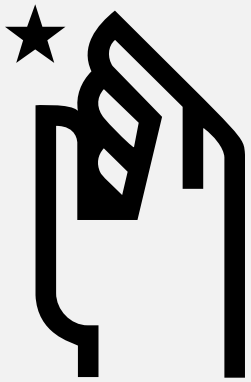
# The Fiona Fund: An Innovative, Movement-Aligned Approach to Crisis Response

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# The Fiona Fund: An Innovative, Movement-Aligned Approach to Crisis Response

**In times of crisis, collaboration and rapid response can save lives and strengthen communities**. The **Fiona Fund** is a testament to what is possible when organizations unite with urgency, purpose, and shared commitment. Hurricane Fiona tested Puerto Rico's communities, arriving just as the island reflected on the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Maria. Amidst this challenge, local leaders and funders came together to respond with speed, care, and strategic coordination.

The Fiona Community Response Fund (*"Fiona Fund"* or "*the Fund"*) was a collaborative rapid response vehicle created to mobilize resources to Puerto Rico's community-led response to Hurricane Fiona, which made landfall on September 18, 2022, just two days before the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Maria. The Fiona Fund brought together nine island-based organizations convened by and including the María Fund, a social-justice funding intermediary established in response to Hurricane Maria in 2017 – and was managed in partnership with Organizing Resilience (OR), a project housed at the Amalgamated Charitable Foundation (ACF). ACF housed and assumed legal responsibility for the Fund. The partner organizations of the Fiona Fund were: AgitArte (nonprofit organization of working class artists and cultural organizers who work at the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality and ideology); Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico (nonprofit that provides free and accessible legal education and support to low-income individuals and communities); Casa Tallaboeña (community-serving nonprofit in southern Puerto Rico, fiscally sponsored by HASER); Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico (FMPR) (the teachers union of Puerto Rico); HASER (nonprofit that acts as a fiscal sponsor for grassroots organizations in Puerto Rico); Instituto para la Agroecología Investigación y Acción (IALA-PR) (supports equitable agro-ecological work in Puerto Rico); María Fund (social justice intermediary); Movimiento Anansé (m.a.i.) (a community-based nonprofit organization that is the parent organization for ethnic multimedia and social impact projects); and Taller Salud (community-based feminist nonprofit serving all of Puerto Rico).

The Fiona Fund raised **$6.8 million** from institutional donors, philanthropic networks, corporate donors, and hundreds of individual contributors. 100% of Fiona Fund dollars were re-granted to the member organizations on the island (OR and ACF covered administrative costs separately). Allocation decisions were recommended collectively by the Fund organizations and implemented by ACF, enabling

"the Fund funded both immediate relief and long-term recovery and organizational sustainability – one of its chief innovations"

field-leading speed and compliance while aligning with real-time, on-the-ground needs. Importantly, the Fund funded both immediate relief and long-term recovery and organizational sustainability – one of its chief innovations.

In early 2024, the Fund formally concluded its work. The existing deep trust and political alignment the partner organizations had established before Fiona – and strengthened tenfold as they collaborated on the response – are evergreen. The partner organizations continue to collaborate and work toward a liberated Puerto Rico year-round and in response not only to climate crises, but on political and other urgent matters facing the island. And, they are ready to activate on a moment's notice should the need arise in future crises.

Roughly half of Fiona Fund resources supported immediate needs (e.g., water distribution, food, fuel/electricity access, cash assistance, medical and safety supplies). The remaining funds are still supporting long-term recovery and organizational sustainability, with most of the partners noting that the multi-year grants they received from the Fund have allowed them to prepare for future crises.

## Key lessons learned include:

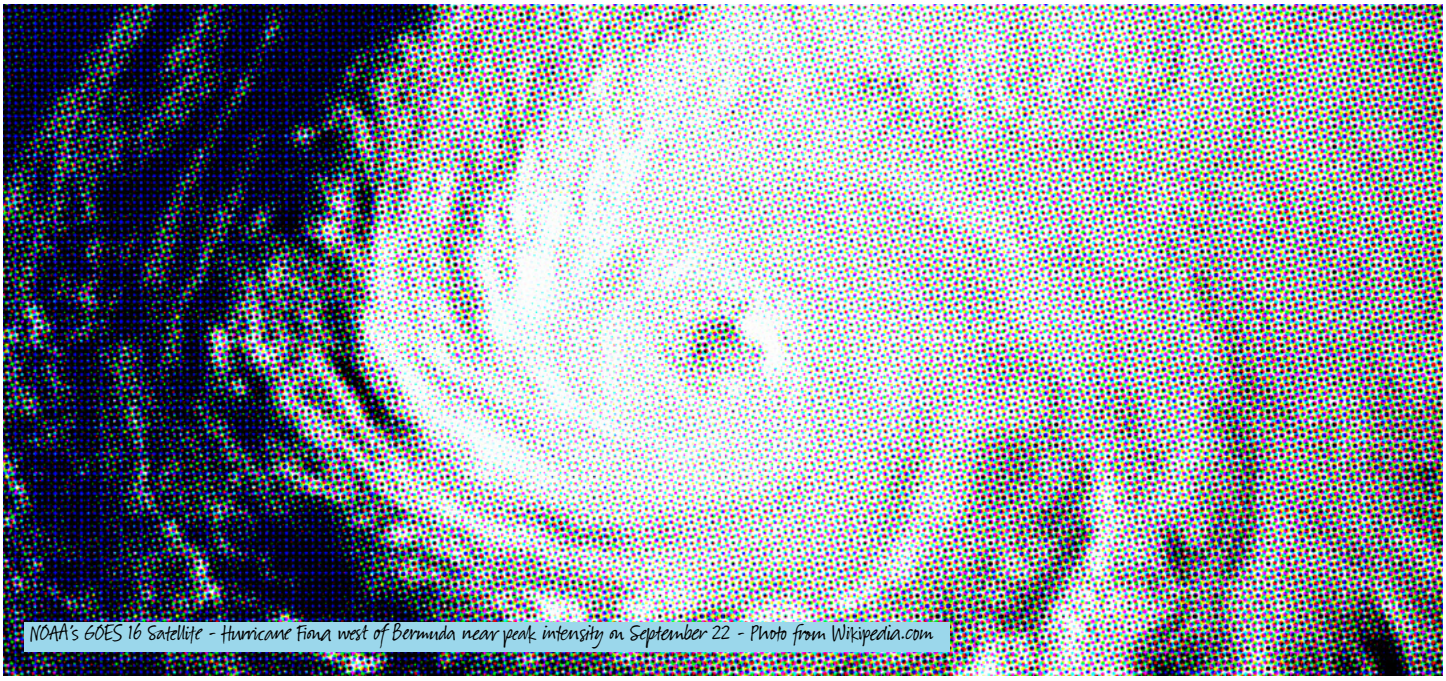
**Crisis response fundraising** and fund distribution must be done with impacted communities and community-based organizations at the center – they are the ones closest to the need and best positioned to balance immediate response with long-term needs

**Pre-existing, trust-based relationships** dramatically accelerate equitable and appropriate decision-making and a diverse coalition of partners ensures they can offer complementary and more integral response efforts to impacted communities

**Dedicating funds for long-term recovery** and organizational capacity building at the outset mitigates the common sharp decline in funding when the crisis is out of the headlines and helps organizations prepare to respond to future disasters and wield power in the long-term

**Housing the fund at a mission-aligned fiscal sponsor** with committed staff capacity ensures field-leading speed and compliance

**Clear roles, documentation, and nimble coordination** tools allow a coalition of partners to act quickly and efficiently in a crisis situation



NOAA's GOES 16 Satellite - Hurricane Fiona west of Bermuda near peak intensity on September 22 - Photo from Wikipedia.com

**Funders must re-think crisis response** – funders should support response at the appropriate scale and allow resources to be used for both immediate response and long-term recovery, power-building, and resilience efforts to mitigate impacts of future crises

## Hurricane Fiona: Facts + Figures

**Hurricane Fiona made Puerto Rico landfall on September 18, 2022** near the municipality of Lajas as a **Category 1 hurricane**, just two days before the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Maria. Despite its category, the slow-moving system followed two weeks of heavy rain, producing catastrophic flooding and landslides, especially in the south. The entire island (more than 3 million people) lost power, many for several weeks; >760,000 experienced water service interruptions; thousands required rescue; >90% of commercial crops were damaged; and estimated damages reached approximately $2.5 billion. Officials recorded 2 direct and 21 indirect storm-related deaths.[1]

By the time Fiona made landfall, Puerto Rico had been plagued by incomplete and inequitable recovery from the devastation of Hurricanes Maria and Irma for almost exactly five years. Compounding infrastructure crises, delayed federal aid,[2] regular failure of the power grid, and intermittent weather and political events, on top of emotional and economic trauma magnified the effects of Fiona.[3]

**PUERTO RICO IS SYSTEMICALLY UNDERFUNDED IN COMPARISON TO OTHER PARTS OF THE US.**

A 2021 analysis published in the Chronicle of Philanthropy states that U.S. territories, including Puerto Rico, received just $16 in philanthropic funding per person, compared to a national average of $310 per person.[4]

[1] NOAA & National Weather Service National Hurricane Center Tropical Cyclone Report: Hurricane Fiona
[2] 2021 HUD Inspector General report and Democrats Homeland reporting
[3] The Washington Post: They were still rebuilding 5 years after Hurricane Maria. Then Fiona hit.
[4] Chronicle of Philanthropy: 3.6 Million U.S. Citizens Can't Participate in Democracy. Here's How Philanthropy Can Help

## The Fiona Community Response Fund

A funder convening to commemorate the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Maria in New York was already scheduled for mid-September – a meeting that was meant to take stock of the recovery progress made in the five years since Hurricane Maria and rally funders to commit additional philanthropic resources to the island.

The meeting was designed to bring funders together to reinforce commitments to Puerto Rico's long-term recovery. But when representatives from some of the largest social justice foundations in the country found themselves in a room receiving real-time updates from partners on the ground on how Fiona was impacting the island, we knew we had to do more.

Represented by executive director Xiomara Caro Díaz, the María Fund was a uniting presence in the room. Maria Fund is a social justice intermediary fund that works in deep alignment with movement partners on the ground in Puerto Rico. Founded after its namesake storm, to date, Maria Fund has mobilized around $18 million to organizations working for social justice in Puerto Rico. Maria Fund was able to convene eight movement partner organizations on the ground immediately to decide to fundraise collectively as Fiona made landfall. Maria Fund also had a pre-existing relationship with Organizing Resilience (OR), a project housed at the Amalgamated Charitable Foundation (ACF). OR is a national network dedicated to leveraging climate crises to support immediate response and long-term recovery ***and*** power-building work. Ms. Caro Diaz serves as an Advisory Committee member to OR, and thus a natural partnership formed where OR dedicated capacity to support fundraising efforts and donor relationship management, execute all grantmaking processes such as grant writing with standardized language, drafting briefs to keep fundraisers engaged, and setting up funder briefings. OR is housed at ACF, who also immediately agreed to house the Fiona Fund and dedicate significant staff capacity to managing it.

With the **structure and operations** formalizing in real-time, funders in the room began to announce commitments. Within 24 hours the needed backend operations were in place, and resources started to flow into the newly created fund.


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The **goals** of the Fiona Fund were straightforward: (1) Mobilize significant, flexible resources and move them rapidly to community-based responders, aligned with real-time needs; and (2) Reserve a meaningful share of funds for long-term recovery and organizational sustainability.

**The key values that made this partnership successful were:**

**Community-led & trust-based.** The coalition and partnerships formed quickly based on years of trusted-based relationships. The coalition members are rooted in the communities they serve and led by community members.

**Speed with integrity.** Funds moved rapidly and in alignment with movement organizations and while meeting all legal and donor requirements.

**Equity & access.** Funding was moved iIntentionally to underserved geographies and populations that were impacted (rural areas, Afro-Puerto Rican communities, elders, disabled people, LGBTQ+ communities, women-led households).

**Transparency, accountability, and flexibility.** Partners communicated real-time needs and challenges, realistic timelines for funds to move, and decision-making processes as all of these factors developed in real-time. And we were all committed to constant communication about what was working and what needed to be adjusted as a crisis unfolded in real time.

**Dual-purpose funding**. From the outset we were all committed to allocating funds to both immediate response relief and long-term rebuilding and organizational strengthening.



## FIONA FUND MEMBERS

**María Fund**
Social justice intermediary organization

**HASER**
Nonprofit that shares resources and acts as a fiscal sponsor for grassroots organizations in Puerto Rico

**Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico (FMPR)**
Teachers union of Puerto Rico

**Casa Tallaboeña**
Community-serving nonprofit in southern Puerto Rico (fiscally sponsored by HASER)

**Instituto para la Agroecología Investigación y Acción (IALA)**
Supports equitable agro-ecological work in Puerto Rico

**Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico**
Nonprofit that provides free and accessible legal education and support to low-and middle-income individuals and communities

**Taller Salud**
Community-based feminist nonprofit serving all of Puerto Rico

**AgitArte**
Nonprofit organization of working class artists and cultural organizers who work at the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality and ideology

**Movimiento Anansé (m.a.i.)**
A community-based nonprofit organization that is the parent organization for ethnic multimedia and social impact projects.



Photo by Alberto Martinez-Marquez. Free to use under the Unsplash License

## A NOTE ON TYPICAL PHILANTHROPIC DISASTER RESPONSE

Typically there is a spike in giving immediately after the disaster, followed by a sharp decline as media coverage fades. Within that spike, resources are primarily focused on immediate response, not on long-term recovery and rebuilding.[5] And even considering the various crisis giving "spikes" that happen annually, crisis response accounts for a relatively small percentage of all U.S. giving.

According to the Center for Disaster Philanthropy, in 2022,

*of the $126.7 billion in total giving, only 1.4%, or $1.7 billion, went toward support for disaster-related initiatives (including domestic and international).*[6]

Additionally, the current administration has added additional review steps for HUD CDBG-DR (disaster recovery) and CDBG-MIT (mitigation) funds which has stalled approximately **$20 billion** in recovery funds intended for Puerto Rico, and delayed disbursement of federal recovery grants significantly.[7]

[5] Associated Press. "Most disaster giving goes to relief efforts, not rebuilding"
[6] https://disasterphilanthropy.org/blog/state-of-disaster-philanthropy-2024/
[7] 2021 HUD Inspector General report
[7] Democrats Homeland reporting

# Fiona Fund At-A-Glance

## Partner roles & responsibilities

**María Fund:** fundraising lead, coalition convener, led coordination with on-island partners

**Fiona Fund partner organizations:** on the ground assessing community needs, making decisions together about how and where to allocate funds (in multiple rounds); executing response operations themselves with funds raised. The organizations were in constant contact and made grant recommendations to ACF weekly in the first weeks after the disaster, then in two subsequent rounds regarding the second and third rounds of multi-year support for long-term recovery and organizational sustainability

**OR:** donor cultivation and stewardship; drafting needed grant proposal language; maintaining trackers of resources committed, in hand, and dispersed; produced supporting materials and efforts (e.g. funder briefing)

**ACF:** legal home of the fund and grantmaking decision-maker, set up and managed ActBlue donation link, compliance review, grant disbursement, financial tracking, receipting

## Key Innovations

1. **Collaborative recommendations:** Fiona Fund members made collective decisions on funding amounts and organizations to recommend to ACF based on real-time assessment of needs and which organizations had the capacity to respond; funds did not default to equal shares—need and capacity drove decisions.
2. **Immediate + long-term by design:** from the beginning, the Fiona Fund embraced the best practice that a significant portion of funds raised would be dedicated to long-term recovery and organizational strengthening of the movement partner organizations.
3. **Speed + compliance:** OR and ACF created templates and drafted language that could be re-used for various fundraising channels, and were in constant communication to ensure funds moved into and out of the Fund with field-leading speed and compliance.
4. **Equity in practice:** partners communicated in real time about hard-to-reach areas and populations and evolving needs and adjusted mid-stream to close gaps. A diversity of organizations meant they could offer




complementary and more holistic responses and care for impacted communities.

5. **Cost effectiveness and field-leading resource disbursement percentage:** OR raised separate dollars to cover administrative costs and fees, allowing 100% of Fiona Fund contributions to be distributed to the ground.

## Fundraising & Resource Mobilization

**Total raised: $6.8 million** (foundations, corporate, and individual donors).

**Timeline:** First commitments arrived within days of landfall; most foundation dollars were pledged in the first 4–6 weeks; individual and small-dollar donations started flowing immediately via an ActBlue page; additional foundation commitments came as foundations secured internal permissions

**Channels:** Relationships, outreach via drafted communications, a funder briefing, and re-circulation of the Fund's appeal to social-justice and climate funders; ActBlue page for small- and mid-dollar donors; web/internet presence so donors would find us while searching for ways to give.

We want to thank the many partners we had in the Fiona Fund – philanthropic institutions, individual donors, and others. With gratitude, we acknowledge that:

- *Mellon Foundation, Ford Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Waverley Street Foundation, Surdna Foundation, and dozens of other philanthropic organizations contributed significant grants to the Fund*
- We also received over 2,400 donations through our ActBlue page, primarily from individuals
- Organizations including *Hispanics in Philanthropy, Solidaire, Environmental Grantmakers Association*, and *Women Donors Network* circulated our appeal to their members and networks, and we are deeply grateful for the amplification

**Grantmaking priorities:** The Fiona Fund organizations and partners believed the best way to move resources to respond to crises was to allow community-based organizations to recommend what amount of resources to disperse to immediate response, and what percentage to hold back for long-term recovery, organizational strengthening, and movement-building. These long-term aims ensure greater


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resilience and systems change to reduce impacts from future disasters. Examples of immediate and long-term use of funds include:

- **Immediate relief:** potable water, food, hygiene/medical supplies, fuel/energy access (generators, batteries), supplemental income, evacuation and essential resources, including cisterns, water tanks, and solidarity aid checks for union members.
- **Long-term recovery & resilience:** several organizations used funds to purchase and/or renovate physical spaces that are being used as offices and community spaces, community kitchens, and can be activated as response hubs in future crises; mental-health supports; agroecology and local food systems; legal aid (housing/benefits); data/IT and organizational capacity; preparedness planning and equipment.

**Geographies & sectors:** Emphasis on southern and central municipalities with severe flooding/landslides and on communities historically under-resourced.

**Speed & sustainability:** Initial emergency grants were disbursed days after the storm hit, weekly for the 4-6 weeks after the event, and then monthly through the end of 2022; additional mult-year grants were issued in 2023-2025 to match evolving needs.

**RECEIVED OVER 2,400 DONATIONS**

*through our ActBlue page*

# Outcomes & Impact




## Grantmaking summary:

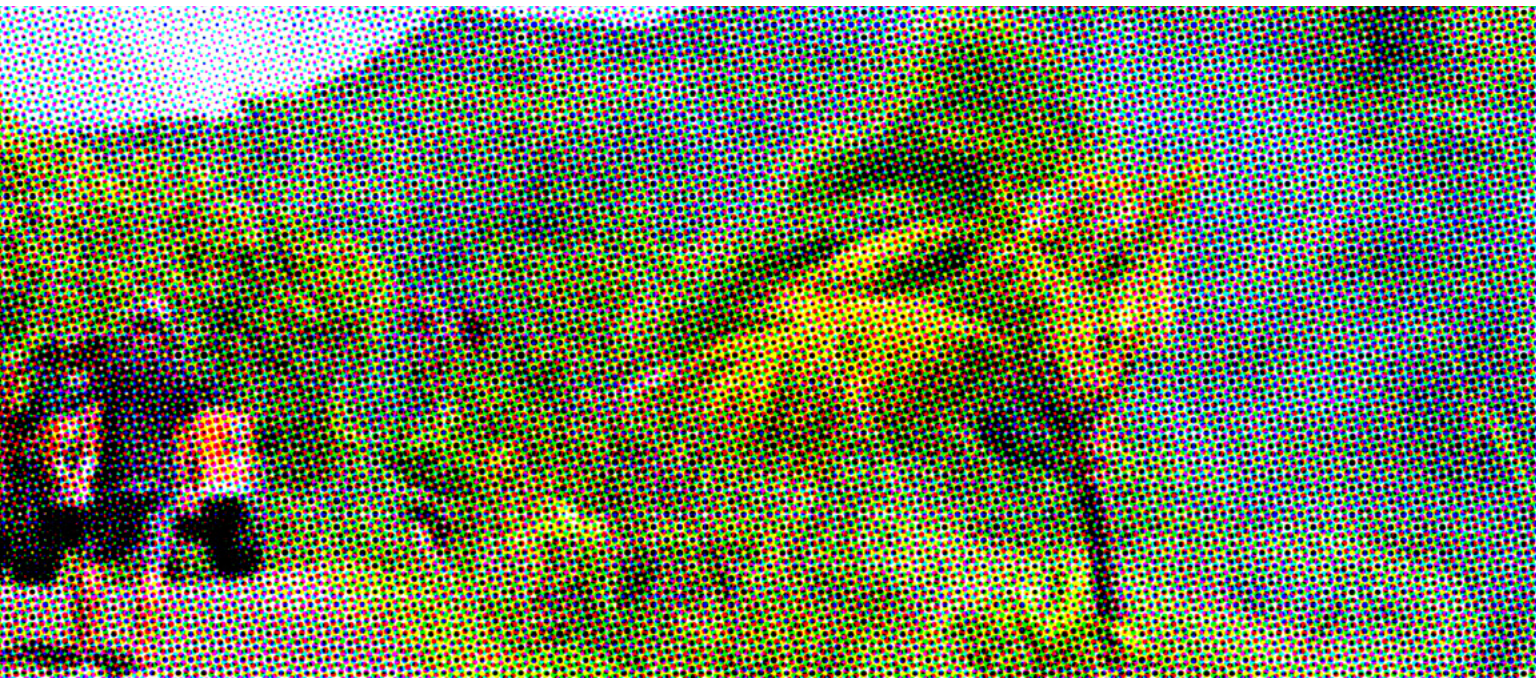
- Immediate response ("Phase 1") disbursed: $1.5M in the first 4-6 weeks of operations.
- The remaining balance was dispersed in 2023 as multi-year grants for recovery and organizational strengthening.
- Organizations funded: the 9 coalition members (plus partners reached through their networks).
- Geographic reach: Island-wide coverage with concentration in the south/southwest and other hardest-hit areas. See a visual of fund distribution here.

## Examples of immediate response work supported by The Fund:

- Water & food security: rapid distribution hubs; rural delivery routes to isolated barrios; community kitchens.
- Health & safety: supplies for clinics and promotoras; cash assistance for urgent needs; generator/battery support for refrigeration and medical devices.
- Legal & housing: tenant/landlord counseling; FEMA/benefits navigation; documentation clinics.
- Women- and youth-led safety & wellbeing: trauma-informed supports, mutual-aid hubs, and safe community spaces.
- Agroecology & livelihoods: supplemental income for farmers, farm repairs, tools, and seed support to restore local food production.

## Examples of Long-term work supported by the Fund:

- Several organizations used funds to purchase and/or renovate buildings that are used as office and community spaces, community kitchens, and can be activated as response hubs in future crises
- One organization has used funds to provide health insurance for staff – for many, it is the first time they have insurance. This is a critical step toward individual resilience in the fast of future disasters
- All of the organizations who were part of the Fund hold different roles in the social justice ecosystem of Puerto Rico. Their



sustainability means expanding the legal and social services available to all Puerto Ricans, being better prepared for future disasters, and working toward a liberated Puerto Rico. These systemic changes are what will make Puerto Rico better able to withstand the impacts of future crises and undo historic harms to the island and its people. This bridge to long-term impact was a driving force in how the Fiona Fund was designed and operated, and will remain the driving motivation for future crisis response efforts.

**SEE EACH ORGANIZATION'S SPECIFIC IMPACT**

*on the supplemental 1-pagers!*

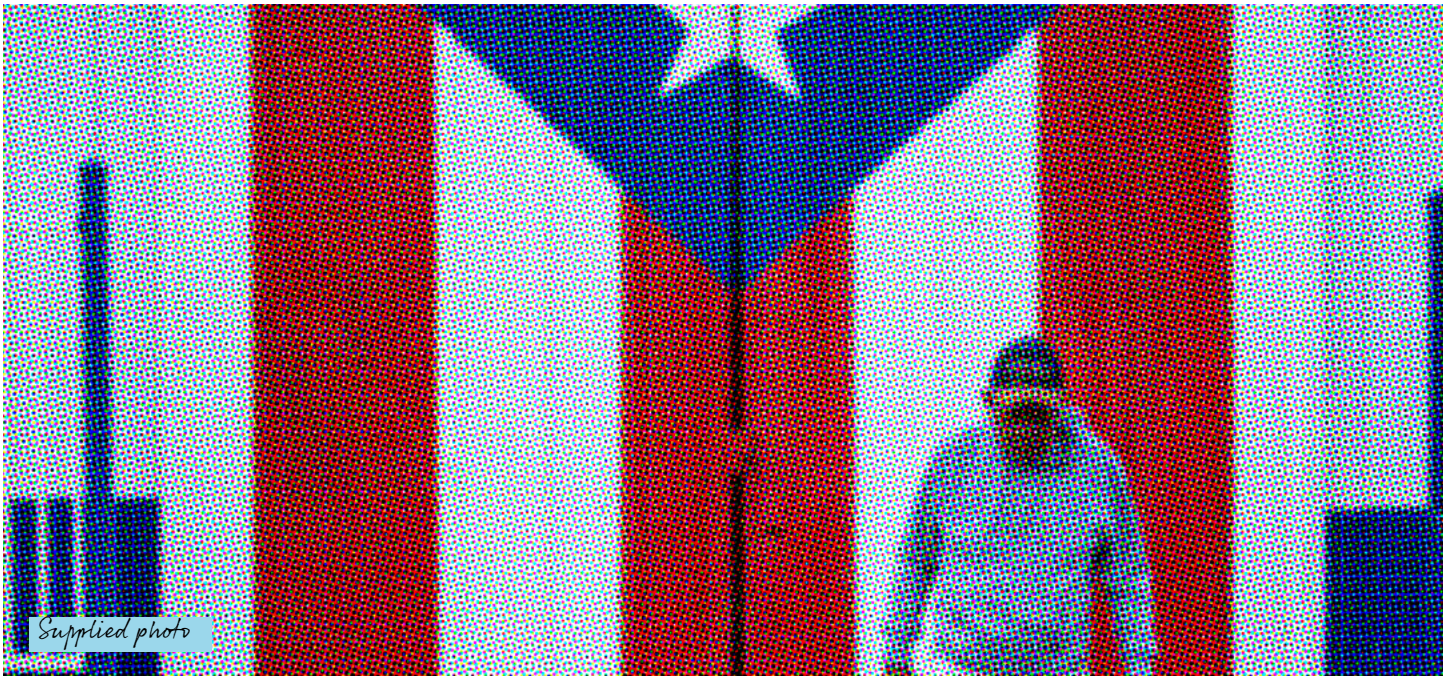
# After 2022: Evolving the Model

**The Fiona Fund structure** remained active until all allocations were finalized. By early 2024, partners agreed to disband the formal Fiona Fund structure. The relationships strengthened during the Fiona Fund experience means the partners are ready to collaborate in future crisis situations. The partners have discussed how future crises may necessitate different partnerships, and for organizations to take on the same or possibility different roles in future responses. With a backbone of trust and partnership in "blue sky" times, the partners know they will be able to make quick, appropriate decisions on how to partner the next time a response is required. They acknowledge that keeping the same structure, roles, and partnerships may not be what communities need next time, so they are committed to avoiding a "path dependency," of using the same structure again, keeping the door open to fit-for-purpose coalitions rooted in the specific geography and event.

## Lessons for the Field

**For funders**

- Back collaborative, community-led funds housed with experienced, aligned fiscal sponsors; commit to funds being flexible to be used for rapid response and long-term recovery
- In non-crisis times, explore ways to expedite grantmaking processes so funds can flow quickly in crises (additionally, consider ways to reduce reporting requirements)
- Rely on social justice intermediaries to reach grassroots organizations and marginalized communities reliably and quickly. Oftentimes, organizations who are best prepared to respond to crises are informal, volunteer-based, or have fiscal sponsors – collaborating with an intermediary can speed up due diligence and keep grantmaking in compliance
- Disasters can be moments to leverage significant resources into marginalized and historically underserved communities to support movements, undo historic harms, protect democracy, and advance other social justice aims. Do not waste the opportunity to be part of a surge of resources that can have impact long after the crisis
- Disaster and crisis response fundraising is a complex, evolving field. Please continue to engage with intermediaries and movement partners who have been through crises to




learn how you can collaborate in alignment with communities – these actors are also an invaluable source for feedback on how to innovate in crisis response resource mobilization practices

- Organizations who are likely to house and manage crisis response funds in the future need reserves of funds on hand so they can begin to respond immediately while they wait for grants and donations to hit their accounts. Consider funding such reserves

## For community-based organizations

In "blue sky" times:

- Build trust and alignment with organizations you anticipate partnering with during crises to ensure you can move into action quickly
- Develop as many templates and tools as possible: wellness check templates, emails to membership letting them know you are responding to the situation, staff roles and responsibilities
- Map and assess your and your ally organizations' capacities to respond in crises – who can do and provide what – so you have a clear map of roles and responsibilities should you need to respond
- Identify a few outcomes that will be relatively easy to track (people reached, towns served, days to disbursement) to help refine processes and tell the story

## For future collaborative crisis funds (particularly lead organizations)

- Identify a fiscal sponsor to house the fund and have transparent conversations about their capacity to engage in rapid response
    - ◊ Understand their grantmaking and resource mobilization processes thoroughly to ensure expedited yet compliant processes from the moment you start responding
- Templates, standard operating procedures, roles and responsibilities, and decision-making processes should be developed and agreed upon ahead of any disaster activation
- Among partner organizations, immediately identify anticipated needs in each community should a crisis arise, and anticipated ability for response alongside longer-term recovery

and organizational strengthening goals. Organizations are able to anticipate how crises will impact them – conducting needs assessments and organizational "vetting" (e.g. ensuring banking and contact info is up to date) can be done in non-crisis times

- Coalition partners should also develop noninvasive, appropriate ways to capture impact and stories in real time. These can bolster fundraising efforts and are critical to reflect back on to learn lessons for future responses



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# Learn More & Engage With Us!

Maria Fund published a dashboard to visualize the distribution of immediate response aid the Fiona Fund moved across the island, and for what purposes, and cataloged an extensive list of press coverage of the response. You can also see Maria Fund's posts about the Fiona Fund on their Instagram.

Please check out all of the partner organizations on social media!

AGRAPRO

AYUDA LEGAL PUERTO RICO

CASA TALLABOENA de Formación Comunitaria y Resiliencia, INC.

FMPR

HASER

INSTITUTO PARA LA AGROECOLOGÍA INVESTIGACIÓN Y ACCIÓN

movimiento ananse inc. m.a.i

TALLER SALUD

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If you would like to learn more about the Fiona Fund, or how the partner organizations continue to collaborate toward a liberated Puerto Rico and prepare for future crises, please reach out!

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