The devastating aftermath in Puerto Rico almost three months after Hurricane Maria. Left: the power grid in Caimitó broken and in disarray alongside roads and houses, endangering residents. Right: Damaged power lines in the Mariana community of Humacao. Photo credit: Shutterstock.

Sarah Vorpahl served as the 2017–2018 MRS/OSA Congressional Fellow.
conservation and demand management, distributed renewable generation with storage, an emphasis on rooftop solar, and accelerated elimination of fossil fuels.

In addition to the technical work of restoring the grid in Puerto Rico, some US Congress members have worked to address the deeper needs of a resilient rebuild. The post-hurricane power problems in Puerto Rico were catalyzed by many factors, including an aging electrical grid, but also historic territorial status, which underfunded many programs, and a massive debt (USD$74 billion in bond debt and USD$49 billion in unfunded pension liabilities). Before the storm, the poverty rate in Puerto Rico (at 46%) was double the average of the mainland states, and unemployment was twice the national average. A year after the storms, the impact of these dynamics is only now being fully understood.

US Senator Bernie Sanders took the lead in the Senate to create a sweeping piece of legislation that not only brought emergency relief to both Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands, but also attempted to ameliorate the historic backlog of funding for services to the territories. The Puerto Rico and Virgin Islands Equitable Rebuild Act of 2017, co-sponsored by seven Democrats in the Senate and endorsed by 75 organizations, touched on agriculture, health care, education, worker’s rights, and the electrical grid. The comprehensive legislation has been referred to as the “Marshall Plan” for the territories.

“It is unconscionable that in the wealthiest nation in the world, we have allowed our fellow citizens to suffer for so long. The full resources of the United States must be brought to bear on this crisis, for as long as is necessary,” said Sanders in a press release about the bill. “But we cannot simply rebuild Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands the way they were. We must go forward to create a strong, sustainable economy and energy system in both territories and address inequities in federal law that have allowed the territories to fall behind in almost every measurable social and economic criteria,” said Sanders.

The rebuilding in Puerto Rico continues, as the worst effects of climate change are only beginning. A resilient Puerto Rico means not only clean, self-reliant energy, but also robust social programs that ensure communities have access to the same resources as the other 50 US states.

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