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Puerto Rico: Improving Lives in Response to Natural Disasters and Institutional Obstacles

In September 2017, two Category five storms, Hurricanes Irma and Maria, wreaked havoc on nations across the Caribbean. One of these islands, the US territory of Puerto Rico, garnered vast public attention. The federal government's relatively slow response quickly became the focus of mainstream media. When I arrived in Puerto Rico two years later for volunteer work, I couldn't help but notice the numerous injustices Puerto Ricans experience on a daily basis, particularly when compared to mainland Americans. In the face of natural disasters, stringent governmental policies, outdated infrastructure, and a lack of a productive agricultural sector amplify Puerto Rico's economic and humanitarian distress.

Puerto Rico is often referred to as the world's oldest colony. In 1898, the Spanish territory consisting of three inhabited islands (the main island of Puerto Rico, Vieques, and Culebra) was ceded to the US as part of the Treaty of Paris [1]. Citizenship was granted to residents during WWI, when American troop mobility became a necessity, and 18,000 men from the territory fought [1]. Since 1917, more than 200,000 Puerto Rican men and women have served in the US Armed forces [2]. However, a poll conducted one century later found that nearly half of Americans didn't know that Puerto Ricans are US citizens [3]. Residents of Puerto Rico have limited rights, according to Article 4 of the Constitution. None of the unincorporated territory's 3.2 million people are entitled to a voting member of US Congress or a vote for President [4].

Since its induction as a US Commonwealth, the primary driving factors behind Puerto Rico's economy have been federal tax incentives [5]. In 1976, Section 936 of the tax code was established, exempting profits obtained by US companies in territories from federal corporate income tax [6]. As a result, American-owned manufacturers, particularly the pharmaceutical industry, flocked to the island, forming a vulnerable economic bubble with little-to-no emphasis on foreign investment [7]. In 1996, with growing speculation over corporate welfare, President Bill Clinton signed into effect legislation that gradually phased out Section 936 over the next decade [5]. By 2006, two years before the Great Recession, Puerto Rico's economy had spiraled into a financial crisis that lingers to this day [5]. American-based manufacturers abandoned the island, leaving 40 percent of their workers jobless [7]. In 2015, the national census reported an exodus of nearly 400,000 Puerto Ricans to the US (11 percent of the peak population from 2004) [7]. Many relocated to communities in New York and Florida [8]. What remains today is a smaller, older, and poorer workforce [6]. Even before the 2017 hurricanes, Puerto Rico's debt amounted to a staggering 73 billion dollars, making it the largest municipal bankruptcy in American history [9]. However, unlike states in the mainland, the territory is unable to file for bankruptcy, under Chapter 9 of the US Bankruptcy Tax Code [10].

The push for statehood has long been a divisive argument among Puerto Ricans, but since the 2006 recession, support has increased tremendously. During the first referendum held in 1967, 60 percent of Puerto Ricans expressed their intent to remain a US commonwealth [11]. In 2012, 54 percent voted against this status, however, the second question on the ballot complicated matters. In which, voters were asked to select their preferred status out of the following options: statehood, a sovereign free associated republic, or independence. The status quo, (remaining an unincorporated territory of the US), was notably left out. In response, nearly half-a-million voters skipped the question as a public display of protest. Overall, the majority of citizens who answered chose the statehood option, but when voters who left the question blank were factored into the outcome, the percentage dropped from 61 percent to 45 percent [11]. Therefore, a legislative raise to statehood could not be put in motion. A similar incident occurred five years later; this time, the US Department of Justice withheld funds from the referendum unless Puerto Rico's pro-statehood ruling party changed the wording of the ballot. They obliged, adding in the status quo "colony" option to the ballot, and further clarified that Puerto Ricans would retain their citizenship as a territory or state. Once again, anti-statehood groups boycotted the vote, influencing others to do so as well. Less than a quarter of possible voters showed up, of which, 97 percent chose statehood [11].

Unlike typical American families, those of Puerto Rico exhibit a unique Hispanophone culture—and more strenuous living conditions. Locals refer to their cuisine as "cocina criolla" (meaning "Creole cooking" in English). This style of cooking draws influence from the indigenous Arawak and Taino cultures, as well as the Spanish settlers who colonized the territory. Modern-day staples include rice, beans, seafood, and tropical fruits [12]. This diet, in combination with heavily-processed foods that are imported to the commonwealth, contribute to the higher-than-national-average rates of diabetes and hypertension (16 percent and 39 percent, respectively) [13]. In the standard household of three, mothers do a majority of the cooking [14, 15]. They are well-respected centerpieces. The traditional male way of living, "el machismo," pushes fathers to be breadwinners, but this can be a challenge where the annual median household income is \$20,296 [4,15]. Of the inhabitants, 44.9 percent live below the poverty line—a rate more than triple the national average (13.1 percent) and double the poorest state (Mississippi) [4]. Even before the hurricanes, more than 1.5 million people were food insecure, including 59 percent of children [16].

Strict federal administration weakens Puerto Rico's capabilities as a body of US government. As a result, the local government is pressured to spend more money on lower-quality assistance programs, depleting resources that could be going towards other sectors. Although residents of the territory do not pay federal income taxes and have higher rates of Medicaid and food stamp coverage, Congress utilizes block grants to allocate these benefits [17-19]. Consequently, Medicaid recipients appropriate a mere one-third of the amount that US residents receive [17]. In 2005, an estimated 18 percent of Puerto Rico's Medicaid costs were federally subsidized, compared to 50-83 percent across the states [20-22]. The Nutritional Assistance Program (NAP) of Puerto Rico similarly sets tighter regulations on food stamp

eligibility than its US counterpart, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) [23]. Consequently, NAP is unable to provide equal amounts of food stamps for Puerto Ricans as mainland residents of the same income [23]. Furthermore, in order to receive additional funding, NAP must submit a comprehensive request to Congress instead of a direct appeal to the USDA [23]. This delays Congress's already belated reaction time to natural disasters. According to the USDA Office of the Inspector General, Puerto Rico did not receive adequate disaster nutritional assistance until six months after Maria [24].

Puerto Rico's historically overlooked agricultural sector contributes to its poor circumstances. In 2017, the industry accounted for less than one percent of its GDP [25]. Operation Bootstrap, a government-led movement in the 1940s, is credited for the major shift in an agrarian-based economy to a manufacturing one [26]. Though it did boost the economy significantly at the time, it had its fair share of unintended consequences. Today, Puerto Ricans import 85 percent of their food supply [27]. Their dependence on imported foods has increased the prevalence of unhealthy diets and inflated the cost of sustenance. In fact, a report issued by the Commonwealth's administration in 2015 found that Puerto Ricans are spending double the amount on US imports than the neighboring US Virgin Islands, another unincorporated territory [28]. With little internal food production and a costly external supply, it's easy to see why more than 1.3 million residents rely on food stamps [18].

The hurricanes of 2017 exacerbated issues when they devastated Puerto Rico's infrastructure, water, and food supply. Approximately 3,000 lives were lost in the disaster, and families were torn apart [29]. A US census from 2018 estimates 130,000 residents subsequently left the territory [30]. Those who stayed behind faced many challenges. Due to an outdated electrical grid, 100 percent of Puerto Ricans lost power directly following Maria; it took nearly a year to fully restore electricity [31]. Of the island's crops, 80 percent were destroyed [32]. Major cash crops were hit the hardest, with nearly all of the plantain and banana production being wiped out, along with half of the coffee [31, 32]. In total, the storms caused an estimated 200 million dollars in total crop damage [31]. Amidst the chaos, food importation likely increased by 97 percent [31]. However, the US Jones Act delayed the transportation of crucial aid to the territory. Under this century-old law, US cargo may only be shipped directly to Puerto Rico in a vessel that is domestically built, owned, and 75 percent operated by American citizens [33]. Fewer than a hundred older ships meet these conditions; this number is projected to shrink further due to a decline in US shipbuilding [33]. Three weeks after Maria, the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) was only providing 200,000 meals a day to more than 2 million victims [34]. One month after Maria, a million people were unable to access the public water system [35]. Of those who were cut off, 20 percent resided in metropolitan communities, compared to 68 percent in the rural northern countryside [35, 31]. FEMA could only distribute 29 percent of the needed water to these severed populations [36]. Which line to stand in for life-saving resources (food, water, fuel, medicine, etc.) became an arduous decision for victims.

During the American Revolution, the US took a stand against colonialism by an oppressive

force overseas, securing a new government by the people and for the people. Today, the same country that once fought for its freedom governs an island nation over 2,000 miles away, continually downplaying the needs of its citizens and disenfranchising them in both the federal law-making system and Presidential election. By voting for politicians that support federal policy change, mainland Americans can act on behalf of their fellow citizens in Puerto Rico. In 2018, Puerto Rico's sole representative introduced the Puerto Rican Admission Act, laying the groundwork for the territory's admission into the union by 2021 [11]. Though the bill had bipartisan support, a vote was never held. Nonetheless, it was the largest group of US Congress members backing Puerto Rican statehood in history [11]. This signified a shift in national idealism towards supporting Puerto Rico.

There are multiple ways that Puerto Rico would benefit through major federal policy change, in particular statehood. A quicker suspension or complete repeal of the Jones Act would enable Puerto Ricans to receive dire aid in the event of a natural disaster. It wasn't until one week after Maria that Congress waived the act for a ten-day period, which is simply not enough time for a population that is still recovering [37]. A full repeal of this act could also cut the cost of food by up to 30 percent, lowering the need for food stamps [31]. As a matter of fact, modifying the territory's block-granted food assistance and Medicaid programs to entitlement-based ones would allow the local government to better serve the needs of its citizens. The prevalence of poverty and food insecurity would decrease significantly. Statehood undoubtedly eases the process of resolving these issues. It would guarantee a clean transition to entitlement-based systems, as well as give Puerto Ricans the power currently lacking to potentially reverse the Jones Act. Moreover, statehood may arrive within the near future. For the first time ever, citizens of Puerto Rico will be asked a simple, yes-or-no question on the referendum this November: "Should Puerto Rico be immediately admitted as a US state?" [38, 39]. No matter the outcome, it will send a clear message to American leaders about Puerto Rico's intentions, and hopefully enact new legislation [40]. In the meantime, Puerto Ricans must look to themselves in order to improve their situation.

In the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, researchers found that Puerto Rican agriculturalists were "motivated by a desire to enhance environmental and human health, strengthen social relations," and improve local food production [41]. Grassroot organizations such as Boricúa are building networks of farmers in Puerto Rico that utilize stronger agroecological systems [42]. By teaching sustainable agricultural methods to local farmers, they are able grow more crops, improving incomes and expanding food security. In 2017, the governor of Puerto Rico developed an eight-year plan to double the amount of food production on the island [43]. In this plan, the Puerto Rico Department of Agriculture (DAPR) greatly incentivizes farming and provides more farmers with crop insurance [43]. In 2012, the average age of a Puerto Rican farmer was estimated to be 65, but this number is predicted to have dropped since DAPR's efforts [43]. There is also a movement for other forms of agriculture. In 2019, DAPR opened a fish market in San Juan that highlighted and economically supported the local fishing industry [44]. Farmers are additionally encouraged to grow quick-to-harvest crops such as lettuce and tomatoes, which are more resilient to wind and

flooding than perennial tree crops (coffee, plantains, etc.) [27]. Government-funded expenditures towards agriculture are especially important for Puerto Rico. With nearly a third of the economy functioning under the table, incentivizing agriculture draws workers into the tax base, increasing the local government's financial capabilities [45]. Furthermore, strengthening the economy and alleviating food insecurity is critical for Puerto Ricans, since they are expected to endure some of the worst storms as a result of climate change [31].

Given Puerto Rico's vulnerability to natural disasters, locals are taking steps towards revamping the island's electrical grid and water systems. Casa Pueblo, a prominent grassroots organization, has their eyes set on meeting half of the island's energy needs through solar power, making it a model society for countries all around the world [46]. During Hurricane Maria, they organized the delivery of over 14,000 solar-powered lanterns and other life-saving resources (portable dialysis machines and refrigerators for medicinal storage) to community members [46]. Today, they are expanding solar panel installation from their founding region into more distant ones. Puerto Ricans are also cultivating water independence from the Puerto Rico Aqueduct and Sewer Authority (PRASA), an agency responsible for supplying water to 97 percent of the population [47]. PRASA is effectively a government monopoly; no other corporation is allowed to operate in the industry [47]. Even before the 2017 hurricanes, the company had a poor reputation. Seventy percent of recipients received water from a source that violated federal drinking water standards [47]. Additionally, 60 percent of water annually treated by PRASA was lost through underground leaks — a rate five times the US industrial average [47]. Isolated, low-density localities that have long been overlooked by the government's water system are now sharing their methods of water storage, purification, and distribution with others. One such community, Corcovado, utilizes concrete-reinforced rainwater collection barrels that are capable of surviving hurricane winds [47]. In Corcovado, solar panels power the water treatment system, making residents well-prepared in the event of another disaster [47]. Spreading these methods, in combination with portable filtration devices and low-cost wells, gives Puerto Ricans more reliable — and sustainable — access to water.

The Foundation for Puerto Rico (FPR) is an internationally recognized non-profit seeking to reduce poverty in the territory. The public charity was founded in 2011 with a purpose to “Discover, link, and unleash Puerto Rico's potential as an active participant in the global economy” [48]. FPR promotes a visitor economy, a concept broader than tourism; any direct or indirect tourist interaction goes towards funding a visitor economy. For example, staying at a hotel directly financially supports that business while dually benefiting individuals along the supply chain, such as local farmers or restaurant workers. Numerous FPR programs, such as the Bottom Up Destination Recovery Initiative (Bottom Up), are working to revitalize Puerto Rico's visitor sector [48]. With eight regional centers across the main island, Bottom Up encourages community members to actively engage in city planning, recovery efforts, and the building of infrastructure [48]. The goal is to attract more long-term visitors to these communities. Such a plan fosters economic development through the creation of new businesses, jobs, and a growing tax base. So far, the foundation's work has been so promising that they believe Puerto Rico's visitor economy could double its current contribution to the GDP

(from 7 percent to 14 percent) by 2030, making it a fierce competitor with Caribbean countries [49]. So far, the FPR has completed more than 231 missions across the islands of Puerto Rico, improving the lives of many [48].

Despite the crisis, when I conversed with locals in Puerto Rico, they viewed Hurricanes Irma and Maria as a pivotal wake-up call for American and Puerto Rican leaders alike. Amid an insufficient colonial institution, the people of Puerto Rico have taken matters into their own hands. By means of re-establishing the agricultural industry, reforming infrastructure, initiating new businesses, and raising their voices to US politicians, Puerto Ricans uplift resilience so that they may one day achieve a more promising future.

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