, and private citizens—also began paying significantly more attention to the situation in Puerto Rico, leading to a notable spike in the amount of aid provided by external sources.

### **Part 2b: Application** (20 minutes)

Participants may break into groups or plenary to apply the concepts discussed to their own challenges. The following set of questions is suggested to structure this section:

- *As you reflect on Mayor Cruz’s experience with Maria, consider how well prepared you are for handling a similar type of crisis. How would you want to act when confronted by such an event? Are you comfortable with carrying out the tasks associated with the three key components of mayoral crisis leadership as depicted in the case?*
  - griever-in-chief (i.e., representing and consoling the community and keeping it together);

- central manager and coordinator of city efforts (i.e., overseeing the emergency response and coordinating the efforts of city departments with agencies from other levels of government and NGOs); and
- chief advocate and negotiator (i.e., advocating for and negotiating relief efforts and support with other levels of government, donors, and aid agencies).

**Part 3: Formulating Lessons** (15–20 minutes)

This part of the conversation focuses on the case lessons that participants will continue to reflect on and apply to crisis management-related challenges in their own work.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Carmen Yulín Cruz, Mayor of San Juan, Puerto Rico, February 1, 2019.