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Hurricane María: An Agroecological Turning Point for Puerto Rico?

By Georges Félix and Eric Holt-Giménez

When Hurricane María tore through Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017, it left 17 dead, 11,000 seeking shelter, and the island's 3.4 million people without power, water, or fresh food supplies.ⁱ It also ripped off the democratic veneer of the US' "commonwealth," revealing the structural vulnerability of an island that has been colonized for over half a millennium. Disasters tend to unmask both unsustainable practices and inequitable relations of power. But they can also unleash the power of solidarity and self-governance as communities—abandoned by their governments and preyed upon by disaster capitalists—come together in unexpected ways. In the aftermath of Puerto Rico's worst social, economic and environmental catastrophe, the Puerto Rican food sovereignty movement is using agroecology to reconstruct the island's beleaguered food system.

The vulnerable underbelly of any society is its food system. Former US Secretary of State and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger infamously stated, "If you control the oil you control the country; if you control food, you control the population."ⁱⁱ

Endowed with mountainous tropical forests, lush alluvial plains, and a perfect climate for year-round food production, even before the hurricane, Puerto Rico still imported 85% of its food. A history of slave plantations, mercantile capitalism, and co-

lonial domination has long prioritized the production of tropical export crops (e.g. sugar cane, coffee, tobacco) over local food supply.

Though the hurricane stripped the forests of vegetation, these will recover with restoration and time. Puerto Rican society, however, is still suffering from the vulnerabilities that made María the worst hurricane in nearly a century. Aside from destroying homes and communication systems, the hurricane devastated roads, electricity grids, and water systems. Outdated and in need of repair before María, these services have still not been restored on most of the island, nearly two months after the hurricane.

Relief and reconstruction efforts are crippled by an unpayable US\$73 billion debt and the loss of public goods and services resulting from the austerity policies imposed on Puerto Rico over the last decade.ⁱⁱⁱ The Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), signed

into law by former President Barack Obama, was supposed to help stabilize the island's economy. In an effort to pay back an unpayable debt, the seven businesspeople appointed to the financial oversight board by PROMESA imposed structural readjustment measures that gutted health care, education, and infrastructure, and privatized public services—the very ones that now are unable to deliver following the hurricane. In the face of over US\$30 billion in relief costs, PROMESA limited emergency domestic spending to just US\$1 billion. While the United States offered \$5 billion in emergency loans, PROMESA balked because it didn't want to add to Puerto Rico's debt burden. After his disgraceful public relations visit to the island, even Donald Trump let slip that unless Puerto Rico's debt was forgiven it would never rebuild. (He later said that Puerto Rico could not expect federal help “forever”—an affirmation he didn't feel was necessary to make for Houston.) Despite being US citizens, Puerto Ricans, like the other Caribbean islanders af-

ected by this year's hurricanes, will be left to recover largely on their own.

Rural-Urban Linkages

“The beautiful thing about the people that practice agroecology is that it isn't only farming in harmony with nature and growing a diversity of things. It is also about building communities, it is about food justice, it is about the growth of the local movement and it is about giving back the power to the communities so they can acknowledge that we can also help ourselves. So we can't grow food right in this moment, but we can help grow our communities.”

-Stephanie Nohemy Monserrate, Ecological farmer, *Güakia Proyecto Agroecológico* in Dorado, Puerto Rico

Immediately after the hurricane, some farmers found their traditional root crops had survived the storm. They began providing food to their communities and formed solidarity brigades with urban allies to help rural neigh-

How Natural are Natural Disasters?

There are no “natural” disasters. A disaster results when a disturbance, or event—a hazard—affects a particularly vulnerable population, economy or ecosystem. It is the combination of vulnerability and hazard that produces the disaster. The higher the vulnerability (and the stronger the hazard) the greater the disaster. If a system is exceptionally vulnerable, even a relatively mild hazard can result in a major disaster. But if the level of vulnerability is low, it takes a much bigger hazard to cause a disaster. Vulnerability itself is not some natural state, but is “produced” by society. This is why, in general, the poor are more vulnerable than the rich, women and girls are more vulnerable than males, children more vulnerable than adults, and colonial dominions are more vulnerable than imperial centers. The opposite of vulnerability is sustainability. Sustainable systems can resist the impact of a hazardous event, and recover quickly afterwards. This is the dual capacity of resistance and resilience, but is usually just referred to as “resilience.” Generally, those populations that are more affluent both resist and recover better than those that are less endowed. Of course, sometimes the hazard is so severe that everyone suffers—initially. After the relief and recovery efforts are over, however, those with greater financial, cultural, and political capital will recover more quickly, and may even find ways to benefit from the disaster, displacing, expropriating, or exploiting those communities with fewer resources. The absence of public safety nets, the presence of cash-heavy banks and corporations in search of real estate and quick profit, and corporate-friendly (rather than a public-friendly) governments, can combine in a form of “disaster capitalism” that preys upon vulnerable communities.

bourhoods open roads, fix their houses and clear their land of debris. They established community support centers (*centro de apoyo mutuo*) to distribute the supplies sent by the Puerto Rican diaspora in the US and Europe. Now the brigades are calling for agroecological reconstruction.

Is this even remotely possible on an island whose reconstruction costs are estimated at US\$94 billion? The question may be better posed by asking: Under a failed colonial system, is reconstruction even conceivable without sustainably re-engaging the island's agriculture?

Despite the island's legacy of food imports, before the hurricane, 15% of the Puerto Rican diet was supplied locally. Consumption patterns must shift. Chef Lina Castillo thinks now is the time to scale up:

"Food issues must be discussed not only with farmers, but also with doctors, lawyers, nutritionists, cooks: everybody. The general situation is that there is no 'food culture.' Without electricity or water it's even worse. Many places are closing doors, and people prefer canned food over fresh vegetables. The thing is to talk based on facts like the higher quality of organic produce, based on taste, nutritional value, ecological impact... But people often ask "How can I feed organic? That's not for me!" And in fact, before the hurricane there was a sort of ecological agriculture, but with prices reachable only by the elites. In my workshops many are in search of healthier lifestyles, mostly the sick, and not particularly the 'vegan foodies' type."

But the hard work of reconstruction entails more than clearing debris, planting crops and distributing healthy food. Roads must be rebuilt, trees planted, terraces established and farmhouses raised. This will require resources, hard

work, solidarity, and political will. Political will is created when social movements create enough public support for their proposals that the political cost to legislators for not following the will of the people is greater than the cost of doing business as usual. This means that agroecology—the agricultural basis for a resilient food system—needs widespread public support to be implemented on the scales needed for the reconstruction.

A Colonial Legacy That is Not Encouraging

While plantation workers grew most of the island's food prior to US colonialism, this production declined steadily until dropping precipitously after the 1960s, making the island largely food dependent.^{iv} The Merchant Marine Act of 1920, more commonly known as the 'Jones Act,' limits the possibilities of trading goods directly with other countries, and dooms the island to high food prices. At its core, the agroecological reconstruction of Puerto Rico's food system implies the transformation of the system itself.

For example, *arroz con habichuelas* ('rice-and-beans') is consumed daily by most Puerto Ricans. Nevertheless, the ingredients to prepare this local dish are nowhere to be found on farmers' fields. The production of avocados, bananas, beans, cabbages, cassava, coffee, lemons, maize, oranges, pineapples, squash, rice, cane sugar, sweet potatoes and yams, as well as eggs, beef, pork, goat, and mutton declined dramatically or vanished entirely. Processed products from the United States dominate the shelves of Puerto Rican supermarkets.

But not all production has disappeared. Plantains, also an important part of the *boricua* diet, were re-introduced in the 1980s. The local production of papaya, grapefruit, mango, pineapple, and tomato, has increased, as have export

crops like chicory root and eggplant. Chicken and whole milk production have increased since 1960.

The curious mix of domestic, imported and export products responds less to Puerto Ricans' needs or desires than to the domination of Puerto Rico's food system by the US food industry. Puerto Rico's farmers have been able to carve out their market niches despite the lack of supportive, domestic food policies—a testament to the enduring legacy of the *jibaro*, the island's peasant farmers.

Lamento Borincano: A Short Political History of Puerto Rico's Food System

During the 1930s, Puerto Rico's *jibaros* grew root crops, coffee, tobacco, and sugar cane. In this 'sweet sugar decade' the United States massively increased its imports of Puerto Rican sugar. Pineapple and other tropical fruits would follow. The 1940s saw strong economic growth, thanks to the establishment of public utilities that provided electricity, infrastructure, and water to rural and urban communities.

But many Puerto Ricans yearned for independence. The working-class *Partido Nacionalista* mobilized the grassroots for Puerto Rican autonomy. In response, the United States and the territorial government engaged in brutal repression against Puerto Rican nationalism on one hand, while investing in sustained urban economic growth on the other. Several waves of rural-urban migration ensued, accommodated by the massive housing projects (*caseríos*) of the 1960s. While this brought social integration and political cohesion to the island, it also hollowed out Puerto Rico's interior of its rural communities. The economic policy known as 'Operation Bootstrap' fostered this transition away from agriculture in favour of manufacturing, particularly of pharmaceutical industries. Export agricul-

ture on the island's rich coastal plains continued, however, as did the overuse of chemical pesticides and fertilizers. When the Campesino-a-Campesino movement for sustainable agriculture swept through Latin America in the 1980-90s, Puerto Rican smallholders began implementing agroecological practices and reviving their traditional crops. *Organización Boricúa*, founded in 1987 and member of La Via Campesina since 2013, became one of the first advocates for healthy food production by and for the people. New organic and permaculture farms grew crops for local consumption. Farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture began popping up in San Juan, Ponce, Aguadilla, Rincón, Lares, and Vieques. The University of Puerto Rico in Utuado offered courses in agroecology. Grassroots educational efforts at *El Josco Bravo* in Toa Alta, *Siembra Para Tod@s* in Utuado, and *Finca Conciencia* in Vieques have trained more than 150 youth in ecological farming practices. But the Puerto Rican government ignored these developments. Instead,

they provided incentives for foreign agribusiness. Multinationals like Monsanto Caribe (1,711 acres), Dow AgroSciences, and Mycogen Seeds (1,698 acres) that grow GMO seed stock for the global market gained control of the best agricultural lands. Puerto Rico has more permits for experimental seed stock than any other US territory or state—more than Hawaii or Iowa. Between 2006 and 2015, multinational agribusiness corporations received more than \$526 million in subsidies and tax exemptions from the Puerto Rican government. Puerto Rico's enormous debt is partially due to these very same tax exemptions. The anti-GMO collective *Nada Santo Sobre Monsanto* claim these policies displace rural people, favor corporate land-grabbing, and weaken the island's food system.

The Future of Agroecology in Puerto Rico

In Puerto Rico colonialism and neoliberalism have created structural vulnerabilities leading to poverty, migration,

environmental degradation and food insecurity. As islanders recover and rebuild, it makes no sense to reconstruct the same model that made the island vulnerable in the first place. Puerto Rico cannot count on the US government or the disaster capitalists to reconstruct the island resiliently. By rebuilding the island's neglected food system, agroecology can serve as a strategic pivot in the process of decolonization and the resilient transformation of the island's environment, economy and society.

“Puerto Rico is not standing up because Puerto Rico has never been on its knees nor fallen. We are not small and we are on our feet, struggling to move the country forward! Let us not fall into negativity and criticism. Just like the Tabonuco tree, our roots are deep and strong!”

—Armando Feliciano of *Finca Los Cucubanos*, Las Marías, Puerto Rico

Endnotes:

ⁱ The official death toll would rise to 43 in the weeks after the hurricane, though San Juan Mayor stated it was likely much higher. See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-puertorico-casualties/puerto-rico-hurricane-death-toll-rises-by-four-to-43-idUSKBN1CF1UI>, and <http://www.abc15.com/news/national/puerto-rico-s-hurricane-death-toll-could-be-10-times-higher-than-reported-san-juan-mayor-says>.

ⁱⁱ <https://truth11.com/2009/12/13/quote-henry-kissinger-oil-and-food-control/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kaske, Michelle. “Washington Needs to Do More as Puerto Rico, Devastated and Powerless, Fights to Survive.” *Bloomberg Businessweek*. October 2, 2017.

^{iv} Please see <http://www.fao.org/faostat/en/?#data> for FAO data.

^v Tormos-Aponte, Fernando and José Ciro Martínez. “Puerto Rico at the Precipice.” *Jacobin Magazine*. October 15, 2017. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/10/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-trump-jones-act-colonialism>.

^{vi} Fonseca, Verónica. “¿Dónde están los mercados agrícolas en Puerto Rico?” *Diálogo Digital*. May 12, 2014. <http://dialogoupr.com/donde-estan-los-mercados-agricolas-en-puerto-rico/>.

^{vii} Martínez Meraco, Eliván. “The Boom of Monsanto and other Seed Corporations Blows in the South of Puerto Rico.” *Centro de Periodismo Investigativo*. March 7, 2017. <http://periodismoinvestigativo.com/2017/03/the-boom-of-monsanto-and-other-seed-corporations-blows-in-the-south-of-puerto-rico/>.

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