

Letter to the Editor/Opinion
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**PUERTO RICO RELIVES A MAJOR MISTAKE AND
WILL HAVE NO ONE TO BLAME**

One short sentence on Puerto Rico in a recent report commissioned by the United Nations on poverty in the United States might have been overlooked if not for the current rebuilding of the power grid devastated by Hurricane Maria.

NYU Law Professor Philip Alliston writes that in his travel documenting extreme poverty all over the United States, he visited a town in the south of Puerto Rico where residents live “next to a mountain of completely unprotected coal ash which rains down upon them bringing illness, disability and death.”

This one sentence led to a question: There are no coal mines in Puerto Rico. So why is there toxic coal ash on the island? The answer explains a past and future problem that unfortunately will continue to perpetuate Puerto Ricans’ second-class status as American citizens.

Puerto Rico’s financial problems were in a big part created by the island’s huge borrowing strategy. At the top of the list of entities borrowing was the island’s power authority. Well you see, Puerto Rico, even though gifted by God with over 300 days of sun each year, is completely reliant on fossil fuels for power. To make this worse is the fact that it imports nearly 100% of the coal, natural gas and petroleum it needs to provide the island with electricity. This policy by Puerto Rico is incredibly expensive and inexplicable.

The revelation on the mountain of toxic ash in the scathing UN report documenting how 40 million Americans live in dire poverty comes at a time when the United States is spending some projected \$18 billion to rebuild Puerto Rico’s power grid. While it will be rebuilt to withstand a category 4 hurricane, Puerto Rico is again falling victim to a dependency on imported fossil fuels that will not only make it harder to address its financial crisis but contributes to the environmental factors that created Hurricane Maria and other such storms to come.

Puerto Rico should not rebuild its electric grid using power producing and distribution models of towers, wires and fossil fuels. Instead, Puerto Rico should be using this opportunity to build a 21st Century power grid rooted in micro-grids fueled by alternative energy like solar, wind, tidal and wave energy. Hawaii, Madeira, Orkney and Iceland are islands with fully developed initiatives that harness clean, green and blue energy to power their communities and businesses while replacing expensive imports of fossil fuels. They have diverted those

significant savings towards improving the health and education and economic opportunities of their residents. These are models of energy production and clean fuel technology that Puerto Rico should be fully embracing.

Allowing Puerto Rico to rebuild a power grid that will continue to rely on imports of toxic, global warming compounds is tantamount to agreeing to perpetuate its colonial status. We can be assured that the current political status of Puerto Rico is being cemented for another century with every inch of power transmission wires and foot of steel towers deployed in the current rebuilding efforts.