
PHOTO ESSAY

The endless hurricane: documenting life in the shelters, after Maria hit Dominica

Why a photo essay?

Photography has always been an important tool for social scientists. Today, the picture's value as a data, communication tool and art is more relevant than ever: social media, digital photography and cell phones allow for almost anybody to document their environments. However, the limited use of photography essays in research and academia reminds us of the need to diversify our view about the field work and disaster studies.

In the field and for this purpose, the act of taking pictures is not about mastering a technique, it is about the interaction with the people. It requires participant observation and consensus and freedom of the people to choose what they want to share. This interaction is the most valuable part of a photo essay because it gives "a voice" to the people, transforming the photographer into an intermediary to communicate a certain part of their reality. In other hand, pictures can speak by them self, leaving the viewer the option to connect and interpret connect and interpret with the images.

The worst disaster in history of Dominica

In September 2017 Category 5 Hurricane Maria struck Dominica before pursue its trajectory to Puerto Rico (Pasch *et al.*, 2019). The small island (population 74,000) in the eastern Caribbean between Guadeloupe and Martinique was sweep out for the first time by a Category 5 hurricane since records began (Masters, 2017). The devastation in Dominica was massive, with around 90 percent of houses roofs damaged or destroyed (ReliefWeb, 2017). Also, crops and infrastructure were destroyed, leaving communities isolated due the landslides that blocked roads. For almost a year, around 50 percent of the habitants lived without electricity, according with testimonies of affected people. Eclipsed by the media coverage in Puerto Rico and often confused with the Dominican Republic, the Commonwealth of Dominica its recovering slowly. Almost two years after this extreme hydro-meteorological event, the impact remains noticeable by the number of destroyed houses along the island. Less visible is life in shelters, generally improvised schools without basic services as toilets and in some of them, running water and electricity. For those who do not have the resources to rebuild their homes, to live in shelters is the only choice: the impact in their health and capacity to recovery is jeopardized. For them, the hurricane Maria still is happening now.

Approach

In February, 2019 in collaboration with the Office of Disaster Management of Dominica, we did a fieldwork to document with local agencies, stakeholders, local leaders, and the affected people, testimonies and interpretations of their actions to cope and survive during the emergency and the following months. Our idea was to identify some of the spontaneous actions that people developed in their communities after the hurricanes that could be taken as baseline for formal preparedness for disaster risk programs, based in the



notion of Zero Order Responders (Briones *et al.*, 2018), that reflect people's creativity for deal with immediate needs through social cohesion and resourcefulness. However, in this case, the affected people are still facing the disaster consequences. When people remains in shelters they not fully recovery, they actually are becoming permanent affected: their chances to remain in poverty are high, feeding the social vulnerability circle. The people in the shelters don't have a house to stay, for them the recovery "window" is getting closed; instead looking for coping mechanisms for recovery, they are dealing with an increase of their poverty conditions.

The purpose of this essay is simply to document and communicate through a visual tool the post disaster context of a specific affected population. Despite the limitations of this exercise, we believe it could trigger a stimulant way to document disaster risk impacts in many other places (Plates 1–10).



Note: Mother works in tourism industry, still in recovery

Source: Scotts Head, Dominica

Plate 1.
Born just weeks after
Hurricane Maria, this
boy grows up in
shelter with
grandmother, in the
picture

DPM
28,5

618

Plate 2.
A large number of
homes remain in ruins
along the island



Source: Petite Soufriere Dominica

Plate 3.
This 60-years old
women lives in shelter
with her husband and
other families in
Castle Bruce,
Dominica





Source: Castle Bruce, Dominica

Plate 4.
A woman gets
attention from a social
worker, who also lives
in the shelter



Source: Castle Bruce, Dominica

Plate 5.
A man in bed opens
his curtain and makes
himself visible to the
photographer

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Plate 6.
With a leg hurt, this
man waits to heal and
get back to work

Source: Castle Bruce, Dominica



Plate 7.
In a recovering
economy job are rare
and precarious,
according to this 18-
years old girl in
relatively more
equipped shelter in
the capital, Roseau,
Dominica



Source: Castle Bruce, Dominica

Plate 8.
A year and half after
Hurricane Maria, the
only challenge is not
just to rebuild, but also
to clean up the debris



Source: Castle Bruce, Dominica

Plate 9.
This woman waits to
be resettled in the
houses (at the
background) build by
contractors with
governmental and
international funds

Plate 10.
A woman takes a
break after work by
taking care of a
neighbor's son,
Roseau, Dominica



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