

# “Solo el Pueblo Salva al Pueblo”

*(“Only the People Can Save the People”):  
Mutual Aid in Puerto Rico and a just  
transition to a post-capitalist economy*

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## About this Report

In the wake of Hurricanes Irma and María in 2017, Puerto Rico's mutual aid networks became essential as government responses proved inadequate. This report, based on interviews with ten community-based organizations across the archipelago, explores how mutual aid plays a pivotal role in Puerto Rico, not only in addressing crises but also in envisioning a post-capitalist, decolonized future. It concludes with a set of recommendations focused on supporting decolonization of Puerto Rico, moving resources to the community-controlled María Fund, and supporting infrastructure that helps move land and buildings out of the speculative market into community control.

This report was originally commissioned to produce a set of learnings for One Project's internal strategy. Since then, One Project and AgitArte agreed to produce an external version to share insights that may be of use to fellow funders and the broader network of communities working on mutual aid in Puerto Rico.

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# Introduction

Almost invisible on the world map, Puerto Rico resonates everywhere day after day. Small in size, this Caribbean country contains invaluable wealth. The cradle of great artists, it is known for its musicians who move masses, its beaches, and the warmth of its people. However, in recent years it has captured media attention because Puerto Ricans have united in the face of catastrophic events: the hurricanes Irma, María, and Fiona, earthquakes that destroyed infrastructure, a bankruptcy that is unprecedented in the history of the United States and its territories, and the #RickyResign (#RickyRenuncia) movement, **a massive mobilization that managed to force then-governor Ricardo Rosselló from office.**

*'Solo el Pueblo Salva al Pueblo'* ('Only the people can save the people!') is a common saying among Latin American social movements. When Hurricanes Irma and María arrived in 2017, winds of over 175 miles per hour downed much of Puerto Rico's electrical system and communications network. Torrential rains produced landslides and flooding that cut off entire communities. As days stretched into weeks and weeks into months, scarcity grew. Waiting for the government to help was not an alternative. In order to survive, people had to collaborate with their neighbors and share what little food, water, medicine, gasoline, energy, and telecommunications they had. Faced with slow and inefficient government responses, the Puerto Rican people activated mutual aid and solidarity practices that have been part of their culture for generations. *'Only the people can save the people'* became the motto and the reality of the archipelago and her people.

International solidarity was quick to come: aid began to arrive from all over the world, particularly from the Puerto Rican diaspora living in the United States. Yet, at the same time that transnational solidarity was activated, the impact of the country's colonial status became increasingly clear. Aid shipments were held **at ports of entry and left to rot**; water shipments were abandoned in empty fields; gasoline shipments from other countries were not allowed to dock because of colonial shipping law that requires all freight to arrive via ships flying U.S. flags. Colonialism's impacts were evident in the slowness of the U.S. government's response to the emergency, as well as in the lack of autonomy of local authorities to help the people.

*“How might community-led mutual aid efforts transform moments of crisis (caused by the collapse of current systems) into possibilities for a just transition to a regenerative economy?”*

Despite climate disasters, colonial oppression, systematic displacement, and the need to fight corruption and widespread injustice, the Puerto Rican people continue to live the saying, *“Only the people can save the people.”* *Boricuas* (Puerto Rican people) have formed powerful mutual aid networks and organized spaces of joy and resistance, all while developing the underlying infrastructure for a new economy. To explore the emergent infrastructure of mutual aid, **One Project** commissioned this report by **AgitArte**, an organization dedicated to mutual aid and solidarity, and Camile Roldán, an independent researcher and journalist from Puerto Rico. We set out to explore the role of mutual aid in Puerto Rico. We wanted to learn how these movements respond to interlocking crises as they develop systemic visions for post-capitalist and decolonizing futures.

We conducted a literature review, developed an annotated bibliography, and visited and interviewed ten organizations that are part of the social movement ecosystem in the archipelago. All of these organizations carry out mutual aid projects. We were particularly interested in understanding how community-led mutual aid efforts transform moments of crisis and facilitate possibilities for a just transition to a regenerative economy. We learned that, for many social movement organizations, mutual aid is a key component within a broader transition strategy to a new economy. We also learned about the ways that Puerto Rican movements have organized financial, legal, cultural, agroecological, and other infrastructure to support mutual aid, as well as to strengthen democratic control of capital and land. We heard many powerful stories and saw a deep desire for a post-capitalist and regenerative future that embodies dignity, solidarity, and decolonization.

# Context

On August 30, 2017, Hurricane Irma hit Puerto Rico, leaving floods, landslides, and climate refugees. Less than twenty days later, Hurricane Maria caused incomparable devastation. Puerto Rico, accustomed to storms, hurricanes, floods, and other typical Caribbean weather events, was not prepared for the extent of damage Hurricane Maria brought. With sustained winds of 175 miles, the storm uprooted the already weakened electrical infrastructure, communications towers, trees, and roofs that housed many poor people. The ground, saturated by Irma's heavy rains, collapsed in many places, isolating entire communities.

Despair gripped the country. With communication and electricity blackouts and no water supplies, efficient and rapid government response was crucial, but for many, it never came. When it did finally come for some, it was disjointed and ineffective.

The hurricanes lifted the veil on poverty in Puerto Rico and magnified the injustice that marks the archipelago's colonial relationship with the U.S. In 1493, Borikén and its Taíno and Carib inhabitants were invaded by Spain, and when the Spanish left, the U.S. colonized Puerto Rico in 1898. It was invaded by the U.S. military and claimed as a territory. For decades, the U.S. violently repressed Puerto Rican nationalist movements. Since Spanish colonization in 1493, Puerto Rico has never been free. This lack of freedom and autonomy continues to affect economic development and poses a constant threat to Puerto Rican culture, language, and prosperity.

The two back-to-back destructive hurricanes occurred less than a year after the territory faced the worst bankruptcy in the history of the United States and its territories, amounting to \$74 billion. Because of its colonial status - contrary to the 50 states - Puerto Rico does not have the right to declare bankruptcy. Thus, the United States government imposed an unelected Financial Oversight and Management Board for Puerto Rico with the power to restructure debt and to supersede Puerto Rico's elected officials and governor on all budgetary decisions. In other words, the Puerto Rican people do not live under a democracy. The Board prioritizes debt service payments that many consider to be illegal and that have never been audited despite an ongoing campaign to do so. The austerity measures and cuts ordered by the Board severely impact public services and social programs in energy, health, and education.

During the summer of 2019, private chats between then-governor Ricky Rosselló, members of his cabinet, and advisers **were leaked to local media**. These chats contained homophobic, racist, and sexist remarks, mocked the dead during Hurricane Maria, and even alluded to a "Puerto Rico without Puerto Ricans." Mass protests, led by different **community groups and entertainment figures such as Bad Bunny, Ricky Martin, and René Pérez**, led to the resignation of Rosselló on July 24, 2019. Puerto Ricans, when



united for a common purpose, achieve the seemingly impossible.

Unfortunately, the mass mobilization failed to install deep systemic change. In November 2020, Pedro Pierluisi of the New Progressive Party (PNP), which aspires for Puerto Rico to become the 51st state of the United States, was elected as governor. The other two major parties are the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP) and the Popular Democratic Party (PPD), which advocates for continued Commonwealth status. In recent times, smaller movements have emerged that challenge these traditional structures, such as Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana (MVC).

During these four years, Puerto Rico has seen the impact of a government economic incentive that displaces locals and welcomes foreigners. It has given foreign investors tax-free benefits, and as a result, it has displaced, gentrified, and perpetuated aggressive speculation in the real estate market. Property sales are taking place in tourist or upper-class areas, as well as in the countryside, along the coastline of poor and Black municipalities such as Loíza, and in urban areas the government has abandoned for decades. In Old San Juan, an iconic historical heritage site of Puerto Rican culture, very few locals are able to live. Meanwhile, in Puerta de Tierra, a neighborhood near Old San Juan, foreigners have bought entire blocks, displacing the people who lived there with affordable rents. It has increasingly become difficult for Puerto Ricans to have decent housing, and many fear that, just like in Hawaii, Puerto Rico will become a country without homes for its own people. As one of the text messages from the leaked chat of ex-governor Rosselló and his friends put it: “I saw the future, it’s so wonderful, there are no more Puerto Ricans.”

Puerto Ricans are not willing to be pushed out of their land. Amidst this scenario, they seek alternatives to stay in the country and defend their land and culture for new generations. They do not sit idly by but come together to tap into their centuries-old mutual aid practices. In Puerto Rico, mutual aid is a practice born from a desire to care for one’s neighbor, protect dignity, and live as one wants and deserves. These movements have always existed in Puerto Rico, but without a doubt, one can speak of a “before and after” the Hurricanes in mutual aid projects across the country. The numerous crises have strengthened the awareness and importance of solidarity and self-management. Puerto Rico understands that it is not charity that will save it from this despair but solidarity. And Puerto Rico is not willing to go back. As a natural response, people are taking responsibility for their destiny and country, echoing the sentiment that only they can save themselves.

# Community-Led Mutual Aid in Puerto Rico

Over the past five months, we visited ten key Puerto Rican organizations and interviewed them about their work, approach to mutual aid, and visions for a better future. The first organization we interviewed, María Fund, is not dedicated to mutual aid but rather is an intermediary social justice entity that focuses on supporting organizations that work on collective liberation through racial, gender, and socioeconomic justice in Puerto Rico. In other words, their work is essential to help the rest of the organizations achieve their objectives.

In the following pages, we share a brief summary of what we found.

# María Fund

## Strengthening Solidarity in Puerto Rico



### Summary

The **María Fund** was founded in 2017, right in the middle of the devastation left by hurricanes Irma and María. Despite the chaos and communication blackout, the organization immediately began the arduous task of raising funds to support people in need. In just a few months, they raised \$4 million. The fund supports organizations that work directly with communities and develop mutual aid programs. These funds are tailored to support community initiatives that seek the dignity of human beings through equity and social justice and respect the sense of urgency of the people who have been left unprotected.

In less than two years, María Fund grew to \$7 million. This fund continues to support front-line communities that protect land for sustainable agriculture, protect decent housing for local communities, and run programs that offer relief to poor and socially disadvantaged people, to name a few. These groups operate from the conviction that Puerto Rico has to stop being a colony of the United States in order for the Puerto Rican people to build a future with better living conditions for everyone.

During a recent visit to the municipality of San Germán, Xiomara Caro, the founder and chair of María Fund, spent time with a group of agroecological farmers. One of the farmers approached her and shared his personal story. “The extra income Maria Fund gave me made it possible for me to be here right now,” the man said. “I wouldn’t be here because I wouldn’t be able to stand on my own two feet,” he continued. Caro finds in this experience the key to building new economic and political systems that meet the community’s needs. After Hurricane Fiona destroyed the crops, many of these farmers survived thanks to the financial aid that María Fund channeled through the Instituto para la Investigación y Acción en Agroecología (Institute for Agroecological Research and Action).

“Universal basic income should be available so that when disaster strikes, no one should worry about losing their house, farm, work, or livelihood. These are the policies of the future, and the Puerto Rican people are already putting this into practice,” Caro explains. A lawyer and community organizer, Caro saw the need to secure institutional funding for community work. While working at the Center for Popular Democracy and in conversations with Puerto Rican G8 communities (Grupo de las Ocho Comunidades Aledañas al Caño Martín Peña, Inc.) and Taller Salud (Healthcare Workshop), she decided to establish the María Fund in 2017. “It happened 48 hours before Hurricane Maria. The web page went live while the hurricane wreaked havoc in Puerto Rico,” Caro recalls.

In just a few months, Caro and her team, backed by the Center for Popular Democracy as a fiscal sponsor, along with the participation of more than 20 people who work with fundraising and philanthropy, raised four million dollars. A year and a half later, the fund grew to seven million dollars. The first grantees were a small number of organizations with solid track records, and these first contributions became the bedrock of the María Fund. The fund envisioned bringing cultural and structural change in Puerto Rico. To build this reality, it needed to align the entity with a more anti-imperialist approach and place the decolonization of Puerto Rico at the center of its efforts. In 2019, several months before earthquakes hit the southern part of the country and the COVID-19 pandemic, the María Fund decided to pursue its work long-term but more independently, despite maintaining an administrative relationship with the Center for Popular Democracy. This transition resulted in gaining greater decision-making power to allocate the funds the organization receives and manages.

Caro and her team continue to forge local alliances that strengthen their capacity to raise funds that back projects focused on structural change in Puerto Rico. One of these projects is the Instituto para la Agroecología. Through this collaboration, the María Fund disbursed \$1.2 million to nearly 50 farmers and farmer collectives to foster responsible agriculture in the country. The farmer who thanked Caro is one of them.

Caro sees other examples of the seeds for a new political and social system in Caguas, where just days after Hurricane Fiona, Comedores Sociales de Puerto Rico (Popular Kitchens of Puerto Rico) opened a food co-op. Caro sees this project as the ideal guide to any mutual aid model that strives to meet the needs of a community with fairness and

*“These things take time. My solution to this quandary is that we already have the ideas. The challenge lies in people not applying social justice in their organizations; hence, they do not have space to reflect daily. They don’t get on a plane every three months to meet with other organizers worldwide doing similar work. We can’t offer that level of counsel yet.”*

respect. At Comedores Sociales, visitors can select 12 free food items they need instead of receiving food chosen by others. This is unique for popular kitchens around the world. For Caro, Comedores Sociales and their leader, Giovanni Roberto, are role models for addressing inequality through mutual aid.

The leader of María Fund understands that the changes they seek for the country will take a considerable amount of time. Still, she believes in the transformative impact of her work and the importance of preserving and respecting the process of achieving this change. She and her team have created support systems that ensure these projects expand at their own pace, and they also offer space for learning and reflecting.

No less important is the hardship many leaders stumble into when they try to transform crisis response projects into long-term organizations. In response to these challenges, several groups in Puerto Rico are already gathering resources to invest in infrastructure, such as acquiring buildings. María Fund needs a long-term funding commitment, preferably over ten years. This means raising substantial money, possibly 20 to 25 million dollars each year. These funds will be chan-

neled to local organizations through a democratic process without disregarding the most crucial part of providing support: establishing solid relationships. Caro dreams of a strong collaborative mutual aid network active across Puerto Rico. She is ready to fight to make this a reality.

However, most funders and foundations are unwilling to take the “political risk” of supporting leaders devoted to equality and refuse to make long-term funding commitments. “These things take time,” says Caro. “My solution to this quandary is that we already have the ideas. The issue lies in these people not applying social justice in their organizations; hence, they do not have space to reflect daily. They don’t get on a plane every three months to meet with other organizers worldwide doing similar work. We can’t offer that level of counsel yet,” Caro remarks sadly.

Fostering mutual aid in Puerto Rico also proves to be challenging in other ways. For example, the unrelenting “media blitz” portrays a specific form of life for Puerto Ricans. This influence is exacerbated by an agenda to turn the country into a luxury destination, displacing locals from their homes and repurposing the land for foreigners’ benefit. Nonetheless, because the menace is becoming visible —and even tangible— in daily life, the chair of the María Fund sees this as an opportunity to organize and articulate why mutual aid is essential for the country’s future.

If there’s something that María Fund contributes to the pursuit of equality, it is a profound understanding of how the mutual aid movement in Puerto Rico is being built. The Fund is committed to understanding each project it supports and exploring shared experiences that unite them. This enables María Fund to work toward greater collective goals than

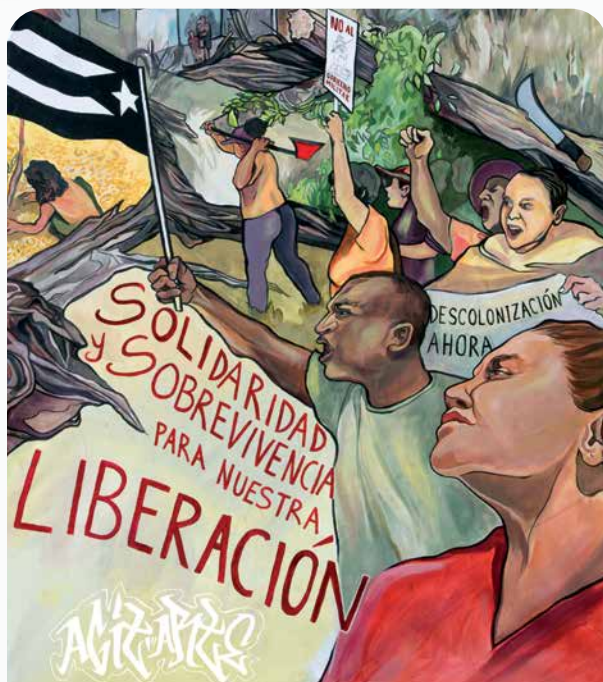
the individual project level. This singular approach allows María Fund to fully retell a lucid, moving story of the current situation on the archipelago. Ultimately, it’s all about transformative experiences, such as that of the farmer who, thanks to solidarity, could stand firmly on his own two feet in the aftermath of the hurricane. Now, it’s time to expand this experience far and wide across the archipelago.

## Recommendations

María Fund provides self-organized, democratically controlled, inspirational financial infrastructure for Puerto Rican social movements. It is critical to move enough resources to the María Fund so that local leaders can envision a new scale and pace of growth for a democratic economy in Puerto Rico. To increase the speed of change, it is also important to enable local leaders to meet with each other and other organizers worldwide regularly.

# AgitArte

## Art Focused on Collectivism, Cultural Solidarity, and Mutual Aid



### Summary

For 25 years, **AgitArte** has used the arts and community activism as tools to fight against inequalities, poverty, and injustice in Puerto Rico. Made up of working-class artists and organizers, AgitArte promotes solidarity, education, inclusion, and the empowerment of marginalized communities.

Through public demonstrations, presentations, and workshops, the group provokes critical thinking and questions the system. After hurricanes Irma and María, the earthquakes, the pandemic, and the government bankruptcy, AgitArte has brought together different groups that pursue social justice. AgitArte's close relationships with organizations in the United States and Puerto Rico allow it to play an essential role in the formation of alliances. AgitArte helps facilitate the fair distribution of resources to mutual aid initiatives on the island. Similarly, it supports artists and projects that seek to challenge oppressive power structures.

Inequality, displacement, poverty, and injustice are everyday realities for Puerto Ricans. Yet, organizations like AgitArte—established and managed by working-class artists and organizers—demonstrate that art and community activism are mighty tools to prompt change. For 25 years, the organization has developed multidisciplinary art projects that foster solidarity amid the complex backdrop of the social, economic, and political reality of Puerto Rico.

Jorge Díaz, co-founder of AgitArte, worked as a community organizer in Massachusetts when he saw the need for popular education projects in Puerto Rico. Around this time, he befriended Juan Carlos Ortega, a Colombian actor who shared his interest in popular theater, primarily focused on youth. Together with other artists and organizers, they established an organization named after Agitprop groups in England, Germany, and Italy. AgitArte is a Spanish portmanteau of “Agitate” and “Art.”

Since 1996, there have been many challenges to keeping the organization afloat, particularly a lack of resources to support anti-establishment cultural work. With or without money, Díaz's unwavering commitment to the organization has made AgitArte a catalyst for change. As a result, it continues to play a vital role within the ecosystem of grassroots organizations.

As the years have passed, the need for groups dedicated to empowering marginalized communities is more pressing than ever.

A devastating surge of privatization, gentrification, and neoliberalism has worsened the dire state of affairs on the island. These manufactured disasters, coupled with repeated natural disasters, have made it increasingly urgent to highlight the work of AgitArte and its ability to build cohesion among different collectives that strive toward similar goals. Despite climate events, these past six years, and the imposition of the Financial Oversight Board, the links between AgitArte and the U.S.—which include foundations, community groups, and leaders—have led to a better, more equitable distribution of aid.

“Our location in Santurce and the relationships we’ve built with the U.S.—particularly in New York and the southern states, which sent over a lot of aid—have turned AgitArte into a leading project. Beyond being a service center, we were now responsible for distributing food and resources. At its peak, we provided support for around 13 to 15 groups on the island,” Díaz explains.

Agitarte uses artistic creation, popular education, and solidarity techniques to work and collaborate with communities. Their work centers on social justice, inclusion, and issues at the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ideology. AgitArte hopes to challenge the U.S.’s cultural hold over the island and offer possibilities beyond oppression. AgitArte’s storytelling and interdisciplinary mediums give visibility to the experiences of the oppressed, enabling the grassroots and the marginalized to imagine a different future. Their work amplifies local struggles and political and social movements that seek liberation and expand abolitionist practices. It sheds light on the stories of historically marginalized and vulnerable communities. AgitArte collaborates with local groups, schools, and community organizations to ensure their impact is meaningful

and sustainable.

The Popular Education and Performance Program is one such project. This program provides tools to examine and challenge oppressive power structures, empower communities, and promote critical thought through art. Through artistic and cultural expressions, they organize workshops, presentations, and activities that foster participation and collective critical thinking around social justice, resistance, and systemic transformation.

*“If [funders] are familiar with the work and the organizations and own the resources to measure outcomes, [they should] refrain from making demands on people who are already overwhelmed with work. And, commit to grant more funding over a long period of time”.*

AgitArte uses arts, culture, and popular education to build and empower mutual aid networks and defy oppressive power structures. Its Mutual Aid & Cultural Solidarity Program supports mutual aid among individuals and fosters social transformation. To accomplish these goals, the group collaborates with organized communities, regardless of geographical location, and strengthens solidarity. It uses collective action to create authentic, enduring change for the common good.

To bring about collective transformation through art, artists and organizers need support. AgitArte implements an artist development program, which provides technical and financial support to numerous individuals and projects. “If all these groups, which are part of a larger community on the island, can

grow, everyone stands to benefit. We've applied this principle to our fundraising efforts, and we've become re-granters. We support several groups and organizations that align with our work," Díaz stresses.

By centering their work at a community level, AgitArte has had a significant impact. They plan to continue the political work they are known for and extend support to other groups and artists. "We're even increasing the amount of creative, collaborative projects we're working on. We have joined forces with other organizations to support groups that are buying or have bought spaces, such as El Hangar, Taller Lúmpen, and El Ancón in Loíza. We've overseen so many programs that sometimes I lose track. But as someone who has spent 25 years in the struggle, we believe the next 25 years will be dedicated to solidifying, theorizing, showcasing our experience, and demonstrating what we've done and why it works," he asserts.

Yet, achieving these and other goals is a challenging task. Díaz stresses that securing funding "is crucial to these projects." Philanthropy can significantly contribute to meeting this need," he remarks. For instance, implementing more flexible funding criteria and general operating or unrestricted grants would be beneficial. These progressive funding strategies would enable entities to focus on their mission instead of constantly searching for ways to sustain themselves and fulfill administrative requirements.

"If funders are familiar with the work and the organizations and own the resources to measure outcomes, they should refrain from making demands on people who are already overwhelmed with work. Funders could commit to grant more funding over a long period of time," Díaz explains. Unrestricted multi-year funding is part of the solution to the sustainability of mutual aid groups.

Equally, grassroots organizations need to collaborate and connect to improve Puerto Rico's social, economic, and political systems. Díaz believes that this profound transformation must begin by decolonizing Puerto Rico. The Financial Oversight Board—which wields decision-making power over the island's budget—should be abolished. It is essential to halt the detrimental impact of government policies that uphold real estate market speculation, mainly at the hands of foreigners. The preservation of Puerto Rican lands is of utmost importance.

Díaz believes that well-managed community organizations equipped with adequate resources can tackle the issue, given their deep understanding of community needs, such as access to the land. Still, he acknowledges the challenge it is to think of the future of AgitArte because of current conditions.

"It would be somewhat presumptuous on my part to speculate how I visualize AgitArte a hundred years from now. Similarly, it is impossible to predict what will or may happen in a hundred years or what problems will arise. The questions are: how can we create spaces to imagine ourselves? How will these projects turn out 25, 10, 5 years from now? Can Puerto Ricans really anticipate what will happen in five years?" Díaz states in a pensive tone.

He proceeds to ask the same questions, but this time directed at philanthropic organizations. While these entities exist, Díaz raises doubts about the extent to which they are genuinely willing to provide resources to facilitate an authentic transformation of the lives of the oppressed and marginalized. Nevertheless, AgitArte will persist in taking to the streets, forging stronger connections within their networks, organizing projects, and working towards a future where society and government are truly liberated from ex-



exploitative and dehumanizing systems.

## Recommendations

As seen through the works of AgitArte, culture, art, and storytelling are essential to inspire people to move resources into a just transition to a regenerative economy. Scaling up the ability of local groups to purchase, defend, and control land and buildings such as AgitArte, El Hangar, Taller Lúmpen, and El Ancón is critical. Trust-based philanthropy, minimizing grant paperwork, and providing multi-year general operating funds will help groups like AgitArte and others thrive.

# Taller Salud

## *Feminism at the center of community struggle*



### *Summary*

You cannot talk about feminism in Puerto Rico without mentioning **Taller Salud**. Taller Salud, a feminist organization founded in 1979, plays a leading role in women's health, rights, capacity, and autonomy of women and families across the island. Through education and activism, Taller Salud addresses violence and economic development within communities. After hurricanes Irma and María lifted the veil of poverty and exposed the dire need of the Loíza community (where Taller Salud is based), Taller Salud began integrating mutual aid into its programs. They provide direct support to help women and families build environments of peace, justice, and empowerment. They help advocate for public policies that improve the living conditions of women and the environment in general while fighting against inequalities. The collective remains active not only in Loíza but throughout Puerto Rico.

Days after the onslaught of Hurricane Maria, the dire realities of many families in Loíza, a municipality located northeast of the island, surfaced. Loíza is a community rooted in a history of Maroon and pirate ancestors who struggled to escape and survive the systemic violence of chattel slavery. For centuries, the area has been persecuted and abandoned by the state. After the hurricanes, hunger, chronic illnesses, abuse at home, and poverty were impossible to hide. Witnessing this reality convinced Tania Rosario to reshape Taller Salud and her work. For Rosario, this experience confirmed that solidarity-based practices—not charity or handouts—are more effective at achieving collective well-being. Rosario and her team mobilized to address the crisis caused by a lack of food, power, water, and other essential services. She saw how “community networks enabled the survival of impoverished communities” and how they set out to work. This response was underpinned by an urgency to protect the most vulnerable people in the community. For example, when it was almost impossible to obtain gas, people prioritized making trips to take food to elderly patients, gravely ill folks, or families with small children. Food was lacking, but somebody always gave their meals to sick or needy people.

“The most awe-inspiring thing I saw were the lines in cafeterias. Most people came to get food for others. Some were willing to go hungry as long as they ensured lonely seniors or bedridden folks ate at least one meal a day. I saw a great deal of people partake in that chain of mutual aid,” recalls Rosario, who

admits she had never imagined such a large scale of needs or a community so committed to meeting them. “It’s one thing to presume the life conditions of people, but it was quite another to confirm the situation was much worse for vulnerable folks in Puerto Rico after the hurricane proved my suspicions. It was a before and after for me,” she pointed out.

Nothing was ever the same for Rosario or Taller Salud after this experience. It was impossible to return to the same framework as before. Suddenly, the need to learn from recent events became urgent.

*“I am betting on an ecosystem of leading organizations that can acquire land to conserve in Puerto Rico. I believe in land conservation in community hands. We dedicate our lives to this”*

“Priorities and plans were redrawn, and mutual aid was integrated as a cross-cutting strategy in all our programs. The length and breadth of the organization changed,” the feminist leader comments. The transition took over two years, as it combined different views that, of course, included women.

For Rosario, it was essential to integrate mutual aid in feminism, which is Taller Salud’s anchor. The organization was founded in 1979 by a group of women around the struggles won during the ‘60s and ‘70s. There was originally no intention to turn the entity into a non-profit; instead, much of the group’s time was invested in research about the island for international bodies, such as the United Nations, even if Puerto Rico is not formally represented internationally. However, after a

decade of work, it became critical to address violence and the AIDS epidemic, among other issues. The leadership decided to restructure, raise funds, and hire staff to tackle these issues.

It has not always been easy to speak of feminism in communities where women often are educated in the church. These environments shun critical discourse around charity and avoid questioning systems of privilege and oppression. But, due to events such as the hurricane, it was impossible not to have these conversations and ask these questions.

“There was space held for mutual dialogues, where we could understand each other because we shared the same values and anger,” states Rosario upon highlighting that women in the community act as feminists—even when they are hesitant to call themselves by the term. Feminist mutual aid practices were the only way to survive the void left behind by the government. These dialogues led the community to organize and manage water and food resources and run structured aid networks like professionals. The community of Loíza, when united in one common purpose, showed impressive capabilities and skills.

To sustain these impressive initiatives, Rosario understands the need to change the narrative around poverty on the island. Rosario and her team are disproving the popular narrative that socially disadvantaged people are guilty of their situation. Instead, through large-scale popular education, they flip the narrative and ask pertinent questions, such as: Where is the state? What is its responsibility in alleviating these challenges? Taller Salud opens and facilitates respectful dialogue between diverse groups and seeks to reach agreements on how to re-design and improve social support systems so that they

work for the people.

Another need that Rosario identifies is “to claim a leading role for mutual aid,” that is, to find a way to provide further visibility to the practices that do work to protect the well-being, alleviate the effect of serious tragedies, such as those caused by the scourge of Maria. The director of Taller Salud understands that it is vital to avoid continuing with the patterns of inefficient ways of doing things and instead emulate the way of working and find solutions set up by groups that practice solidarity.

“Suffering was prolonged, and it shouldn’t have been. If the island’s disaster response was designed with the people in mind and if resources were redistributed and decentralized, many lives could have been saved. Why would you centralize all resources on an island like this one? Municipalities like Cabo Rojo are far away when the roads work; imagine when they don’t,” Rosario asserts.

For Puerto Rico to have a better future, Rosario argues, it must abolish its colonial status. As a U.S. colony, Puerto Rico is held hostage by a 19th-century legal precedent that imposes a slew of limitations and acute injustice to the lives of Puerto Ricans. In the everyday life of Puerto Ricans, this is visible in the inequitable allocations for Obamacare, Medicaid, and the Federal Emergency Management Administration, among other programs. The result is that federal protections that should be “a great advantage” to the relationship between the U.S. and the island are implemented in a “prejudiced and unequal manner.” Hence, she believes that a system of reparations is needed to address this reality.

Rosario and her team are organizing with a circle of organizations that work side by side to better the lives of all, with the aim of guar-

anteeing healthcare, safety, dignified employment, and quality education. In a nutshell, she wants to build a country where people don’t have to “pretend so much” that they are okay when suffering. She imagines a Puerto Rico that will be “feminist, antiracist, and on the path to economic justice.” However, to reach this goal, community participation in decision-making is critical. Decisions must not be forced onto the local population, she stresses. An essential part of this process should be to address the loss of land that looms over the island, a consequence of the government keeping in place a system that encourages real-estate market speculation and draws in foreign investors who develop properties for purposes that do not align with the needs of Puerto Ricans.

“I’m setting my hopes in an ecosystem of organizations at the helm of the country that can acquire Puerto Rican lands for conservation. I believe in land conservation in the hands of the community. We are willing to dedicate our lives to achieve that,” Rosario pointed out.

## Recommendations

As seen through the works of Taller Salud, a feminist lens on mutual aid is fundamental to systems transformation. A feminist perspective not only addresses care and the reduction of harm and violence in everyday life, but also includes decentralizing resources across the archipelago, and supporting the ecosystem of organizations focused on acquiring land and placing it into the hands of the community.

# The Teacher's Federation of Puerto Rico

## *Rescuing Public Education*



### *Summary*

Quality public education is a transformative force. The Federation of Teachers of Puerto Rico (FMPR) - founded 50 years ago - works to preserve quality public education and stop the privatization of public education. The union, which brings teachers and teaching staff together, is winning this battle to preserve quality public education. It has rescued 50 public schools that currently serve as community centers. These centers have become important venues that host workshops, supervise study groups, practice sports, and guide parents and caregivers, among other services requested by the communities. The members of the organization - as well as the residents of the rescued schools - offer their time voluntarily to keep these projects going.

The Federation is not only fighting against privatization - it fights to maintain enrollment rates and decent lives for teachers and teaching staff. Thanks to the union's campaign, teachers obtained an increase in base salary from \$1,750 to \$2,750 a month (still well below what they consider fair). The organization continues its fight, in alliance with other community organizations, to defend quality public education as a commitment to the future.

To understand the full extent of the deterioration of Puerto Rican public education, consider the data. In just four years, from 2014 to 2018, the government shut down 567 schools following the Puerto Rico Education Reform Act, an initiative that sought to privatize 10% of the 858 schools that remained open. This move was deemed by many as the first step toward the privatization of the archipelago's free public education system.

The Teacher's Federation of Puerto Rico (FMPR, following its initials in Spanish), established more than 50 years ago, spearheads the opposition to this plan. Its members are fighting together to avoid the loss of spaces meant for children while securing better working conditions, ensuring a good quality of life for retirees, and safeguarding the excellence of their teaching curriculum. So far, several organizations have reclaimed nearly 50 school facilities and repurposed them to serve as community centers offering tutoring, music, sports, and art lessons, workshops, and other services aimed at children and their families. This is made possible by teachers, supporting staff, and the communities neighboring each school. Communities and teachers have managed to obtain the resources and financial and material support needed to keep these projects up and running and volunteer their time to maintain the facilities, a task that involves janitorial work, upkeep of the grounds, and repairs. But there is much to be done.

“Now more than ever, we must persevere in our struggle because private entities will want to turn our schools into charter schools. They want to bleed the budget of the Department of Education (DEPR) dry, leaving students without the resources they require to receive a quality holistic education,” asserts Mercedes Martínez Padilla, chair of the FMPR. “They want to dismantle our schools piece by piece,” she explains, “just like they did to the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority.” (After being fully privatized, Puerto Rico’s energy service is currently in crisis).

Even though DEPR has a \$9 billion school budget, these funds are not allocated for much-needed building maintenance. As a result, particularly after the havoc caused by hurricanes Irma, Maria, and Fiona and the earthquakes in the Southwest of the island, the facilities are in a deplorable state. In Guánica, a municipality severely hit by the upheaval, students from seven schools are enrolled into one; to manage the high number of students, the school makes do by dividing groups into morning and afternoon rotations and combining on-site and online sessions. These issues affect learning. For example, according to teachers, the increased number of students per classroom and the elimination of courses diminishes the quality of education. This adversely affects motivation and leaves students and teachers unprotected and uncared for.

According to Martínez—an educator—the scheme behind the disrepair is “for the people to demand privatization.” That’s why the union must focus on combating the neglect of education centers and improving teachers’ working conditions. Recently, the union achieved the highest teacher pay raise in its history—a 57% increase in wages that had remained stagnant at \$21,000 (\$1,750/month) a year for decades. This means that a teach-

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er’s monthly earnings are now at \$2,750. Moreover, the Teaching Career Act, an initiative that provides financial incentives to educators with master’s degrees or PhDs, was revived. “This is more motivation to keep us going amid the crisis caused by the repayment of a nefarious debt and a looming fiscal oversight Board that intends to leave this country empty-handed. It wants all of us to leave our own country,” Martínez explains. Out of 45,000 teachers working in 2008, only 26,000 remain, and student enrollment has decreased by almost 50%. Many of these children either moved to the US, along with their families, or dropped out and looked for work to support their parents amid the dire financial straits that came with the natural and man-made disaster.

“Our students should have never gone through these situations. They did because we didn’t and don’t have a government that meets our children’s needs,” the leader of the teachers’ union states.

It was precisely after the hurricanes and the government’s poor management of the ensuing crisis that the FMPR joined forces with other organizations to improve the lives of communities connected to the public education system. The organization set up health

clinics, secured safe housing for the homeless, handed out 20,000 hot meals, and distributed medication, essential goods, and medical equipment to students whose health was in danger due to lack of basic services such as power. The FMPR went to schools such as San Vicente in Vega Baja, on the island's northern coast, to repair the roof, which was "completely ripped out" by the winds. At Marcelino Canino School in Dorado—also located on the northern shore—the floods brought by Hurricane Fiona caused the water levels to rise above eight feet. "We had to rush there to prevent the closure of the facilities and clear out moldy supplies. With the help of allies from the Puerto Rican Independence Party, we left the school like new," declares Martínez.

Following the earthquakes in the south, the FMPR, in collaboration with AgitArte, brings knowledge, joy, and peace to children through theater, body movement, puppeteering, and mindfulness workshops. This work conveys a message of "hope and resistance" to affected populations.

However, if the FMPR is to continue its efforts, it needs personnel and economic resources. The organization aims to expand its capacity to support people during difficult times without relying on a government that, as they see it, is failing to do its job. As a result, it is planning to establish a solidarity and aid committee with international backing. All this is within the framework of an independent country that can implement a new economic system different from capitalism.

"Long term, I see the repurposing of schools and the Federation reshaping themselves and bolstering international aid. But for that to happen, we need to do a lot of work, and [we need to organize] a lot of decent, upright folks who will always close ranks with the

Federation," points out Martínez.

## Recommendations

Support the FMPR to maintain quality public education, fight the privatization of the school system, support the 50 public schools that have been saved from privatization and transformed into active community centers, and organize people to demand funding for public education. Also, community centers should be considered as sites for communities to imagine, design, and build more inclusive and just systems.

# Casa Tallaboëña

*A home for the struggle in Peñuelas*



## Summary

Casa Tallaboëña de Formación Comunitaria emerged from a generations-deep environmental movement in the southern Puerto Rico community of Peñuelas.

The community has fought against environmental dangers over generations, the most recent being a toxic ash dump. By creating the Peñuelas Ash Camp, joined by citizens all over the country, they were able to pass a law that prohibits toxic ash dumping.

Casa Tallaboëña was created as a sister organization to continue their work. They put mutual aid into practice to tend to the massive losses from a series of earthquakes in southwestern Puerto Rico. The group trains new leaders who can face the challenges of the future. They have plans to build a resilient structure that serves this purpose. At the same time, they continue to conduct a census to determine the population affected by the operation of the Commonwealth Oil Refining Company (CORCO).

Environmental hazards, such as a natural gas pipeline, a sulfuric acid plant, industrial waste incinerators, a petrochemical complex, industrial landfills, and the dumping of toxic coal ash, have historically threatened the Peñuelas region. In addition to these man-made disasters, this municipality was severely impacted by the hurricanes and the earthquake. Yet, despite these struggles, the community came together across all generations, setting an example for the rest of the country.

Recently, the community has fought to stop the dumping of toxic coal ash in local landfills. Under the leadership of the Campamento contra las Cenizas de Peñuelas (Encampment against Coal Ashes of Peñuelas), residents raised awareness among Puerto Ricans of the danger of the toxic coal ash. Less than a year later—in 2017—hurricanes Irma and Maria devastated the island. The crisis unleashed by these events prompted the camp leadership to establish a sister organization called Casa Tallaboëña de Formación Comunitaria (House of Community Learning of Tallaboa). The organization seeks to develop and strengthen the quality of life of people through mutual aid. It aims to develop tools that train people to deal with difficulties that may arise in the future.

“The name speaks for itself: this is a house of learning so that coming generations can build up skills to face challenges,” José “Nolo” Díaz, one of the spokespersons of the house and the encampment, explains. While the latter organization is working to achieve



long-term goals, the former group keeps a watchful eye on any environmental hazard to speak out in protest right away.

Yet both groups are underpinned by solidarity; they know there is no other way forward for their causes. In the early 2000s, the public rallied to halt the construction of Gasoducto del Sur, a natural gas pipeline that would stretch across multiple communities in the south. Affected regions joined efforts to create the Frente Amplio (United Front) against what they dubbed “the pipeline of death.” Díaz highlights that their strength is in their numbers. Working in tandem with others, they raised awareness of the dangers of building the pipeline, and this collaboration made the movement “invincible.” Their experiences and success over the years prove the key role that mutual aid continues to play in Puerto Rico. After the numerous natural disasters, dozens of houses became improvised shelters for neighbors who had lost their homes, and residential garages were turned into classrooms. People who held little trust in government efforts opted to donate food and other essentials to the encampment while volunteers sorted and distributed these items. Others worked side by side to remove the vegetation debris that blocked the roads and obtain much-needed medications for the sick, among other pressing tasks.

“During the earthquakes, we sent aid to several southern municipalities, including Guánica, one of the epicenters; Lajas, Guayanilla, and Yauco—even Adjuntas and Ponce,” Díaz remarks. “Already, since hurricane María, we had realized that it is up to us to take on the roles of first responders, but this was magnified during the earthquakes because, quite literally, the entire governmental apparatus collapsed. And it was simply a matter of us either getting organized to deal with the situation or no longer continuing as a communi-

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ty,” Díaz states.

One of the urgent initiatives they are currently undertaking is a census: not just any census, but one that tallies the people whose health was affected by pollution-borne diseases and the contamination generated by the Commonwealth Oil Refining Company (better known by its initials CORCO), which carried out operations in the seaside municipality from 1955 to 1982. After the corporation closed, more than 29 acres of polluted coastal land were left to become a brown-field site. The group suspects a link between these industrial practices and the high incidence of illnesses.

“These generations of old folks are now experiencing the negative effects of living near or working all their lives in the petrochemical industry. For example, take asbestos residues. There’s a high rate of asthma here. There’s also a high incidence of skin conditions and heart disease; illnesses related to psychological aspects and stress, too— depression, diabetes, and high blood pressure as well,” Díaz points out.

Currently, a resolution that would mandate the School of Public Health at the Universi-

ty of Puerto Rico to research these illnesses is under consideration by the Puerto Rican Senate. Its implementation would be particularly significant for the sister communities in Guayama that are near a polluting, coal-burning energy plant. However, the initiative has been obstructed, so the Peñuelas community leaders are not waiting any longer. They have decided to undertake this work within their communities and are training the staff that will carry out this task.

These are not the only initiatives the Peñuelas community is undertaking. Tallaboa 2023 is another project in development. The leaders plan to build their headquarters by converting the tents that cover the camp. Currently in the design phase, the building will consist of an emergency response operation center. The design shows that the leaders have incorporated learning from past experiences. The center will be a single-story, earthquake-resistant structure with solar panels to generate power. There will be community spaces for workshops, meetings, and other activities. Emergency supply storage will also be built to safeguard supplies and essentials for immediate response to hurricanes, earthquakes, and other situations. Lastly, the house will feature a terrace where the community can celebrate triumphs or get together.

The first challenge in building this home was acquiring the title deeds. The leaders of the encampment secured the deeds; now, the main obstacle is funding for construction. To achieve this goal, they need to raise between \$175,000 to \$250,000. Camp leaders do not want government funding and are fundraising through different means, such as raffles, a radio program, submitting proposals to foundations, and requesting grants from local businesses and other companies. They operate, for the moment, mostly through volunteers,

with a few exceptions of contractors. Around 40 to 50 people make up the encampment base, but when the people are summoned, many more arrive. Equally, some do not necessarily show up for events but support the group financially. The people of Peñuelas are organized. However, at an island-wide level, Díaz argues that the decolonization of Puerto Rico from the United States is a necessary and decisive step toward the progress of all of Puerto Rico.

“We must tackle two things: the first priority should be solving the political status of Puerto Rico. The country has to press forward; if it’s a colony, that can’t be done. Second is politics; we have to sit down as a country and have the maturity to see what unites us. This is an unbearable situation. If we don’t stick together [and...] press on collectively, there won’t be any path moving forward,” Díaz feels.

From the heights of barrio Seboruco, where the Casa Tallaboeña will be erected, impressive metallic structures are seen. These are the ruins of an oil refinery. For people like Díaz, this image is a reminder of the resistance that had to be built for the people to exercise their right to exist. Díaz is hopeful that community movements, in the long run, will help folks face any impending emergency or atmospheric event without needing to wait for or depend on the government.

“That ugly junk is part of our history, and without the petrochemical complex and landfills, this wouldn’t have turned out the way it has, and the community wouldn’t be as strong as it is now. And that is something we want to teach those who are now on their way up. That thing made us strong because it helped us become not just resilient but combative, so that we could survive. Otherwise, we would have been evicted from here

years ago. I think this is a day-to-day struggle to endure as a community,” he highlights.

## Recommendations

When governments collapse, it is up to the community to self-organize. When the community is organized, it is possible to grow community power, stop harmful projects, and pass new laws that defend people and the earth. It’s critical to build the capacity of youth leaders so that coming generations can face the challenges ahead. Funders also need to support the acquisition and development of community-controlled land and buildings, like Tallaboa 2023, to serve as headquarters for struggle.

# El Hangar

## *A Safe Space for the Queer Community on Every Block*



### Summary

In many parts of the world, the LGBTQ+ community, or anyone who expresses diversity in their sexual orientation or gender identity, is punished, threatened, or harmed. Puerto Rico is no exception. This makes the work of El Hangar particularly valuable in Puerto Rican society. Located in Santurce, El Hangar is a safe meeting place for everyone. There, people share, learn, and educate one another about how to live in a society without discrimination or violence. Through collaboration with other organizations, El Hangar also serves LGBTQ+ immigrants, who are at a greater disadvantage because they face poverty and additional discrimination. El Hangar has educational programs for children and youth, teaching about gender and sexuality with a focus on respect and dignity. El Hangar is a safe space for leisure, celebration, and enjoyment. However, they risk losing the building, as the owner plans to sell it at a high price, like so many places in Puerto Rico.

Trans, non-binary, and queer communities in Puerto Rico need safe spaces to exist without judgment. That is how Carla Torres Trujillo sees it. When faced with this reality, she turned her community project, El Hangar, into a place of respect and solidarity.

Originally from Morovis, a municipality in the island's heartland, Torres grew up surrounded by nature and longed for the greenery missing from urban landscapes. When she discovered an abandoned parcel of land in downtown Santurce, San Juan, she set her hopes in its potential, even if it resembled "a landfill." She rolled up her sleeves, weeded out the underbrush, and instead planted a garden. In the summer of 2016, she cleaned and fixed the two existing structures on the property. Torres moved into one of them with only bare necessities.

"By January 2017, we had held the first meeting to discuss what El Hangar has become. We are a group of people with social science and social work backgrounds who share similar interests and speak of art as a tool for education. Our first event was in March that year, and the second took place in April. At that moment, many events had transpired. The 2017 student strike was unfolding, and we put the project on hold to participate in the strike. The first year was very intense. It was one thing after another; then hurricane Maria came," Torres recalls.

The disaster tested their capacity to establish allies and practice mutual aid. El Hangar became a collection and distribution center

for donations. During the numerous disasters, people, including those in the diaspora, were willing to give aid and help each other. “I don’t want to encourage the patriotic side of me, but the truth is we live in a country where people give so much love, and when these things happen, you say, ‘fuck, people are present, giving their support,’” she states while crying. “People don’t want to be over there, in the US. But we don’t have much choice in the matter,” she points out.

Amidst the chaos, Torres allowed one of her collaborators to use El Hangar for their birthday party. It was a magical night that became the start of the route that would guide the project mission. After a second event, a party organized by the queer arts collective Spicy Nipples, it was impossible not to recognize the body as a political terrain and a site of resistance. El Hangar provided an atmosphere of acceptance and, as a result, attracted sex workers and trans, non-binary, and queer people, among others. And there was no turning back.

“Then, the discourse around *bellaquera* (lust), crisis, and the need for a safe space began,” Carla comments. She adds: “With all the conversations that were going on for months, we realized there was indeed a crisis due to the lack of safe spaces where people could just be.” El Hangar was the place the community was missing, and this was the place where they could share and create community. During Pride week, Torres and her group organized recurring events, such as the Mer-

*“With all the conversations going on for months, we realized there was indeed a crisis due to the lack of safe spaces where people could just be.”*

cado Comunitario Queer (Queer Community Market). The market, designed as a mutual aid platform, allowed individuals who are yet to register their businesses and those with little income to sell their art and products. The market provided an opportunity for those interested to practice barter, trade, and solidarity economy.

El Hangar is located in downtown Santurce, in a marginalized and low-income community. Its location makes it easy to deliver aid and collaborate with other long-established organizations, such as La Fondita de Jesús. Committed to supporting homeless people, La Fondita helps queer people find homes and obtains food for local migrant women and sex workers, among other initiatives. In another collaboration with Wet Justice and Fefa Ferrer, Torres developed the first comprehensive sex health school for children and youth. The school offers four meetings that address roles, the body, respect for identity, privacy, and communication between children and their caretakers. Torres continues to open up El Hangar for diverse initiatives. For instance, she’s developing ‘a venting space’ for those raising children. To continue to accommodate diverse interests and groups and broaden the solidarity network in Puerto Rico, she understands the need to set up long-term plans. However, this is an onerous task: lack of financial resources is a major obstacle. This, on top of the myriad of other crises, makes reaching Torres’s goals daunting. Torres gets this. “The crisis exists. We constantly live in crisis, but what can we do to demand and intersect in order to build something different?” That is the question she brings to the table.

Currently, the location of El Hangar is under legal dispute due to the seller breaching their purchase agreement. Torres believes the owner likely wishes to offer the proper-

ty to investors who are taking advantage of inflation and the real estate speculation that surged after the disasters. The Inter-American University of Puerto Rico's Law school program is providing legal aid to finalize the purchase and preserve the structure so El Hangar may continue to grow. This goal will not necessarily be easy to accomplish—surrounding properties have already been sold at a premium to foreigners who are quickly displacing the locals.

Yet, even if the circumstances are bleak, the hope to transform the situation is unstoppable. Torres plans to organize an assembly in El Hangar, where the most oppressed groups will come together to design the solutions. She's not stopping there. She aims to set up a radio station to amplify the voices of marginalized communities.

"In a hundred years from now, I see El Hangar as a space that will continue to expand and grow. I'm very partial to this expression: we are building the life we want and deserve to live. We do not conform to what we should or can do; we keep doing the work, whether we are allowed to. In the long run, I see a space, a project where we do things our way, where the diversity of bodies is unconditionally respected." A place where women can walk the street at 8 p.m. without fear of somebody in a car dragging us in against our will. The only way we can make this a reality is by talking to folks, creating community, opening safe spaces in every block," she underscores.

## Recommendations

Queer Puerto Ricans are crucial to building a culture of liberation and a vision of an inclusive, accessible, decolonial, democratic economy. Liberated spaces like El Hangar are essential, yet they are constantly threatened by displacement due to real estate specula-

tion. Therefore, it is vital for funders to support the purchase of community-controlled spaces like El Hangar.

# Institute for Agroecological Research and Action/IALA-PR

## *Setting the Groundwork for the Future of Puerto Rico*



### *Summary*

Land grabbing is one of the biggest challenges facing Puerto Rico today. Puerto Rico has abundant and beautiful land for its locals, but it's running out of land to live and land to grow food for those that most need it. Multiple construction projects are eating away land that needs to be protected to mitigate the impact of climate change and ensure vital resources, such as drinking water. Although the government should serve as a watchdog for these areas, they are culprits in the land crisis. The government is implementing policies that increase speculation in the real estate market by the foreign population (mostly USians) acquiring property and land for commercial purposes. This displaces locals from their land, affects land dedicated to indigenous crops, converts it into tourist structures, and eliminates the already limited agricultural production. Faced with this dire and urgent situation, the ***Institute for Agroecological Research and Action*** is taking action. They seek funds to help farmers acquire land and finance educational initiatives. They also help research, promote, and preserve ancestral knowledge about crops. Some estimate Puerto Rico needs a minimum of 582,700 acres of farmland. Although the government has yet to provide data on the land currently set aside for agriculture, it is known to be much less than the target. For this reason, IALA is seeking resources to buy land, protect crops, and finance research to help identify the best practices to promote agroecology on the island.

To protect seeds is to preserve life. These words sum up the mission of the Instituto para la Investigación y Acción en Agroecología (Institute for Agroecological Research and Action/ IALA-PR in Spanish initials), a non-profit organization providing holistic support to agroecological initiatives. The institute provides farmers with the quality of life they deserve and protects and nurtures ancestral knowledge, which is critical for the survival of Puerto Ricans.

Established in 2010, the institute meets the needs identified by farmers who are hoping to turn their work into a cost-efficient activity and face the countless challenges of farming in a tropical country that is also a colony of the U.S. In the beginning, the institute backed 50 organizations. Hurricanes Irma (2017), Maria (2017), and Fiona (2022), the earthquakes (2020), and a million-dollar government debt brought new threats that loom over the island's agricultural sector. This forced the institute to increase its support to a hundred organizations throughout the Puerto Rican archipelago. More recently, the growing real estate speculation market has significantly affected Puerto Rico in several ways, compromising, for example, access to farmland.

"We've seen three-generation farmers being forced to quit due to a solar panel project being installed on farmland; agriculture is deemed by many as unprofitable. These farmers are being told their leases are no longer up for renewal. Three generations of

knowledge, of wisdom, of tradition are now lost,” Katia Avilés, founder and chair of IALA-PR, explains. “Sometimes investors simply acquire the whole tract of land and tell the farmers they have until tomorrow or the end of the month to vacate the premises because x or y project is coming,” Avilés adds.

Furthermore, other factors compound the issue of protecting the land. Due to the economic crisis, many people need quick access to capital. If they own or inherit properties, they will likely sell to individuals with greater buying power. The buyers are often USians drawn by the generous financial incentives the Puerto Rican government offers exclusively to foreigners. Most often, these properties are not kept as farmland. Many become short-term rentals (Airbnbs), for instance. To illustrate the severity of the situation, Avilés mentions that in Jayuya—located in the center of the island—a U.S. American has bought close to a third of the territory that comprises the municipality.

“Airbnbs have a devastating effect on farmland. The buyers start by segregating a small plot of land that’s no longer fit to plant. Then, they build a guest house within a certain number of square meters. This makes the land no longer viable for agriculture. Then, the plot is sold for what used to be the price of ten acres. There’s no way that all of us together, even with another farmer, can buy several square meters for the price of ten acres,” Avilés explains.

A third factor driving the crisis is the “financial and moral bankruptcy of the government.” Powerful public servants, far from safekeeping the local patrimony, have enacted laws and regulations that remove protective measures from areas that need to be preserved. Moreover, they have turned the land into a “stock swap.”

*“We’ve seen farmers who come from three generations of farming folk and who are forced to quit due to a solar panel project being installed on the land; agriculture is deemed by many as unprofitable. These farmers are being told their leases are no longer up for renewal. Three generations of knowledge, of wisdom, of tradition are now lost”.*

According to the Puerto Rico Land Use Plan, close to 582,700 acres are meant to be cultivated for food, but, according to Avilés, “we fall short of this amount in production.” To add insult to injury, local Joint Permit Regulations allow housing and roads to be built even “in the forest.” Although this regulation was declared null, the government still implements it illegally. “This situation enables real-estate speculation and an unheard-of price increase,” Avilés remarks.

In the face of this reality, IALA-PR is raising funds to investigate and back with data on how much land the Puerto Rican people have lost and its consequences. IALA-PR has kick-started a campaign to guarantee land access and has also raised 2 out of 10 million dollars to preserve 53 acres of land intended for five projects. Half of this money will be allocated to support farmers meeting requirements such as filing taxes and paying municipal property taxes. Avilés highlights that \$10 million will not be enough to safely keep a substantial tract of land. However, she states, “If \$30 million or \$50 million are needed, we’ll reach that goal.”

The IALA PR runs three major projects—work centers, agroecological schools, and small business incubators. Suheilly Torres



Caraballo, coordinator of the agroecological work centers, describes them as the organization's core. These spaces uphold farmers' initiatives. They support farmers with administrative tasks, manage funds, and locate resources. They teach skills needed for project growth and sustaining operations. Furthermore, the agroecology schools teach theoretical and practical agroecology that combines ancestral knowledge that has stood the test of time with modern techniques that mitigate against climate change consequences.

"We have projects such as Bosque Jardín Pachamama (Pachamama Forest and Garden), specifically focused on seeds. This project teaches one how to select seeds and integrate them into our culture. We observe if people use them or don't and how they're used. Then, we reproduce those seeds that can acclimatize to our current circumstances," Avilés explains. In the same vein, El Josco Bravo farm submitted a proposal to identify seeds that can survive the "crazy weather" we are living through.

"The only way we can endure, to adapt, is through projects researching [for example] what type of ginger thrives in extreme heat, like what we are currently experiencing, what ginger thrives despite the irregular rains, that are also coming back next year," Avilés remarks.

Meanwhile, the small business incubators work to turn dreams into agroecology realities. The business incubators offer resources for education, support with drafting business plans, training, and meeting requirements for business operations. Currently, nearly 30 initiatives have been developed. Some of the initiatives supported fruits and vegetable products that would otherwise be at risk of extinction. These projects emerge from the belief that a farmer alone cannot attain progress - solidarity and collaboration with oth-

er farmers or farming projects are needed. Equally, Puerto Rico needs to form alliances with neighboring islands to survive economic, environmental, and climate obstacles. The IALA-PR staff knows their work is a long-term commitment. "We are opening the way for those who come after us, thinking that the current capitalist economic system can't go on because it's incompatible with nature. You can't just exploit, exploit, and exploit, and keep waiting for the system to sustain you," Avilés states.

## Recommendations

Green transition initiatives such as solar projects should not be used as weapons to undermine food sovereignty. To preserve indigenous and modern food sovereignty knowledge, funders must quickly mobilize to help shift as much land as possible into community control. This means support for organizations like the IALA-PR, which seek resources to place land into community control, as well as support for worker centers, small business support services, and studies that will help identify best practices and promote agroecology in Puerto Rico.

# Revista Étnica

## Healing, Reparations, and Resistance for the Afro-Caribbean Community in Puerto Rico



### Summary

Puerto Rico is home to Afro-Caribbean communities with rich cultures. If these cultures and histories are not disseminated and celebrated, they are in danger of disappearing. From this awareness, **étnica Magazine** was created. The *étnica Magazine* shows black art, politics, culinary, and cultural ancestral knowledge and highlights notable contributions to society. For the team, the goal goes much further. Through the magazine, they seek to create positive changes within the black community. Allied with other organizations, they solve problems, educate, and learn. Ultimately, they want to transform the narrative that criminalizes black people and obscures their great contributions to society. One of the projects that does this is their publishing house. They publish works by Afro-descendant authors.

Despite how much time has passed or the changes the modern world brings, ancestral wisdom endures. One such form of knowledge is the culinary customs rooted in Afro-Indigenous traditions, such as preparing food on the burén. This practice of cooking outdoors provides families and community members the pleasure of coming together to share a meal, forge camaraderie, and spend time together. Gloriann Sacha Antonetty-Lebrón acknowledges the importance of upholding traditions such as these, which are emblematic of a rich Afro-Caribbean culture.

However, for this legacy to live on, current generations must understand the need to foster and protect these customs from erasure. Active commitments to practice these cultures will help transmit these practices to families and neighbors. To preserve these cultures, there first needs to be awareness about the need to visualize black communities in Puerto Rico. This is why Antonetty established *Revista Étnica* in 2019. The goal of the publication is to highlight and promote Afro-Caribbean cultural diversity—amplifying the voices and experiences of its protagonists so they are recognized and appreciated.

“We acknowledge that Black people—not only in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean but all over the world—are living under constant threat to their lives and suffering erasure. Our contributions to society are erased,” explains Antonetty, editor of the magazine.

In just five years since its creation, the project has made substantial headway, Antonet-

ty notes. For example, she mentions five published issues and a collaboration with sister organizations—such as Colectivo Ilé. Through these initiatives, the project works with the youth, claims African heritage in the latest census, and promotes anti-racism and Afro-feminism, among other projects.

The political and natural disasters, George Floyd's murder, the climate crisis, and the ongoing colonization of Puerto Rican lives are defining moments for the development of *étnica*. "We've constantly reinvented ourselves, taking advantage of every opportunity and challenge we've faced," states Antonetty. Events such as these have renewed the team's conviction and commitment to elicit positive changes in society. In contrast to the conventional approach of mass media outlets, *étnica* is set apart by its dedication to meaningful connections and solidarity.

After the devastation of Hurricane Irma, the team undertook a simple but significant gesture—washing the hair of impacted women who returned to the island after losing everything. Amidst the chaos, this act showed these women a moment of kindness and care amid the desperation; it was a way of sending out a message of solidarity and support. Little more than a few weeks later, Puerto

*"Our people are aware of what they need, and we can't just get there and tell them: 'We're offering you money for this or that.' That can't happen because then we're reproducing the Eurocentric, capitalist structures already in place. We've decided to work with foundations that can put all their trust in us acting according to what the people require".*

Rico would have to undergo one of the most catastrophic hurricanes in all its history. As the situation got worse, the solidarity became stronger.

"I think the fact that *étnica* was born from the context of the aftermath of hurricanes Irma and Maria led us to understand how mutual aid works—and has always worked—in our communities, but in a setting where food was not available. Both governments were leaving us to die. It was appalling because these very tangible crises enabled us to understand how we've always truly functioned," Antonetty remarks.

Antonetty believes people's innate solidarity response in times of crisis stems from African and Indigenous cultures and is passed down from generation to generation within families and communities. This response often centers on dignity and strives for communities to identify their needs rather than prescribe solutions. *étnica* does not simply arrive in the communities to give—instead, they ask what their needs are.

"Our people know what they need, and we can't just get there and tell them: 'We're offering you money for this or that.' This can't happen because that would reproduce the Eurocentric, capitalist structures currently in place. We've decided to work with foundations that can put all their trust in us acting according to what the people require," Antonetty, a journalist, also highlights.

Despite the challenges, *étnica* pushes its plans forward with passion and grit. Antonetty is convinced that by using a range of media platforms and collaborating with other community initiatives, they can transform the narratives of Afro-Caribbean people. Together, *étnica* is determined to create spaces where the voices of Black Caribbean people

will be respected and heard, thus enacting positive and long-lasting change.

## Recommendations

Afro-Caribbean people have always been crucial to Puerto Rican history, culture, politics, and movements. Still, they are being erased, criminalized, and left to die by both governments: PR and the USA. *étnica Magazine* is a response to make Black Puerto Rican contributions more visible. Black people in Puerto Rico have always survived through mutual aid practices, and we need trust-based philanthropy to support and invest in the Afroboricua community for the long run. *étnica* will only work with foundations that trust them to use resources in ways that respond directly to community needs.

# Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico

## *Fair Housing Advocates for the Puerto Rican People*



### Summary

The three hurricanes that have hit Puerto Rico in the past six years have exacerbated the affordable housing crisis. Deteriorating infrastructure, coupled with speculation in the real estate market, among other factors, is making it increasingly difficult for Puerto Ricans to find a home. **Legal Aid** is an organization that works to protect the right to decent housing. They fight against displacement and seek solutions to give Puerto Ricans affordable housing. Through advocacy, they have removed the requirement for property titles to access hurricane recovery aid and federal assistance. This meant that aid could reach the most disadvantaged who do not have properties.

Legend has it that people tied themselves to the trees during hurricane season in Puerto Rico so the winds did not blow them far from their homes. Nowadays, this Puerto Rican folklore illustrates the housing crisis that has followed the aftermath of catastrophic hurricanes and state neglect. Where are the homes of Puerto Ricans who lost it all after these disasters? To what can they tie themselves? These are the questions Ariadna Michelle Godreau Aubert, Esq., founder and director of Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico (Legal Aid of Puerto Rico), asks herself daily.

Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico plays a significant role in advocating for the right to fair housing on the island. On August 21, 2017, one day after Hurricane Maria devastated the Puerto Rican archipelago, Godreau foresaw what Puerto Ricans would have to face in the aftermath of the disaster: lack of housing. She reached out to organizations in the U.S., and within 24 hours, she raised \$500,000 for Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico. They have used these resources to support thousands of people's access to housing. However, six years later, it is evident that the government's hurricane recovery process has failed. To make matters worse, government policies favored displacement, gentrification, and real estate market speculation. These facts, coupled with the dire state of the island's fiscal situation, compromise access to affordable housing, particularly for low-income populations. In this scenario, Godreau and her team, with both fierceness and compassion, champion the right for Puerto Ricans to remain.

“A writer named Zambra wrote we are always looking for ways to go back home. And our grandmothers, when hurricanes came, used to say people tied themselves to trees. But there’s no longer anywhere to tie ourselves. There’s no longer a place to call home,” Godreau declares.

Before Ayuda Legal, Godreau founded another project called Espacios Abiertos (Open Spaces) in 2014. As part of this initiative, she developed the site [ayudalegalpr.org](http://ayudalegalpr.org) to promote and democratize legal information. Three years later, in the middle of the Hurricane Maria emergency, the entity became independent and one of the leading legal aid organizations.

Godreau and a group of colleagues started by receiving packages in the mail full of flashlights, batteries, and heaps of documents containing information on the policies of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Between September 20 and October 4, 2017, they managed to recruit over 70 lawyers willing to go into the communities, offer support to survivors of the disaster, provide assistance to apply for aid, and report bad practices from federal agencies, such as water rationing, militarization, and discrimination. Within two months, Ayuda Legal trained more than 400 people on FEMA-related issues. The organization also provides legal training to groups focused on housing and to community leaders committed to searching for alternatives to the Fiscal Oversight Board and the subsequent entrenchment of austerity policies.

One of the first battles waged and won by Ayuda Legal was to eliminate the property title requirement to be eligible for some government aid, which, from a legal standpoint, was “nonsense.” Another challenge was government-inflicted violence as a response to

*“We need philanthropy that is committed to doing the work and finding solutions to inequality, so all of us can be in a position to develop projects at a larger scale, but also meet needs when it’s time to do so.”*

the ensuing humanitarian crisis. Government and police brutality became apparent when a curfew was implemented. The police assaulted those who ‘broke’ a curfew and beat members of the Teacher’s federations as they protested in front of the offices of the Department of Education, among other incidents.

“Outsiders should know that Puerto Rico has not only undergone a string of disasters in only six years, but it has lived in constant disaster for decades. The events that have taken place in these past few years have amplified the decades-long vulnerabilities and political disasters. When the disasters come the government becomes violent or stops functioning. People need to self-govern, yet people no longer have the resources to self-govern. From there comes the need to defend and guarantee basics such as housing, food, and land,” Godreau points out. While fighting all these injustices, she found out she was pregnant with her first child. Her sense of responsibility to the island and the wish to set root and be a mother in her own country grew.

“We have to give voice to our broken hearts because that is the origin of our rage, anger, and sadness. I’ve always said that rage has great creative power but can’t sustain things. Feelings of love must be present, and we move Ayuda Legal anchored in that idea of love, or at least in the idea of an affirmation. What is the affirmation, what do we want,

what is our vision, what will it look like when we win, because we will win. We are going to do this. It will be possible, maybe not in our lifetimes, but it will be possible,” she ponders.

This certainty of a possible future justifies the affirmative vocabulary used in projects and slogans by Ayuda Legal. Instead of saying “no to displacement,” they speak of the “right to remain.” Instead of “disaster aid,” they say: “fair recovery,” “affordable rent,” and “the right to have a home.” Words are the starting point of transformation. Words, through narrative, help people claim their rights instead of assuming the government is doing them a favor. Besides activism in language, the organization’s most significant achievements have been changing bad policies and enacting new ones. Through their advocacy, they have exposed the malfeasance of recovery funds and have changed the policies that make property title a requirement for federal aid. This work also provides an avenue for dialogue around issues of affordable rent in a country where one-third of home properties are rentals, as well as discussions about oversight of bank compliance with the law that governs real estate market transactions. Ayuda Legal plans to keep using the law to enact change.

“We’re ready for a future where the individual and collective right to housing is realized. It is not just an aspiration, not a desire, not a need or a broken heart. We’re ready for a time when fair housing will be readily enjoyed, and not just enjoyed by a few, not just enjoyed by all who live in Puerto Rico, but enjoyed as reparations for the people who had their right to have a roof over their heads taken away. We’re ready to remain here, and the work of Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico precisely supports the future we dream of and want. We will be a part of that framework to figure out how we will remain and what the conditions are to re-

main, as well as discuss an equal distribution of resources, housing, and land. We want to reconfigure how we take down a legal system and how we can rebuild it based on a view of rights and responsibilities where human dignity is seen as non-negotiable. This will be our guiding principle,” Godreau states.

The biggest obstacles to achieving this aim are the state, the limitations set on the funding organizations receive, and the unequal distribution of resources. Most funders favor fast results rather than projects with growth potential. Godreau regrets that not many philanthropic organizations are willing to understand that “things take time.” Unequal distribution of resources hinders the motivation to establish efficient and consistent alliances.

“Mutual aid lacks sustainable funding. We need philanthropy that is committed to doing the work and finding solutions to inequality, so all of us can be in a position to develop projects at a larger scale, but also meet needs when it’s time to do so,” In this regard, she thinks that philanthropy can be an essential element for transformation, but only if certain aspects are modified. For example, providing more freedom and power to organizations is critical so they can lay out or veto strategies. It’s important to establish flexible funding procedures, allow grantees to tell their stories, and do more to eliminate barriers that foster inequality, such as language. Conversely, Godreau deems “toxic” philanthropy that forces communities to accept conditions to keep carrying out operations because halting operations is not an option. To heal, she suggests trust-based philanthropy.

The work for the transformation of Puerto Rico toward a more just society continues, and many things motivate Godreau and her team to fight for this reality. Two of these

are the children she bore during an intense struggle to better Puerto Rico: Lucas Imar, which means Lucas and the sea, and Elián Iré, which means sun and the future.

## Recommendations

Climate disasters are the result of political disasters. Therefore, philanthropy has to support large-scale structural changes while meeting people's needs in moments of crisis. It is difficult, but possible, to leverage large-scale government resources to help people's needs, including access to housing. Legal aid is an essential infrastructure element for a just transition to a regenerative economy.



# HASER

## *A Solidarity Network to Fix a Broken System*



### *Summary*

The inspiration to create **HASER** came from the example of how connections work to promote survival in nature. Similar to how trees provide habitat for fungi, which in turn provide them with nutrients, HASER's mission is to help groups working on mutual aid projects efficiently deal with bureaucracy. With HASER's support, organizations can maximize their time for direct work with communities. Currently, they support ten projects from different towns of the archipelago, which work in different areas of community development. Together with them, they have developed 50 proposals to benefit the communities. HASER plans to acquire a building that will serve as a resilient operations center where other groups can go to share resources and lower maintenance costs.

Underneath the soil, plants and fungi are ever interacting. Thread-like fungi teem around the roots of trees, forming links between both and helping the trees absorb water and nutrients. The trees, in turn, provide the microhabitats where fungi thrive. This exchange, known as mycorrhizae, is just one of the many relationships scientists study to understand better the interplays that transpire within an ecosystem. Colibrí Sanfiorenzo-Barnhard, a Puerto Rican environmentalist and organizer, argues that similar connections govern humanity. She likes envisioning the bonds we create as similar to those in nature. Like fungi and plant roots, people build networks to bolster themselves and to grow and develop as a society.

For years, Colibrí boosted education programs to foster scientific development in youth. Inadvertently, she became a manager of the funds given to these groups. She strove to optimize resources and find solutions to unforeseen obstacles. To her, this experience posed the challenge of figuring out what kind of organization was necessary to support action in Puerto Rico at a community level. Her knowledge of ecosystems—which made her recall the myriad of connections in forests that enable survival—was vital in this process.

“The possibility of a network of groups that functioned in the same way inspired the beginnings of HASER (Spanish acronym of Making Social-Ecological Actions Resilient) as an organization whose chief aim is to create alliances with grassroots groups that

are already taking action in their community,” Colibrí stated.

HASER started in 2016 with a \$3,000 budget and four volunteers. Today, it has three full-time employees and three part-time workers. Besides receiving 10% of the funding from the projects it manages, it is backed by direct grants from allied entities. The group jointly manages all administrative, fiscal, legal, and logistic details required to run grassroots projects and allows leaders to focus on the day-to-day work in their communities. In a place like Puerto Rico, this is not an easy task. As a colony of the US, the archipelago is governed by two fiscal systems and languages. Hence, there’s an overwhelming amount of red tape, and time and resources are limited to address all of these requirements. The problem is compounded whenever the country undergoes emergencies that need swift responses.

For Colibrí, HASER’s primary purpose is to “try to understand this broken system,” which is defined by a combination of extreme bureaucracy, along with requirements and criteria that don’t account for the country’s and its people’s context. Therefore, finding ways to facilitate proceedings and support entities to comply with requirements is invaluable and ensures entities can continue to provide services. When faced with hurdles, saying no isn’t an option; instead, “we ask, ‘what do you want to do?’ and work out a solution within the broken system,” the organization’s founder explains.

HASER provides fiscal sponsorship to organizations and helps communities draft and submit proposals, among other projects. One such project is the Network of Actions. Fiscally Sponsored by HASER, the Network of Actions is one of HASER’s most successful programs, and it had ten fiscal sponsorship relationships with ten of the island’s munic-

*“The possibility of a network of groups that functioned in the same way [as connections in nature] inspired the beginnings of HASER (Spanish acronym of Making Social-Ecological Actions Resilient) as an organization whose chief aim is to create alliances with grassroots groups that are already taking action in their community.”*

ipalities in 2022. In 2022, the group drafted close to 50 proposals that pertain to issues such as food sovereignty, the conservation of natural areas, social and environmental justice, and art and culture. The experience gained through the Network of Actions shows that fiscal sponsorship can speed up proceedings, as it enables groups to develop efficient internal systems. However, to achieve this, the group must have established a relationship of trust with the fiscal sponsor.

To broaden its scope, HASER published the Fiscal Sponsorship Guide (GAF by its Spanish acronym) in Spanish. In this free-of-charge educational document, the organization shares the knowledge it has gathered about fiscal sponsorship by providing valuable information to keep operations organized, actualized, and compliant.

One of HASER’s essential goals is to create a platform offering shared resources. This project includes acquiring two buildings, one in the capital of San Juan and the other in Mayagüez, located on the northwest side of Puerto Rico. The structures will serve as headquarters for HASER and other interested organizations. This initiative will function based on a membership system that gives

access to equipment, the storage of materials, and the resources of an office, but at a considerably lower cost.

“We’ve realized how essential these components are to keep projects afloat,” Colibrí asserts after she remembers the wake of Hurricane Fiona in 2022. These needs became more salient due to the lack of storage space for purchases and even shelter to keep operations going. Establishing these centers would require an investment of at least \$5 million in San Juan and around \$3.5 million in Mayagüez. These funds will solely be for the acquisition and rehabilitation of the premises. In the long run, Colibrí visualizes an ideal scenario where many centers are opened throughout Puerto Rico—organized by regions and interlinked across the archipelago—to share resources for community organizing among neighboring municipalities.

According to Colibrí, this plan will grow the mutual aid movement on the island. Mutual aid is one of the survival tactics used in the face of the colonial crisis. “Fostering mutual aid in Puerto Rico first requires an understanding of an already-existing ecosystem,” she points out. “There are groups that work at varying levels and scales and toward different directions,” she also highlights.

Examining the history of these groups, which are not necessarily structured as nonprofit organizations, is paramount—more so after hurricanes Irma and Maria. Following these events, and as community needs grew, the number of groups providing mutual aid increased. Yet, if Puerto Rico’s transformation is to emerge from these spaces, they must coordinate towards a clear common purpose. This can only be achieved over the years as these groups build trust while they take collective action.

“My experience is that, as time goes by, these organizations develop cohesion and hold on even more to whatever works. All of a sudden, you see groups of 30-40 years still doing the work. I think that will be a major aspect of the transitions that are going to ensue when another collapse or an attempt at independence takes place,” Colibrí emphasizes.

When asked to imagine a post-capitalist world a hundred years into the future, she shares that mutual aid work, solidarity exchange of goods and services, and collective management of resources will be fundamental. “Cash will be less significant, but no doubt it’ll still exist. As nonprofit organizations that receive 501(c)(3) funding, we must keep in mind that part of the collective conversations in this post-capitalist world will mean reassessing if we want to keep receiving this type of money—that is, if these 501(c)(3) structures are still in effect. From a very personal perspective, I believe that, after 100-plus years of mutual aid in neighborhoods of the Archipelago of Puerto Rico, we’ll see a collective network of resources, benefits, and actions that will still work toward a dignified, fair, and equal life for all the living beings of our planet,” she points out.

Colibrí visualizes a new political and financial system based on the needs of a community of people who join forces out of the conviction of bettering their surroundings. “The streets hold the power to shape problems and solutions,” she notes.

The image of the forest reappears. Underground and around every tree is a network where each member carries out different yet essential tasks. Each contribution sustains the ecosystem, strengthening it in the face of any shocks it may face.

## Recommendations

Natural ecology can serve as inspiration for how we organize our movements. Administrative support and capacity are key infrastructural needs, and mutual aid infrastructure can be shared by multiple organizations. One of HASER's most urgent needs is to purchase a building that can become shared offices for organizations across the movement ecosystem in Puerto Rico.



# Conclusion & Recommendations

These ten organizations and their mutual aid programs, in many cases already mutually interdependent, have enabled many Puerto Rican communities to respond to interlocking crises and survive where government services have failed. They have also begun to build infrastructure, in particular financial, legal, social, narrative, and land infrastructure, to underpin a just transition to a regenerative democratic economy. What follows is a summary of the top recommendations for how funders interested in serving mutual aid efforts might be able to do so. This section begins with the top four recommendations, followed by a longer list of general findings and recommendations.

# Top recommendations

1. *Urgently decolonize Puerto Rico from the United States and remove oppressive colonial systems such as the Financial Oversight Board.*

2. *Move land & buildings into community control*

This is the most urgent need. Find ways to co-design and/or support existing infrastructure for land and building acquisition by local solidarity economy projects, agroecological initiatives, and fideicomisos or community land trusts.

3. *Move resources to Maria Fund, an existing mission-aligned financial vehicle, where they will be distributed through a process controlled by key movement organizations that have a vision for a decolonial, ecologically sustainable, postcapitalist Puerto Rico.*

4. *Funders should explore Mutual Aid & Just Recovery as key areas for philanthropic impact*

The frequency and severity of climate related crises will only continue to increase. Providing infrastructure and support for mutual aid and just recovery efforts is a powerful approach. Progressive funders should prioritize this as a viable opportunity for meaningful impact.

# General findings & recommendations

- **Mutual aid has been practiced in Puerto Rico for generations**, and it has sustained the people in times of crisis.
- During the past six years, Puerto Rico has faced the most serious bankruptcy in the history of the United States and its territories, three devastating hurricanes (Irma, María, Fiona), and several episodes of earthquakes, particularly in the southwestern zone of the country, which left serious damage to public and private property.
- **These catastrophic events raised a new awareness about the role of mutual aid. For example, the Mutual Aid Network** was created to bring together different movements around the island that responded to meet the most basic needs of the population, including food and shelter.
- In the midst of the recovery after the hurricanes, **the Puerto Rican people rose up in a mega-mobilization to demand the resignation of then-governor Ricky Rosselló (#RickyRenuncia)**. This movement was successful and achieved the resignation of the governor. Unfortunately, due to the colonial situation, the movement was unable to install a better government.
- **After the catastrophic events, a lot of support came to Puerto Rico in the form of donations (money and materials)** from NGOs, as well as from the Puerto Rican diaspora. However, aid was distributed mainly to large organizations with complex bureaucratic systems that are disconnected from the needs of the communities. Communities wanted a new support model based on trust. To counteract this, **new local organizations have been organized, such as the Maria Fund, which receives and organizes support based on what the community-based organizations need and request.**
- The organizations agree on the need to expedite the processes to obtain funds from philanthropy, since the administrative burden takes time away from direct work in needy communities. It is critical for **foundations to support the local infrastructure of receiving and democratically distributing donations.**
- In Puerto Rico there are already several models of mutual aid that are making a difference in the lives of many people, in areas such as: sustainable agriculture, the right to decent housing, self-management for resilience during and after emergencies, defense of public education, and protection of Puerto Rican identity and cultural heritage, among others. **Therefore, support existing mutual aid projects.**



- Organizations running mutual aid projects need economic resources to be able to maintain their operations and expand their initiatives to support more communities.
- Puerto Rico is currently facing the consequences of speculation in the real estate market. Foreigners (mostly USians) are buying properties in the coastal zone and the countryside, displacing communities that are tempted to leave their homes (in many cases, emigrate to the United States) at the possibility of obtaining money to alleviate their economic situation.
- There is a legal infrastructure, including organizations that support the people of PR to retain control of their lands, in the countryside as agroecological projects and in the cities as land trusts (fideicomiso). Foundations must **support that legal infrastructure to help the fight against eviction and the shift of land to community control.**
- Puerto Rican emigration to the United States has increased after the hurricanes and earthquakes. According to the Federal Census Bureau, 97,000 people emigrated from Puerto Rico in 2017, many after María.
- The organizations agree on the need to **acquire land to protect areas for agriculture and to curb the disorganized and excessive development that the country currently faces.**
- **Puerto Rico is a colony of the United States.** This political status prevents a true autonomy of the country. Puerto Ricans do not have the right to vote for the president of the United States unless they emigrate to the mainland, and have no representation in Congress. The laws of the United States also go above the legislation and the Constitution of Puerto Rico. The organizations agree that the elimination of the colonial status is essential for the progress of the country.

# Appendices

## Executive Summary

An executive summary is available here, in the form of a presentation deck: [Mutual Aid in Puerto Rico Presentation - ENGLISH VERSION](#).

## Annotated Bibliography

Review and summary of relevant writing about Mutual Aid in Puerto Rico, with citations.

## MUTUAL AID

What is Mutual Aid? Where does theory and practice come from?

**Kropotkin, P.A. (1902) Mutual aid: a factor for evolution** - In *Mutual aid: a factor for evolution* Kropotkin presents his groundbreaking observations of the dynamics of cooperation among various species of flora and fauna in Siberia. This book serves as the foundation for understanding the theory of mutual aid. Kropotkin describes teamwork and cooperation between ants, bees, monkeys, among other animals. Although he did not rule out that there is competition between them, his detailed account portrays that collaboration is just as important or even more important for their survival. He argued that the species most likely to survive were not those that isolated or competed, but those that knew how to help each other.

**Kropotkin, P.A. (1892) The Conquest of Bread** - In this book, Kropotkin argues that the immensity of wealth in the world makes it possible for humanity, without exception, to live without having to suffer needs. "Everything belongs to everyone," affirms the author, because this abundance arises from the work and contributions of generations of people whose specific contributions are impossible to quantify. To put this theory into practice, he bets on an economic model based on mutual aid, cooperation and solidarity. At the same time, Kropotkin analyzes the failures of capitalism and feudalism, which promote the personal enrichment of a few at the expense of the work of the majority.

**Zibechi, R. (2012) Mutual Aid and Social Transformation** - This book presents a look at social movements organized based on mutual aid in Latin America. Examples of solidarity networks and mutual aid initiatives are addressed to support social transformation in Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Ecuador and Colombia. These models not only aspire to build a fairer society, but also ways to deal with problems such as the exploitation of natural resources by capitalist interests.

Anarchist, socialist, and cooperativist movements in history, and their use of the theory and practice of Mutual Aid

**Woodcock, G. (1962). Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements** - This work presents

the evolution of anarchism as a political and philosophical movement with great influence throughout history. Woodcock argued that anarchism arose as a response to inequalities and injustices. In addition, the author addresses the relationship of this movement with other political currents such as socialism and Marxism.

**Rocker, R. (1937). *Anarcho-syndicalism: Theory and Practice*** - This book is considered a vital reference for understanding anarcho-syndicalism, a form of anarchism that proposes replacing the State and private property with a society founded on solidarity and cooperation. In anarcho-syndicalism, unionism is key to achieving this model oriented to the common good. The author analyzes the thought of the movement's most important theoreticians, as well as their relationship with socialism and communism.

### Mutual aid in the context of natural disasters and other high-impact events (Hurricane Katrina, Covid-19, etc.)

**Solnit, R. (2010). *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*** - The premise of this book is that in times of crisis people tend to collaborate with others. Taking the example of key events such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the tsunami in Japan (2011) and Hurricane Katrina (New Orleans, 2005), the author explains the importance of the solidarity networks that emerged from these emergencies. The author criticizes the role of the government and the media when they show an exaggerated vision of chaos in the midst of these situations, while advocating for mutual aid as a model for the well-being of society.

**Sitrin, M.A. (2012). *Everyday Revolutions: Horizontalism and Autonomy in Argentina*** The global economic crisis, and specifically in Argentina, has prompted the creation of new social and economic models as means of survival. Overwhelmed by globalization, Argentines from different backgrounds have come together to create radical groups to run businesses, build homes and schools that meet their needs. With a horizontal organization that prioritizes and promotes collaboration, these groups have become models for responding productively to large and serious crossroads in society.

**Spade, D. (2020). *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (And The Next)***. Using simple and direct language, Dean Spade addresses the issue of mutual aid and its importance in the context of the recent crises caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and natural disasters (aggravated by climate change), among other events of great impact worldwide. Through concrete examples, the author describes how community movements have been and will be key to eradicating the great injustices of the capitalist, neoliberalist system, as well as the role of the state that oppresses minorities. In addition, Spade explains the role of mutual aid and its marked differences with charity. The author also offers a guide on how to practice mutual aid so that it is effective and does not replicate the errors of entities that contradict its principles.

**Jabr, F. (2020, February 12). *The social life of forests*. *The New York Times*** - This article explains the research and theory of forest ecologist Suzanne Simard. Thanks to his work, we now know that under the ground, mycorrhizal fungi entangle themselves in the roots of trees, helping them to obtain nutrients in exchange for a habitat. Simard's research shows that there is a type of communication between trees and fungi that is extremely important for the survival of both species and the entire ecosystem. In a way, Simard's approach to ecology is reminiscent of Kropotkin's approach to coop-

eration as a method of survival. In addition, the vision of the ecologist has been important in raising awareness among people and the scientific community about the impact of our agricultural practices on forests, global warming, and the loss of natural habitats.

**Crow, S., & Cleaver, K. (2010). Common Ground: Building Power When the Lights Are Out.** - This book narrates how the organizations and support networks that were formed after the scourge of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans were essential to meet the urgent needs of the victims in the areas of health, food, shelter, emotional support, among others, related to this disaster. The authors argue that this situation is an example of how communities can organize to face the oppression of the system. It addresses the issue of racial discrimination and sustainability.

**Mutual Aid Disaster Relief- <https://mutualaiddisasterrelief.org/about/>**- This movement was born from the earthquake that shook Mexico (Michoacán) on September 19, 1985. From this emergency, members of the community became active to help the victims and meet the urgent needs for food, medical care and shelter. They even acted by lying on the floor to prevent state machinery from cleaning up the rubble without first ensuring an exhaustive search process for survivors. In subsequent crises, such as 9/11 in New York and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, members of the community reacted in a similar way, and this organization continued to grow. Currently, they identify themselves as a grassroots organization that responds to disasters using a model based on solidarity, mutual aid and autonomy, with special attention to marginalized populations.

**Solo el Pueblo Salva al Pueblo - <https://nacla.org/news/2020/08/24/public-health-pandemic>** The phrase “Only the people save the people” (Only the people save the people), has been coined in different Latin American countries to name the solidarity movements that emerge as an alternative to survive. The article highlights how in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, solidarity ties were developed and strengthened, which were the response to the deficiencies of the State and institutions. The importance of these support networks is presented to serve particularly the most socially and economically disadvantaged people in times of major crises such as the pandemic.

## Media, Communications, and Mutual Aid

**Red Hook WIFI: From Mesh Networking to Social Networking, by Aditi Mehta.** - “local community-run wifi networks can affect the culture of a neighborhood, and help build social ties and social cohesion, particularly among diverse residents who do not normally interact. I have explored this question alongside the Red Hook Initiative, a community-based youth development organization in Brooklyn, New York that is well-known for building a local wireless network (Red Hook WIFI) after Superstorm Sandy in 2012.” <https://globalmedia.mit.edu/2019/09/12/red-hook-wifi-from-mesh-networking-to-social-networking>, and see <https://www.inverse.com/article/57951-red-hook-free-wifi-helps-community-thrive>. Red Hook Initiative also produced this report: [https://rhicenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/RHI-Hurricane-Report-6\\_2013.pdf](https://rhicenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/RHI-Hurricane-Report-6_2013.pdf).

## THE PUERTO RICAN CONTEXT

**Fight for the Earth/Food Sovereignty documentary “They will inherit the earth” (Lucha por la tierra/ soberanía alimentaria - Documental “Serán las dueñas de la tierra”) - <https://youtu.be/vuCWJlpt9lg> :**

This documentary presents the complexities of betting on agriculture in Puerto Rico in the context of the challenges of government bureaucracy, the lack of support, and the system's obstacles to making this important activity profitable. Through the stories of young farmers, their battles and their desire to move forward despite the obstacles, an up-to-date overview of the importance of food sovereignty in the archipelago and the people who are fighting to save agriculture is obtained. .

**Trías, Monge, J. (1999). Puerto Rico: The Trials of the Oldest Colony in the World. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.** This book can help to understand the complexities of Puerto Rico's colonial status and how it has negatively impacted different aspects of the population's quality of life. Trías Monge explains that the island has not benefited from the relationship of economic dependency it maintains with the United States and indicates that this country has ignored the claim for greater autonomy made by Puerto Ricans, while calling for action to change this reality.

**Center for the new economy (Centro para la nueva economía). (2006).** Restoring Growth in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico's per capita income is half that of Mississippi, the poorest state in the United States. In this book, published by the Center for the New Economy, they analyze the country's fiscal situation based on different economic development reforms and their results. The authors, experts in economics and academics from different areas, contrast the past with a vision of the future to promote health, education and entrepreneurship, among others.

## Brief history of Mutual Aid (Apoyo Mutuo) in Puerto Rico

**Vázquez Calcerrada, P.B. (1960). Housing in Puerto Rico Under the Mutual Aid and Self Help Program. Paper presented at the World Planning and Housing Congress.** <https://issuu.com/coleccionpuertorriquena/docs/ayudamutua-editada> - One of the first documented initiatives was the Mutual Aid and Self-Effort Program (PAMEP), of the Department of Housing, between 1940 and 1960. At that time, the government recognized the ineffectiveness of "traditional means" (private investment and efforts governments) to solve the serious housing crisis and its social consequences. PAMEP suggested that it could be the communities themselves, through self-management, who will determine their particular needs and the best ways to attend to them. Under PAMEP, citizens received lots of land, training and basic equipment to work on building their homes, as well as professional supervision and social support. Although this was a government program, it is important to mention it because for some it serves to demonstrate how good intentions are not enough to push forward a mutual aid project, in the specific case of Puerto Rico. Meanwhile, for others, it was a good example of how mutual aid can be effective in addressing complex social problems from the government apparatus.

**Roberto Vélez Vélez, Red de apoyo mutuo, consideraciones para otro desarrollo, (Mutual Aid Network, considerations for another development) 80 grados (6/9/2020)** (<https://www.80grados.net/red-de-apoyo-mutuo-consideraciones-para-otro-desarrollo/>) - The author analyzes proposes "to examine and reflect on the validity of mutual aid as an alternative decolonial model of development" in Puerto Rico after the passage of hurricanes Irma and María, the earthquakes in the southwestern zone and the beginnings of the Covid-19 pandemic In Puerto Rico. As a prelude to this analysis, he explains the experience with the Mutual Aid and Self-Effort Program (PAMEP) and explains the emergence of Community Support Centers to raise questions that we must formulate to build a country based on the example of mutual aid initiatives. Vélez maintains that "The lesson in a post-disaster and precarious country has been that in solidarity

we can affirm and create.”

**Pedro Anglada Cordero, The Power of Solidarity and Mutual Aid: Decolonizing Puerto Rico, 5/17/2022**

<https://anarchiststudies.org/decolonizing-puerto-rico-by-pedro-cordero/> - In this article, the author reviews several important aspects of the personality of Puerto Ricans, in the context of a country besieged by colonialism and capitalism. In addition, it relates the natural disasters that the island has experienced with the natural emergence of mutual aid movements and as key events for the awakening of the people. Nothing like a hurricane, says the author, to unite people and awaken solidarity.

**AgitArte, Mutual Aid and Cultural Solidarity - <https://www.agitarte.org/projects/mutualaidandcultural-solidarity/>**

- Organization with a long history in the practice of mutual aid from the trenches of the arts. They support groups similar to their political vision and use their talent to join the collective rejection of actions that oppress the people and propose alternatives based on solidarity and the common good.

**Feeding Solidarity (TED X UPR) - <https://youtu.be/IBcspj1XEFk>**

“Can solidarity be regulated? I think not,” says Giovanni Roberto, creator of the Soup Kitchens initiative at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras campus. In this presentation, the activist tells how his project began, from a failed attempt in Caguas, to settling on the university campus where the reception was positive. Soup kitchens is based on the principles of solidarity, so the same food is offered to everyone, in exchange for: contribution of cooking ingredients, money (according to each person’s budget) or time. Soup kitchens exist around the world, says Giovanni: In the Dominican Republic they are called [economic soup kitchens], in Peru, [soup kitchens], and in France, [soup kitchens]. This concept is growing everywhere as a result of the current crisis. In addition to its first headquarters in Río Piedras, the initiative has spread to the towns of Ponce, Humacao and Mayagüez (in the latter two, also within the universities). Furthermore, with an awareness of the importance of achieving food sovereignty on an island that imports 80% of what it eats, the project is beginning to harvest food to serve on your table.

**After María (Después de María).**

Hurricane María was the most destructive natural phenomenon in the modern history of Puerto Rico. Its scourge was brutal and lifted the veil of inequality and the socioeconomic crisis that the archipelago was already suffering. As a direct consequence of the government’s mismanagement and the authorities’ lack of rapid and effective response to the emergency, civic groups on the island began to mobilize, forming or activating support networks inside and outside the country. In particular, Puerto Rico had the support of the diaspora in the United States, which was forcefully activated to achieve the shipment of aid. It is estimated that 5.6 million Puerto Ricans live in the United States (almost twice the number of those who live on the island). Cleaning roads, helping the sick, offering food and water, among others, were the most pressing needs of the population, which were met by neighbors through mutual aid. Otherwise, it would have been impossible to survive the consequences that the natural disaster had on the communities; especially in the poorest and most isolated parts of the country. Thousands were left incommunicado, without water or electricity services. Waiting for government action was not an option.

**Mariana Mutual Aid Project (Proyecto de apoyo mutuo Mariana) ([https://youtu.be/bh8\\_qg5jLDA](https://youtu.be/bh8_qg5jLDA))**

- Without water or electricity, days after Hurricane Maria, Christine Nieves led a mutual aid project to distribute 300 meals a day to the community, with the contribution of 20 volunteers who kept up the work daily.

**Mutual Aid and Survival as Resistance in Puerto Rico.** <https://mutualaiddisasterrelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Mutual-Aid-and-Survival-as-Resistance-in-Puerto-Rico.pdf>.

## Disaster Capitalism in Puerto Rico

**Book and movie - Aftershock of disaster** - <https://www.aftershocksofdisaster.com/> - This book brings together writings from recognized figures in different areas of Puerto Rican society with the aim of exposing, contextualizing, and analyzing the effects of Hurricanes Irma and María in Puerto Rico. It includes a conversation between Yarimar Bonilla (editor of the book) and the journalist/activist critical of capitalism, Naomi Klein. Among other issues, the crisis that occurred after María is contextualized due to the serious fiscal situation of the island due to the unpayable and unconstitutional debt (\$70,000 million, plus \$55,000 million in unfunded pensions) that led to the imposition of a Fiscal Control Board. This body is the one that approves the budget allocations of the government of Puerto Rico in contempt for the quality of life of Puerto Ricans and for the benefit of creditors despite the people's claim that the debt be audited and the burden imposed on those responsible.

**Bianca Galau, How Native Hawaiians have been pushed out of Hawai'i** - <https://youtu.be/NO83K8s8dnk> - In this report, the independent Puerto Rican journalist Bianca Galau travels to Hawaii to hear from the voice of her people the consequences that having become a state of the United States has had on her archipelago. Among the situations they face is the rising cost of housing that today prevents many Hawaiians from being able to maintain or find a decent home in their own country. The case of Hawaii has many similarities with Puerto Rico, to the point that many anticipate that we are on our way to being displaced in our own country as a result of the establishment of tax credits that benefit foreigners, speculation on the real estate market, and the rise in the cost of living.

## Mutual Aid Centers

**The formation of the Network of Mutual Aid Centers.** The Mutual Aid Centers (CAMs) are a set of community-based initiatives that were born in different towns of Puerto Rico in response to the humanitarian crisis left behind by Hurricane María (9/20/2017). Given the inefficiency of the State, the communities could not sit idly by waiting to satisfy such basic needs as clearing streets that were impassable, obtaining food and drinking water, or help for their sick. A characteristic of the mutual aid movements that were activated or created after María is that they functioned around a participatory structure, where decisions were made collectively, resources and skills were shared to maximize the reach of aid. In addition to dealing with the emergency, the groups became an important platform for denouncing events involving mismanagement of resources and even corruption in the administration of humanitarian aid. Solidarity projects began organically and included community kitchens, food supply, medical assistance, shelter, health care, and care for the elderly and seriously ill.

**Centros de Apoyo Mutuo (CAMs) y la Red de CAM "-"** <https://redapoyomutuo.com/> - Web page that gathers information about the formation of the Mutual Aid Centers (CAM) and each of the organizations grouped under this group. The CAMs were a rapid citizen response to the emergency situation in Puerto Rico after the ravages of hurricanes Irma and María in 2017. Each of the groups was organized based on the specific needs of their communities, which, in general, were concentrated on the issues of food, housing and help for communities and people in greater economic and social disadvantage.

Several of these groups evolved once the post-hurricane situation eased and continue to provide support in different ways today.

**Jacqueline Villarrubia-Mendoza y Roberto Vélez-Vélez, Centros de Apoyo Mutuo: reconfigurando la asistencia en tiempos de desastre, Centro Journal, volume xxxii • number iii (otoño 2020)** <https://par.nsf.gov/servlets/purl/10280900> - This article studies and analyzes the role of the Mutual Aid Centers after the onslaught of Irma and María, based on 18 months of work within these groups and a process of interviews with their participants. The authors present a comprehensive and detailed inventory of these solidarity networks and how they influenced the mentality of the most vulnerable people during these crises. It is argued that the CAMs challenged the perception that the community has to conform or wait for the State to address their situations. “The CAMs suggest that the government response to the hurricane inhibits a questioning about how the social structures have distributed the manifestation of the damage and produces an inertia of the impoverished sectors to depend on their assistance. As Maldonado-Torres suggests, in the CAMs we see the creation of “activities and actions that help generate people who identify and question” the disaster through action and not just criticism (2018, 339)”.

**Cooperative League of Puerto Rico / Liga de cooperativas de Puerto Rico** - <https://liga.coop/educacion-cooperativista/historia-del-cooperativismo/> - Official page of the League of Cooperatives of Puerto Rico, with information about the formation of the cooperative movement on the island. Although the origins of cooperatives go back to the Taino Indians, it was not until 1873 that the first cooperative organized under the name “Los Amigos del Bien Público” was established. This institution fulfilled the purpose of offering the people a more accessible alternative to carry out economic transactions based on solidarity principles. During the decades of the 1970s and 1980s, there was great growth in savings, insurance, and housing cooperatives. By the year 2020 there were 113 cooperatives in Puerto Rico.

## INDEPENDENT MEDIA IN PUERTO RICO

**Center for Investigative Journalism / Centro de periodismo investigativo (CPI)** <https://periodismo-investigativo.com/historia/> - Founded in 2008, the center is an independent, non-profit entity that throughout its history has served as a government oversight body. Their investigations led to massive protests for the resignation of Governor Ricardo Rosselló and for the government to recognize that deaths as a result of Hurricane María exceeded 2,975 and not 64 as originally indicated.

**Bianca Gralau** <https://www.instagram.com/biancagraulau/> Independent journalist who uses social networks as a platform to denounce causes that affect the people.