From Abandonment to Affordable Housing

Submitted By: Centro para la Reconstrucción del Hábitat



Organization Profile

Organization Name: Centro para la Reconstrucción del Hábitat

Organization Type: Civil society

Website: https://www.crhpr.org/en

Practice Details

Country(ies): United States of America

City(ies): Puerto Rico

Start Year: 2017 **Ongoing:** Yes **End Year:** N/A

Main Adequate Housing Components:



Housing Thematic Areas:



Relevant SDGs:



UN-HABITAT

Problem & Context

Puerto Rico faces a persistent housing crisis compounded by overlapping challenges: widespread vacancy and blight, lack of affordable housing supply, unresolved property titles, and weak legal protections for low-income households. Natural disasters and economic austerity have worsened housing insecurity and accelerated displacement throughout the island. Policy gaps including limited mechanisms to acquire and manage vacant properties, fragmented legal support for families lacking formal deeds, and inadequate financial tools for community-based housing development have contributed to the crisis. As a result, vulnerable populations, particularly low-income families, renters, and the elderly, face systemic barriers to secure and adequate housing. It is within this context that in 2017, housing advocates in Puerto Rico created the Center for Habitat Reconstruction to promote the responsible management and reuse of abandoned and vacant properties on the archipelago.

Solution Developed

Vacant and abandoned properties, while they may represent health and safety risks for their populations, also represent a potential for equitable development. By reclaiming these spaces, we can integrate resilience and community priorities, while emphasizing affordability and local ownership. Through a variety of activities, these interventions reduce blight, prevent displacement, and expand access to secure housing for low-income and marginalized groups. The objectives of CRH's housing practice are to transform vacant and abandoned properties into safe and productive assets, expand the supply of affordable housing, and strengthen community control over development. The practice seeks to secure tenure for vulnerable households, promote equitable access to housing, and ensure that redevelopment processes prevent displacement. A further goal is to align housing with long-term resilience by integrating legal, financial, and community tools so that low-income and marginalized populations can benefit from stable, affordable homes.

Implementation

The CRH's housing practice reduces abandonment, secures tenure, and expands equitable housing access through an integrated approach. Place-based projects support grassroots initiatives, from transforming abandoned lots into gardens to repurposing vacant schools. Community planning maps abandonment and develops reuse strategies centered on resilience, while municipal partnerships help local governments apply legal tools to reclaim public nuisances. At the policy level, advocacy drives reform, and through legal aid CRH assists families with titling, succession, and occupancy. Housing development is advanced through rehabilitation and innovative financing that enables small-scale, community-driven construction. Implementation involves collaboration across sectors. Municipalities identify and transfer properties; community groups co-design and manage projects; NGOs and universities contribute research and capacity-building; and private partners support investment. CRH

coordinates these efforts and ensures community voices guide decision-making. Timelines vary by initiative. Property reclamation can be achieved within a year, while place-based projects typically range from one to four years, from identification through financing and reuse. Resources include philanthropy, public and federal funds, and mission-aligned partnerships. CRH also reinvests income generated through housing construction and municipal technical assistance to sustain programs and scale impact.

Enablers & Obstacles

The initiative was enabled by strong community engagement, policy advocacy, and municipal collaboration, leading to Puerto Rico's first community land bank and legal aid clinics on title and occupancy. CRH provided technical assistance to municipalities to identify and reuse vacant properties, while supporting communities through capacity-building and co-design. A key enabler was creating new data strategies, filling the gap in island-wide vacancy information. Obstacles included bureaucratic delays, lack of baseline data, and complex legal barriers from informal tenure. These were addressed through tailored data collection, cross-sector partnerships, and specialized legal aid. To counter financial exclusion, CRH launched a community lending fund for projects outside traditional credit. Together, these factors allowed the initiative to advance from policy design to active implementation and replication across municipalities.

Results & Impact

Our blight management program has delivered concrete results: more than 1,958 houses repaired through direct support and technical assistance; over 300 households receiving legal aid to secure tenure; dozens of vacant properties integrated into reuse pipelines; and affordable housing units rehabilitated or developed with community partners. A community lending fund has mobilized new capital for equitable housing, including land banks and community-driven financing, expanding access for populations excluded from traditional credit. Legal aid is especially vital in Puerto Rico, where informal settlements predate U.S. colonization and many households still lack formal title, leaving them vulnerable to eviction, displacement, and ineligibility for aid. By assisting with titling, succession, and occupancy rights, and supporting communities and land trusts in identifying properties that pose risks or could be repurposed, we address structural inequities while building resilience.

For low-income and marginalized groups, the program has meant housing security, prevention of displacement, and better access to affordable housing. At a broader level, it reduces blight, revitalizes neighborhoods, and strengthens disaster resilience while advancing economic revitalization, social cohesion, and environmental protection aligned with the SDGs and New Urban Agenda.

Replication & Scale Up

This practice is rooted in Puerto Rico's unique context of vacancy, informal tenure, and disaster risk, and is not intended for direct transfer elsewhere. However, elements such as community-driven data collection, cross-sector alliances, and lending tools for excluded populations could be adapted. Replication would depend on local legal frameworks, community capacity, and available resources, showing that while context-specific, the principles of equity, collaboration, and data-driven planning are broadly relevant.

CRH's practice is designed for Puerto Rico's context of widespread vacancy, informal tenure, and disaster vulnerability, and is not intended for direct transfer elsewhere. Still, its core strategies like community-led planning, legal aid to secure tenure, municipal partnerships, and innovative lending and offer lessons for other regions. Replication would require adapting to local legal systems, land markets, and governance structures, ensuring that equity and community voice remain central.

Policy Uptake

This housing practice has informed or been partially integrated into policy discussions, strategies, or pilot-level policy instruments.

CRH's practice has directly shaped policy by informing Puerto Rico's first Community Land Bank law, advancing legal reforms for managing vacant and abandoned properties, and piloting municipal blight ordinances. Data and community-driven approaches developed by CRH have been integrated into housing strategies, while legal aid clinics addressing tenure barriers have served as models for policy instruments that expand access to secure housing and prevent displacement.

Lessons & Takeaways

Over eight years, CRH has faced disasters, political shifts, funding gaps, and resistance to alternatives like rehabilitation. Success came from adapting, innovating, and acting independently, building momentum from the ground up rather than waiting for endorsement. By combining persistence with community-driven action, CRH has created space for new housing models, showing that determination can reshape Puerto Rico's housing landscape.