

LESSONS FROM JUST  
TRANSFORMATION,  
ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE,  
AND THE FIGHT FOR  
SELF-DETERMINATION  
IN PUERTO RICO





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# PROTESTA Y PROPUESTA

Lessons from just transformation, ecological justice, and the fight for self-determination in Puerto Rico

*“De la Protesta a la Propuesta”* (“From protest to proposal”). That’s the slogan that watershed protectors used when they successfully stopped open pit mining in the heart of Puerto Rico’s mountains then brought those same lands under community control. For those of us looking to build just transformation in place, we have much to learn from Puerto Rico’s social movements which are at once both visionary and oppositional, centering sovereignty and self-governance.

Sara Mersha (far right) of Grassroots International leads a “Web of Life” activity to ground members of the delegation in the complex interconnectedness of all life on earth and the ecological erosion that hacks at the Web of Life.

PHOTO BY BROOKE ANDERSON

## **ABOUT THIS RESOURCE**

This spring, [Grassroots International](#) led a delegation of donors and social movement organizers to Puerto Rico to learn from how just recovery and just transformation are playing out on the ground, at scale, in real time on the archipelago. The group met with Puerto Rican organizers who shared what is working, what's not, and how they're navigating the contradictions. Afterwards, [Grassroots International](#) and [Movement Generation Justice & Ecology Project](#) (MG) co-authored this report.

# JUST TRANSFORMATION AND JUST RECOVERY

## Just Transformation, or Just Transition

Just transformation, or just transition, is the work “to transition whole communities toward thriving economies that provide dignified, productive, and ecologically sustainable livelihoods that are governed directly by workers and communities.”<sup>1</sup>

In the U.S., the term *just transition* was originally used by the labor movement to demand that with the phaseout of polluting industries, workers would be retrained and adequately compensated rather than bear yet another cost from working in that industry. Environmental justice communities on the fenceline of these polluting industries then built common cause with workers for a just transition that would not put the environmental or economic burden on workers or communities. In the U.S., the term has since further evolved to capture systemic transformation of the whole economy. While U.S. frontline groups often use the term *just transition*, some Puerto Rican social movements use the term *just transformation*—especially as a way to capture the necessity of achieving decolonization and sovereignty as part of any transition. As such, we’ll be using *just transformation* in this report, as well as other concepts such as *self-determination* and *ecological justice*.

**JUST TRANSFORMATION, OR JUST TRANSITION, IS THE WORK “TO TRANSITION WHOLE COMMUNITIES TOWARD THRIVING ECONOMIES THAT PROVIDE DIGNIFIED, PRODUCTIVE, AND ECOLOGICALLY SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS THAT ARE GOVERNED DIRECTLY BY WORKERS AND COMMUNITIES.”**

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1 From “Banks and Tanks to Caring and Cooperation: A Strategic Framework for a Just Transition” written by Movement Generation Justice and Ecology Project available at [movementgeneration.org/justtransition](https://movementgeneration.org/justtransition). This document draws heavily from this framework.



Rooted in different contexts and conditions, social movements around the world have developed many different systemic change frameworks including just transition, just transformation, *buen vivir* (collective community and ecological wellbeing), ecofeminism, food sovereignty, and agroecology.

This document borrows heavily from principles outlined in the “[Just Transition Framework](#),” which in turn draws on the wisdom, strategies and lived experiences of frontline communities across bioregions throughout Turtle Island. The framework was written down by Movement Generation in concert with member organizations of the [Climate Justice Alliance](#) (CJA) and learning from the creative strategies of grassroots groups. At the same time, Puerto Rican social movements have been fostering a just transformation and when CJA and MG shared the “Just Transition Framework” with them, many groups found that it helped illustrate some of the principles and strategies they were advancing in Puerto Rico as part of a just transformation.

### **Just Recovery**

Just recovery is connected to just transformation and refers specifically to “Response, recovery and rebuild efforts centering systematically oppressed communities during climate accelerated disasters,” according to CJA. It requires a redistribution of resources and power, such that frontline communities are in positions of leadership to determine their futures and to build a visionary economy for life.

Jesús Vázquez of Organización Boricúa elaborates that in a Puerto Rican context, “We use Just Recovery as a long term process where we practice mutual support for the empowerment of communities through the relationships and local organizing efforts that have kept us together in the past, make us stronger in the present, and that will guarantee us a future together.” Puerto Rican organizations such as Organización Boricúa are building permanently organized communities to both weather the storms and build regenerative economy.

As Naomi Klein in her book, *The Battle for Paradise*, explains: “This is more important than ever because standard responses to disasters leave behind more pollution, more debt, less

democracy, and a weaker infrastructure. In contrast, a Just Recovery would reduce pollution, reduce debt, challenge systemic racism, deepen democracy, and leave behind more resilient and resistant communities.”

### **Learning from Just Transformation and Just Recovery on the ground in Puerto Rico**

What do just transformation and just recovery look like in Puerto Rico? How are Puerto Ricans reinventing economy at a bioregional scale? How are Puerto Rican social movements developing a roadmap, building governance structures, thinking by sector, factoring in impending shocks, and bringing those projects to scale through translocal organizing?

**“WE USE JUST RECOVERY AS A LONG TERM PROCESS WHERE WE PRACTICE MUTUAL SUPPORT FOR THE EMPOWERMENT OF COMMUNITIES THROUGH THE RELATIONSHIPS AND LOCAL ORGANIZING EFFORTS THAT HAVE KEPT US TOGETHER IN THE PAST, MAKE US STRONGER IN THE PRESENT, AND THAT WILL GUARANTEE US A FUTURE TOGETHER.” JESÚS VÁSQUEZ**

Social movements and frontline communities are rebuilding Puerto Rico centering the wellbeing and self-determination of the people. They are confronting the powerful forces of disaster capitalism—an agenda that is being imposed upon them and which is centered in the interests of capital and corporations that are polluting and intensifying the impacts of climate change and social inequality, even as they seek to profit from the shocks that result from these injustices.





A house stands in the midst of a remote part of the island heavily damaged by Hurricane María. Understanding how human settlement “dances well” with the living world is a key part of managing home well.

PHOTO BY BROOKE ANDERSON.

## IF ECO MEANS HOME, ECOSYSTEMS ARE THE RELATIONSHIPS OF HOME

Understanding Puerto Rico’s ecosystems, keystone species, and relationships of home.

*Borikén*—the indigenous Taíno name for Puerto Rico—is an archipelago in the Caribbean Sea, consisting of the islands of Puerto Rico, Culebra, Vieques, Mona and others. Puerto Rico is mostly wet and moist forest in the north and dry forest to the south. It is in the hurricane belt of the Western Atlantic and Caribbean. Intricately elegant mangrove ecosystems abutt key and strategic areas of the Puerto Rican coast lines, as naturally designed buffer zones



for big storms. Rich in plant and marine species, these mangroves serve as critical and regenerative repositories of the archipelago's biological diversity. Many of these have been compromised by human development, leaving many places vulnerable.

When we appreciate the critical role of red mangroves as a keystone species<sup>2</sup> in the Puerto Rican context—as storm protectors as the birthing

refuge for the larvae and young of many fish, mollusks, and crustaceans; as key contributors to the regulatory well-being of a whole island—we begin to know and understand home well. Understanding this ecological context, interplay, and interdependence—in any bioregion—is critical to constructing and ensuring a just transformation.

**UNDERSTANDING THIS ECOLOGICAL CONTEXT, INTERPLAY, AND INTERDEPENDENCE—IN ANY BIOREGION—IS CRITICAL TO CONSTRUCTING AND ENSURING A JUST TRANSFORMATION.**

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2 Keystone species are species on which other species in an ecosystem largely depend, such that if they were removed the ecosystem would change drastically & become less resilient.



Pluma Barbara Moreno of Centro de Apoyo Mutuo Jíbaro Lares (Lares Peasant Mutual Aid Center) and Movimiento Indígena Jíbaro (Indigenous Peasant Movement) leads a group in a *mística*—or opening cultural offering to ground the space. PHOTO BY BROOKE ANDERSON.

## WHAT YOU DO TO THE LAND YOU DO TO THE PEOPLE

Colonization was the first, and remains the most devastating, form of ecological erosion in Puerto Rico.

Borikén was first inhabited by the indigenous Taíno people, which were also the principal inhabitants of what we now call Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, and the Bahamas. The Taíno people have a rich history and culture, including as expert weavers, gourd-makers, canoe-builders, fisherfolk, and farmers—cultivating beans, corn, yuca, and sweet potatoes, and a very biodiverse pharmacy of medicinal plants.

Christopher Columbus invaded Borikén in 1492 and the archipelago was colonized by Spain in 1493. The Spanish enslaved the Taíno people of Puerto Rico and also brought enslaved West African people to Puerto Rico to work the gold mines and colonial plantations. Between enslavement; falling prey to smallpox, measles, and other diseases for which they lacked immunity; and death in battle with the Spaniards, during the first 30 years of Spanish colonization alone, 80-90% of the Taíno population were killed. However, in the 2010 census, over 9,000 people in Puerto Rico identified as “Taíno.”

Puerto Rico became a colony of the United States in 1898, and remains so today, making it one of the oldest colonies in the Western Hemisphere. This historical and on-going colonization of Borikén—and the lack of self-determination of Puerto Rican people—is at the root of the economic, political, and ecological crises in the archipelago. Puerto Rico has been falsely presented by the U.S. as an island experiencing economic progress within the context of democracy, when in reality it remains a colonial experiment. This relationship has imposed a violent neoliberal agenda in Puerto Rico. The experience of those hardest hit by climate disasters and by the economic conditions created by this capitalist model mirrors those of many countries impacted by neocolonialism in other parts of the Global South.

Some of the recent examples of how this continues to play out in Puerto Rico include:

- ▶ the use of Puerto Rico’s land and territory for military practice, including live bombs that have terrorized and polluted both people and planet, leaving a toxic legacy.
- ▶ the takeover of public fertile land that should be in the hands of small-scale farmers and using it instead for experiments by large agribusiness corporations such as Bayer-Monsanto.
- ▶ the destruction of coastal ecosystems that protect the islands against hurricanes and the displacement of people from their lands in order to build luxury hotels, apartments, and golf courses.



- ▶ the denial of autonomy to trade with Puerto Rico's sister islands in the Caribbean through the imposition of the Jones Act<sup>3</sup>.
- ▶ the imposition of the Financial Oversight and Management Board (*la junta*) without the consent of the Puerto Rican people, implementing austerity measures and privatization in order to repay the illegitimate debt.

For decades, Puerto Rican advocacy groups and international allies have denounced the United States' colonial occupation of Puerto Rico. During the 2018 United Nations General Assembly of the Special Committee on Decolonization, more than 40 petitioners described the situation as one of genocide and "economic terrorism." They described the reality as characterized by multinational corporations—facilitated by the United States—exploiting Puerto Rico's resources, even as the U.S. (through *la junta*) implemented austerity measures and forced schools to close and pensions to go unpaid.

According to Pedro Caban's article, "[Hurricane Maria's Aftermath: Redefining Puerto Rico's Colonial Status](#)," the economic crisis in Puerto Rico has been deepening since 2004 when the economy started to contract and the government began dismissing thousands of public sector employees. In addition to Puerto Rico's \$72 billion in debt and all the cuts under *la junta*, the archipelago is struggling with a 45% poverty rate and more than 12% unemployment. According to the 2014 U.S. census, 58% of Puerto Rico's children live below the federal poverty level.

These economic and social conditions provoked a massive migration that started in 2005. According to the Pew Foundation, between 2005 and 2015, approximately 446,000 Puerto Ricans migrated to the U.S. An additional estimated 130,000 people migrated between July 2017- July 2018, most

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3 The Jones Act 1920 requires all goods ferried between U.S. ports to be carried on ships built, owned, and operated by Americans. Those ships are far more expensive to buy and operate than ships flying foreign flags. As a result, it makes most things in Puerto Rico more expensive.

of them after Hurricane María. This will have serious impacts on the future of Puerto Rico's economy and recovery.

After Hurricane María, the cruelty of the U.S.-P.R. colonial relationship was further revealed. On top of the devastation caused by the storm itself, there was the devastation of the grossly inadequate response from the U.S. government. As a result, thousands of people died, exposing the crime of U.S. colonialism as a culprit in this human-made disaster.

The world paid attention to Puerto Rico's situation after Hurricane María, but there were other human-made "hurricanes" before, such as the massive debt that Puerto Rico faces. This debt came about as a result of predatory financial instruments, through which the Puerto Rican government borrowed money under conditions that many experts argue were illegal under Puerto Rico's constitution. This debt has been used as a strategy to push more neoliberal policies in the context of the economic crisis.

Another "hurricane" was the U.S. Congress' imposition of la junta's control over Puerto Rico's public finances through 2016 passage of the so-called Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability (PROMESA) Act. La junta is overseeing the liquidation of Puerto Rico's assets to maximize debt repayments, and is approving major economic decisions—such as drastic downsizing, deregulation, privatization of public services, and austerity measures such as deep cuts in pension, health care, and education—as priorities despite the humanitarian crisis after Hurricane María.

Resistance has been present in Puerto Rico since Spain's colonization. Frontline communities and social movements have been resisting the extractive and oppressive system, and making the commitment to remain in Puerto Rico regardless of the economic and political conditions. They have been fighting against the colonial system and the corrupt government, demanding freedom for political prisoners, defending important ecosystems and the commons, and organizing against mining, militarization, the imposition of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), other corporate agribusiness interests, and fossil fuels. More recently, they have been organizing against la junta and PROMESA, austerity measures and the privatization of public

services. They are building and strengthening resistance, while also working hard to create regenerative systems based on collective self-management. There are movements and grassroots organizations working toward multiple sovereignties and alternative systems, such as food sovereignty, energy independence, territorial sovereignty, solidarity economies, and grassroots feminisms.

**WHAT YOU DO TO THE PEOPLE, YOU DO TO THE LAND AND WHAT YOU DO TO THE LAND YOU DO TO THE PEOPLE. SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL WELL-BEING ARE INEXTRICABLY LINKED.**

In this particular political, economic, and ecological moment and with these multiple crises, the grassroots groups and social movements that are most impacted have had to

take on the difficult task of being the first responders, especially given the lack of adequate response from the local and U.S. government. They organize with great courage, taking this crisis as an opportunity to decolonize minds, territories, and bodies and to gain more popular power. Community-based groups are the ones proposing and working for a just recovery and just transformation, not just rebuilding the old that replicates the oppression that put people in such a vulnerable position in the first place.

Ecological erosion in Puerto Rico is anchored in the genocide of Indigenous Peoples and the enslavement of West Africans. The key enabling resource of ecological erosion is the concentration and control of labor. Social inequity is a form of ecological imbalance and inevitably leads to ecological erosion. Said another way, what you do to the people, you do to the land and what you do to the land you do to the people. Social and ecological well-being are inextricably linked.





# TEK**now** VS. TECHNO: WE'RE NOT LOSING TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE (TEK). WE'RE LOST FROM IT.

It is the violation of indigenous sovereignty that has distanced us from the TEK it takes to be in right relationship to place. We all have the capacity to relearn home, and right management of home.

Despite these deep histories of colonization and genocide, resistance and resilience continue. According to Pluma Barbara Moreno of the Centro de Apoyo Mutuo Jíbaro Lares (Lares Peasant Mutual Aid Center) and Movimiento Indígena Jíbaro (Indigenous Peasant Movement), "There has never been a

A spider spins its web in Bosque Escuela Olimpia, Puerto Rico. Where the extractive economy has hacked at the web of life, it is Traditional Ecological Knowledge that helps us repair and tend the strands of the Web of Life.

PHOTO BY BROOKE ANDERSON.

conquest of indigenous people, ever in the world. There never will be. We are *still* resisting the invasion. We are *still* defending the territory—recovering our wisdom, our traditions, our medicine. The environmental crisis is because our traditions have not been followed. We have to keep working this *camino*

**THERE HAS NEVER BEEN A CONQUEST OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE, EVER IN THE WORLD. THERE NEVER WILL BE. WE ARE *STILL* RESISTING THE INVASION. WE ARE *STILL* DEFENDING THE TERRITORY—RECOVERING OUR WISDOM, OUR TRADITIONS, OUR MEDICINE. THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS IS BECAUSE OUR TRADITIONS HAVE NOT BEEN FOLLOWED. WE HAVE TO KEEP WORKING THIS *CAMINO* (PATH/DIRECTION). PLUMA BARBARA MORENO**

(path/direction). The greatest violence against people in the world today is against indigenous people defending their territories.”

If colonization has forcibly distanced us from knowing how to live in right relationship to place, recovering that traditional ecological knowledge is at the heart of ecological

restoration. In other words, the future is indigenous. We have to remember our way forward. This is especially true for those of us who were not raised in the cultures, ways, and lands of our ancestors. We can both recover the knowledge of our own ancestors and listen to, learn from, and center the wisdom and struggles of the indigenous peoples on whose land we find ourselves.



## SHOCKS, SLIDES, AND SHIFTS

Puerto Rican social movements are directing the shocks and slides toward the shifts they need.

Shocks are moments of acute crisis (think: hurricane or mass shootings). Slides are slower, but equally devastating forms of social or ecological erosion (think: sea level rise or increase in mass incarceration). Shifts are the cultural and systemic changes we need to successfully implement

Scott Barbés Caminero of [La Jornada se Acabaron las Promesas](#) (“the promises are over”) talks about the fight for sovereignty in Puerto Rico in the face of PROMESA<sup>4</sup> and La Junta.

PHOTO BY BROOKE ANDERSON.

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4 PROMESA stands for Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act. “Promesa” means “promise” in Spanish.



a just transformation. The question is: how do we harness the shocks and direct the slides toward the shifts we need? Puerto Rican social movements provide us powerful examples of how to use shocks not to reconstruct what was but to radically remake governance toward real resilience.

When Hurricane María hit Puerto Rico in September of 2017, the impact was devastating. According to a study by the Harvard School of Public Health [published in the New York Times](#), over 4,000 people were killed during the hurricane and in its immediate aftermath. Three million people were left without power, many for months. Over 80% of the nation's agriculture was lost.

In the wake of the hurricane, in a process dubbed "disaster capitalism" by Naomi Klein and others, capitalists (developers, bankers, corporate CEOs, corrupt politicians, and other architects of the extractive economy) have used the shock of the hurricane to push their neoliberal agenda. That agenda is centered on the interests of capital and corporations which are polluting and intensifying the impacts of climate change and social inequality, even as they seek to profit from the shocks that result from these injustices. They are attempting to shutter public schools, displace communities, privatize all that remains in the public domain, and change laws to allow a massive transfer of agricultural land and commons to wealthy foreign interests. Specifically:

- ▶ The island is becoming a testing ground for privatization and a playground for the unrestricted power of the financial and tech industries.
- ▶ In February, then Governor of Puerto Rico, Ricardo Rosselló, announced a major privatization of K-12 education with a move toward student vouchers for charter schools. The move, aided by Trump Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, was just one step among many under what Rosselló called the "right-sizing" of government, including plans for the privatization of healthcare, the university system, and municipal governance.

- ▶ Hedge funds that are speculating on the Puerto Rican debt, and which are parties to Puerto Rico's bankruptcy dispute, went on bond buying sprees in the wake of Hurricane María.
- ▶ Vulture fund managers are pushing for an acceleration of austerity measures, further cuts to essential services, and higher profits for Wall Street stockholders.
- ▶ Rosselló was attempting to attract Wall Street and tech firms to come to the island to help drive its reconstruction. Nevertheless, despite the fact that Roselló is no longer in power, current Governor Wanda Vázquez maintains this perspective in favor of capital.
- ▶ A recent labor law reform cuts wages, benefits, and jobs.

On the other hand, frontline communities are confronting the powerful forces of disaster capitalism, and fighting for a Just Recovery—rebuilding Puerto Rico centering the wellbeing and emancipation of the people. **La Jornada Se Acabaron las Promesas** is a movement working for Puerto Rican liberation and decolonization. La Jornada has been a focal point of resistance and struggle against PROMESA and the Fiscal Control Board (FCB), or la junta. The movement emerged in 2016 when the PROMESA Law was passed in Puerto Rico. PROMESA is a U.S. law in which Congress authorized the creation of a Fiscal Control Board, imposed by the U.S. government but paid for with funds of the Puerto Rican people. This unelected fiscal control oversight board has total control of Puerto Rico's economy. When PROMESA was passed and the FCB was set up, various sectors of Puerto Rican civil society which had been fighting for decolonization for many decades all came together to design a strategy against the FCB and in favor of self-determination.

Specifically, social movements in Puerto Rico have been calling for an end to PROMESA; an end to la junta; and a cancellation of the approximately \$74 billion of illegitimate debt. However, more than any one specific demand, Puerto Rican social movements are moving forward hundreds of local projects that center and advance *sovereignty*.

As Jocelyn Velázquez Rodríguez, general coordinator of La Jornada Se Acabaron las Promesas, explains: "The imposition

of PROMESA has visibilized the crime of colonialism on the island. Exposing that reality has been part of our work. But our contribution has not been limited to that. We've been consistent in naming that for Puerto Rico to be prosperous, it is essential to break with neoliberalism, capitalism, and machismo, among other evils. We're committed to an economy that serves the needs of the people, not those of big capital. That's why we supported agro-ecological and community self-governed projects, fought the closure of schools, held political education days in defense of the land, and collaborated in the construction of the Mutual Support Centers, as well as in other efforts to help our people understand that in order to get ahead, we need to end the U.S. colonial regime."

If sovereignty is the ability of a people to self-govern, Puerto Ricans are asserting their right to multiple sovereignties— i.e. land/territorial sovereignty, food sovereignty, economic sovereignty through solidarity economy and energy independence. And to claim sovereignty, you have to not just critique current governance, but actually be prepared to govern.

From that place, Puerto Ricans are moving forward with mutual aid and self-governance at the heart of their political projects— from community-governed micro solar grids to people's forests and from social kitchens to occupying abandoned schools. And it's not just in response to the hurricane, it's both just recovery *and* the long term work of just transformation.

Organizers on the ground in Puerto Rico repeatedly told us, "The problem is not the hurricane. The problem is the system. The problem is colonialism." If the problem is colonialism, then just recovery must inherently be a decolonial project.





## FROM FIGHT THE BAD TO BUILD THE NEW

Puerto Rico shows us how to fight the bad and build the new; how to be both visionary and oppositional

[Casa Pueblo](#) is an independent community and cultural center in Adjuntas, Puerto Rico. It was founded in 1980 when the Puerto Rican government attempted to start open pit mining for silver, gold, and copper in 17 areas in the heart of the Puerto Rican mountains that would have caused a social and ecological catastrophe for 36,000 cuerdas (34,964 acres). The area threatened by mining—*Bosque del Pueblo* (the People’s Forest)—included a watershed that provides water to San Juan and much of

Melvin Torres from Casa Pueblo talks about the history of fighting a proposal to open-pit mine Bosque del Pueblo (“The People’s Forest”).

PHOTO BY BROOKE ANDERSON.

the rest of the island. As leaders at Casa Pueblo explain, “If the mines went in, it would be game over for water in Puerto Rico.”

The fight that Casa Pueblo waged against the mines wasn’t just about protecting “their” land, but about protecting the watersheds for an entire country. The organizers were [thinking in landscape strategies for watershed](#) protection and means for sustainable development. While the dominant economy pursued mines that would have put the entire island’s water supply at risk (mismanagement of home), Casa Pueblo was thinking in an ecosystem way and engaging in bioregional governance. It wasn’t just about the water or the forest, but about how human settlements relate to watersheds and to each other across watersheds, and how to govern in order to meet their responsibilities to the watershed and to each other for seven generations into the future. This is what it looks like to put living systems at the center, to manage home well.

It took 15 years, but Casa Pueblo not only stopped the mega mining project in 1995, but in 1996 they proposed (and won!) a new forest unit to be managed by the people—i.e. not controlled by either corporations (e.g. mining) nor the state, but governed by the people themselves.

The forest is now called Bosque del Pueblo. Casa Pueblo was the first community organization in Puerto Rico to manage a forest, but now there are several. As Arturo Massol Deyá of Casa Pueblo said, “This is the first time in the history of colonization of Puerto Rico that the people are actually controlling part of their territory.”

This is an example of deep democracy and ecological stewardship connected to place. When you reclaim land and return it to the commons, it creates an amazing opening for folks to return to right relationship and right governance structure, which is what Casa Pueblo has moved into.

As Tinti Deyá Díaz, founder of Casa Pueblo, explains, “We broke up with fear. With parents and children, we were able to create an army of conscience and defend our most precious resources: our people and our nature. All over the island, community movements are developing with such a committed





people leading them that I think the time will come when the [political] parties will disappear and the leaders of this country will emerge from those communities. And I hope to see it.”

In addition to Bosque del Pueblo, Casa Pueblo now runs a program called *Bosque Escuela la Olimpia* (the Forest School). In 2003, Casa Pueblo acquired 150 cuerdas of land to establish the school. The forest is the birthplace of the river Rio Grande de Arecibo that supplies drinking water to more than 1 million inhabitants. They have an *Escuela de Hongos y Líquenes* (School of Fungi and Lichens). They are also helping to restore Guaraguao de Bosque and Falcón de Sierra populations endemic to Puerto Rico, which after Hurricane María plummeted to a mere 19 birds. Casa Pueblo is providing resources to researchers to rehabilitate the falcons, fit them with tracking devices, and release them back into the wild. They are also taking the birds out of Adjuntas to other parts of the island to enrich the genetic diversity of the species.

Tinti Deyá Díaz, founder of Casa Pueblo, speaks at Casa Pueblo about the fight they lead against mining.

PHOTO BY BROOKE ANDERSON.





Jesús Vázquez of Organización Boricuá (left) talks about organizing for food sovereignty through mutual support efforts alongside Jovanna García Soto of Grassroots International (right).

PHOTO BY BROOKE ANDERSON.

## WHAT WE FEED GROWS

Puerto Rican social movements are putting their labor toward creating the solutions they need. One of the places this is most evident is in efforts toward land and food sovereignty.

### Organización Boricuá

In the late 1930's, Puerto Rico produced 65% of its own food<sup>5</sup>, a trend that continued on until the 1950s when industrialization of the island brought about an unprecedented expansion in food consumption and imports. Borikén had long been a land of farmers)—of *jíbaros* and *jíbaras* (the peasants of Puerto Rico)—a

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5 "The Food Supply of Puerto Rico." Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin 55, August 1940, Río Piedras.

people connected to their territory. With colonization and the acceleration of the neoliberal development model in Puerto Rico, people were purposefully displaced from rural and coastal communities and moved into the cities. With this push, the dignity and self-sufficiency of working with the land was taken away from them.

The land has been further degraded and contaminated by a federal and national government that greenlights excessive development on fertile land, enforces a conventional agribusiness model that promotes the use of agrottoxics such as pesticides, experiments with Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO's) through the Biotech industry, and promotes military testing grounds (for example, the bombing of Vieques). Post-Hurricane María, Puerto Rico has seen increased land grabs and forced displacement of farmers to make way for tourism and corporate parks.

Today, Puerto Rico imports approximately 85% of its food, mostly in U.S. vessels under the Jones Act through just one central port in the capital. These imports are (a) expensive, (b) fossil fuel intensive, and (c) vulnerable to food shortages during disasters such as Hurricane María when ports and roads become inoperable. As many food sovereignty activists in Puerto Rico have noted, if Puerto Rico once grew most of its own food (in addition to the food it grew to satiate its colonizers, coffee for Spain and sugarcane for the U.S.), it can grow its own food again. This was also true of New York City until the 1940s (which had a population of 7.4 million people, larger than Puerto Rico's current population) and Paris until the 1970s. These were not small cities then, and they were eating mostly out of their own foodsheds (meaning that they were sourcing their food from within their own ecosystems).

However, if you want freedom, you need land. You need access to the resources necessary to turn your labor into a dignified, productive, and ecologically-sustainable livelihood. The U.S. has used Puerto Rico's food dependence to instill fear in people that if the archipelago's colony status were to go away, there wouldn't be any food. In this context, growing food is a form of practicing sovereignty. Building up this type of food sovereignty that directly challenges colonization is what Organización Boricúa does.



[Organización Boricuá de Agricultura Ecológica de Puerto Rico](#) is a national platform with 30 years of history composed of farmers, *jíbaros* (peasants), farm workers, and food sovereignty activists from rural, coastal, and urban communities. Organización Boricuá is a decentralized base group organization with a multiregional and intergenerational diverse membership that holds a network of agroecological farms, working groups, and educational projects in the islands of Borikén, Puerto Rico. The organization is a vehicle of transformation towards a just, sustainable, free, sovereign, democratic, healthy, and happy Puerto Rico. Organización Boricuá promotes and practices agroecology as a vehicle to achieve food sovereignty and social, environmental, and climate justice. The collective actively defends the national patrimony, the natural commons, and the families and communities that work with the land building sovereignty, supporting each other, and living collectively from their respective territories in the archipelago. Organización Boricuá has a presence on all of the regions and islands of the country and is part of the international movement of the Latinamerican Coordinator of Peasant Organizations, La Vía Campesina, the Climate Justice Alliance, and the People's Agroecology Process.

As Katia Avilés Vázquez of Organización Boricuá explains: "They came after our culture, our food, our seeds. Now with PROMESA, they are coming after what keeps us here: our lands. While people were forcing ex-governor Ricardo Roselló's resignation, the Puerto Rican government tried to pass under the radar a complete overhaul of land use practices that would facilitate the sale and development of land, all in the middle of an economic crisis where Puerto Ricans are being pushed out of their homes and lands and the lots sold at *pescao abombao* (attractive prices) to rich investors or U.S. upper class. Organización Boricuá is working with allies to secure access to land to protect biodiversity, forests, farmland, as well as rural, coastal and urban residents."

"We're fighting to have enough land to produce the food we need, and to have enough water in the cuencas [[basins, or watersheds](#)]," said Jesús Vázquez of Organización Boricuá.





Since Hurricane María, Organización Boricuá has been organizing solidarity brigades (a form of mutual aid) in which all the small farmers work together to rebuild another farmer's farm. It's not just working on each other's land, but each exchange includes political education, an educational workshop (teaching forest regeneration, sustainable agriculture, and animal husbandry), building tools, sharing culturally and ecologically appropriate seeds, and enjoying a meal together. These brigades not only build community and membership in the organization but also help to mitigate the impacts of climate chaos on small farmers by collectively spreading the risk. Immediately after the hurricane, the Climate Justice Alliance sent delegations (in which Grassroots International participated) from the U.S. to participate in these brigades. As Jesús Vázquez said, "Climate change makes it hard to predict. Just when farmers start earning something, something happens—a drought, a hurricane."

Organización Boricuá is working to create markets and supply chains for people to source food from small farmers in Puerto Rico, especially from families that are dependent on the land for their livelihood. They're developing a local organic certification

Norysell Massanet of Organización Boricuá shows Yulissa Arce of Grassroots International how to separate seedlings that are ready for replanting.

PHOTO BY BROOKE ANDERSON.

committee. Whereas USDA standards are constantly under attack from the giants of industrial, chemical-dependent agriculture, local standards are a great example of the devolution of accountability down to the scale of what you're trying to govern.

While they build the new, they continue to fight the bad. Organización Boricuá has been organizing against Monsanto, Dupont, and Bayer's takeover (for testing of pesticides and GMOs) of much of the fertile land, public land, and parts of the island with access to water in Puerto Rico. Organización Boricuá is also doing work with their members to limit genetic contamination from GMOs. "They experiment here and implement elsewhere. They don't just hurt us, but use us to hurt everyone else. That's how colonization works," reflected Jovanna García Soto of Grassroots International.

In an era in which concepts like "sustainable," "agroecology" and "permaculture" are so easily co-opted, Organización Boricuá makes it clear when they say: "If you're not working with the community, you're not doing agroecology."

Women farmers in the southwest coast of Puerto Rico (for instance, at finca La Botica de la Tierra) affiliated with Organización Boricuá grow food, raise animals, and share knowledge through workshops on regenerative agriculture.

Norysell Massanet of Organización Boricuá explains: "The hurricane impacted the population of Puerto Rico in different ways. It depended on your social status. The lower your economic status, the more vulnerable you were to disaster. We depend on the land. For the farming community, a disaster like Hurricane María was emotionally draining. You wake up and it looked like a bomb exploded in the area. Even if you know trees will recover, leaves will grow back, birds will return... the silence after the hurricane was so distressing for the whole community. It was a concrete piece of information that we know what climate change means. At one point right after the hurricane I thought to myself, 'Wow, you're trying to do this, grow food and manage resources, in a climate change scenario?' I was scared, really scared. I lost my house. I was living in a tent. Every morning I would ask myself, 'When do you stop?' That question remained unanswered. I just started





again. I just kept going. What [Organización] Boricúa did was paramount for people like me. Every farmer that Boricúa holds dearly knows each other. Just having Boricúa looking over us was beautiful. Grassroots International's support for Boricúa was also paramount, for it to do this kind of work."

As movements in Puerto Rico uplift the right to land, housing, and food, increasingly communities are looking to the possibility of doing land occupations (*rescate de tierra*—literally, "land rescue")—such as the successful occupation of Huerto Urbano Callejon Trujillo in Ponce—and using community land trust models to then help hold that land.

### **Comedores Sociales de Puerto Rico and Cocina Rebelde**

Just as Organización Boricúa is addressing food sovereignty from the producer side of things, so too is there a movement to address food insecurity from the consumer side of things.

Even before Hurricane María, 35% of the island was food insecure<sup>6</sup>. However, similar to energy outages, the combination

Giovanni Roberto of Comedores Sociales speaks as volunteers behind him serve a meal at Cocina Rebelde. Comedores Sociales' slogan is "Yo no como austeridad, yo cocino dignidad" ("I don't eat austerity, I cook dignity").

PHOTO BY BROOKE ANDERSON.

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6 Puerto Rico Food Security Survey released by the Puerto Rico Institute of Statistics, <https://www.primerahora.com/noticias/puerto-rico/nota/radiografiaalhambray-lanecesidadenpuertorico-1346034>.





Virgen “Socky” Vázquez , leader of the Mutual Aid/Support Center and one of the Cocina Rebelde cooks.  
PHOTO BY BROOKE ANDERSON.

of a food crisis and total lack of government aid in the aftermath of the storm created the conditions for people to develop people-to-people, or mutual aid, solutions—like “comedores sociales,” or community kitchens. The comedores sociales are not free. People can choose to either work or donate in exchange for food. In that way, it’s a reclaiming of labor, reclaiming the muscle of providing for ourselves. It is self-governance of food.

**Cocina Rebelde** (Rebel Kitchen) is part of that comedores sociales movement. Giovanni Roberto, an organizer with Cocina Rebelde and Comedores Sociales de Puerto Rico, elaborates, “We work with the people, for the people, in order to organize the people. We ask ourselves: ‘What could we do to fortify social change projects? How do we do it in a way that does not depend on anyone else: not on the state, not on the Federales [U.S. government], not on the foundations? How do we build our independence?’ Our response has been to increase the flavor and the rebellion/rebelliousness. It’s not an end in and of itself. It’s a way of social organization. It’s a way to train young people. Asking people to do something makes

their participation possible. Organization has to be based on people's needs, not just an ideology."

For instance, in the aftermath of Hurricane María, Virgen "Socky" Vázquez was the only person in her neighborhood with a gas stove. People all around her home smelled coffee and came. Eventually, she and others were feeding 500 people per day. Now she is one of the most consistent volunteers at Cocina Rebelde.

For Comedores Sociales, hunger and poverty are the result of the capitalist and colonial system in which the control of land and food has been an instrument of domination. The purpose of Comedores Sociales is to combat hunger by collectivizing solutions. One of those solutions, under the premise of increasing flavor and rebellion, is Cocina Rebelde.

Cocina Rebelde is a solidarity economy project with a feminist perspective. It was born in response to the question: "How do we build our independence?" The idea is to break dependency and be able to govern. The resources obtained through Cocina Rebelde help to sustain the Comedores Sociales permanently, as well as to provide salaries. In the development of this economic project, alliances with other projects have been key to strengthening and developing a solidarity economy in Puerto Rico. For example, Cocina Rebelde sends the organic material it produces to Huerto Semillas to make compost. Cocina Rebelde also shares its kitchen with other projects, such as Aguas Frescas Resistencia. In the future, they are hoping to source more of their food from agroecological farmers.

The comedores sociales have also played important roles in supporting movements on the ground. For instance, they provided food for the women's sit-in outside of La Fortaleza (the governor's mansion) and many of the mass mobilizations during the momentous and successful #RickyRenuncia protests. Comedores sociales also organized a protest outside of the capital. In doing so, they gave people ways of being protagonists in the movement. It gave people a way to participate, which made them more comfortable participating in other ways, such as in the popular assemblies that determined the collective demands.





Arturo Massol Deyá of Casa Pueblo talks about their work to build an “energy insurrection” in Puerto Rico.

PHOTO BY BROOKE ANDERSON.

## IF WE'RE NOT PREPARED TO GOVERN, WE'RE NOT PREPARED TO WIN

We must not just govern under existing structures, but rather remake the structure of governance to be more democratic and ecologically responsive. We must engage in the daily practice of self-governance.

Puerto Rico imports most of its energy—which, similar to food sovereignty, both means that it is more expensive and fossil fuel intensive, but also leaves the island vulnerable to energy shortages and outages in times of disaster. In this context, [Casa Pueblo](#) stepped into the



fight for energy independence<sup>7</sup> in Puerto Rico. Casa Pueblo was founded out of a fight to stop open pit mining in the 1980s (see above). At the time of Hurricane María, Casa Pueblo had 45 solar panels and 12 batteries providing energy to the community center—including a community radio station, *mariposario* (butterfly sanctuary), music school, gallery, and gift shop. Suddenly what had been something of an anomaly with its solar panels became an “energy oasis.” People came from all over Adjuntas to store refrigerated medicine, plug in their respiratory equipment, and charge their cell phones.

Adjuntas was one of the last spots on the island reached by FEMA, which arrived a full month after the hurricane hit. At that point, FEMA’s blue tarps (used to temporarily cover homes until more permanent repairs can be made) were of little help. During the hurricane, Casa Pueblo distributed 14,000 solar lanterns, reducing the risk of fire by candlelight and the vulnerability of elders. They equipped an additional 10 homes with extra energy for dialysis and small refrigerators (for insulin, antibiotics, cold water), to meet critical health needs. They distributed water filters, food, medicine, and set up health clinics and cultural activists. With their solar power, they set up a public satellite phone, which people came in long lines to use to contact their families. They also recorded 1 minute messages from residents and played them on the air of their solar-powered radio station.

Post hurricane, Casa Pueblo has built out the island’s first community-controlled microgrid. It is no longer an “energy oasis” but rather has outfitted an additional 55 homes (nicknamed *Cucubanos*, after the Puerto Rican word for lightning bugs) with solar energy, 89 full-size refrigerators in

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7 In the U.S., many organizers use the term “energy democracy” to describe the fight to shift energy from a commodity controlled by corporations to a shared resource with a decentralized, resilient, transparent model that is driven by and benefits workers and communities. In Puerto Rico, organizers are using the term “energy independence” to describe their vision and principle, as Arturo Massol Deyá of Casa Pueblo does below.

**IN 2010, WE WERE DEFENDING OURSELVES FROM A PIPELINE. NOW WE ARE ON THE OFFENSIVE. NOW WE ARE THE THREAT. WE'RE CALLING FOR AN ENERGY INSURRECTION. WE'RE NOT GOING TO WAIT FOR THE GOVERNMENT. WE'RE GOING TO UNPLUG OURSELVES. MASSOL DEYÁ**

solar-powered homes in addition to a barber shop (as Arturo Massol Deyá of Casa Pueblo noted “now everyone who goes to the barber shop talks about solar!”), 2 hardware stores, an agricultural center, an elder home, the fire station, 5 mini markets (where you can get food even if you don’t have cash since during the hurricane, people couldn’t get cash out of ATMs), a restaurant (“during the next hurricane, this will be a social kitchen”), a pizzeria, and two rooms of Bosque Escuela. Casa Pueblo charges the businesses

in order to offset the cost of installing solar for low-income residents.

Securing 89 full size refrigerators on solar is about using energy independence to leverage food security and community health. Renal and kidney failure tripled post-hurricane because of lack of access not just to dialysis but to healthy food. Some people ate junk food for months before they had access to fresh food again. “The next hurricane, Maria Martinez will have dialysis,” Massol Deyá says<sup>8</sup>.

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8 These were Arturo’s words when we visited Casa Pueblo in June 2019, and in fact when the next hurricane, Hurricane Dorian, threatened Puerto Rico, this is what Arturo sent out: “Dear friends of Casa Pueblo:

Facing the first tropical threat of the season, Dorian, in Adjuntas, Casa Pueblo is better prepared than in the past. Our Radio Casa Pueblo 1020 operates its studios and the transmission tower with solar energy, having broken total dependence of PREPA in 2017. In [casapueblo.org](http://casapueblo.org) you can find the link to the radio and our weather station. In addition, we have alternative Internet and satellite telephony systems so as not to depend on commercial infrastructure and remain incommunicate as happened after Hurricane Maria.

In the event of a collapse of the traditional energy system in the area, Casa Pueblo will once again be the solar energy oasis for the community, where people can recharge their equipment or operate respiratory therapy machines. In addition, several grocery stores in Vegas Abajo, La Olimpia, Vacas Saltillo, Guilarte and Tanamá are equipped with photovoltaic systems to access food and serve as a community refrigerator. Families that require peritoneal dialysis have in their home’s energy security with photovoltaic installations. The Rest. Vista al Río of Tito Rivera would be the town’s social dining room if necessary. In addition, 60 houses operate as Casa Pueblo with solar energy; 50 houses have solar refrigerators installed; the Fire Station, the medical emergency unit, the elderly home, two small hardware stores and more. And all by community initiative, with the support of all of you. Ah! And if you’re in need of a haircut, the barber shop solar Pérez could open without



For these homes and businesses, solar used to be the alternative, or backup, source of energy. Now PREPA<sup>9</sup>, the energy utility, is the backup. The solar that Casa Pueblo has installed allows users to flip a transfer switch to choose their energy source. Energy bills for solar users in Adjuntas have gone down from \$85/month on PREPA (fossil fuels) to \$5/month on solar. Casa Pueblo is now working to bring “second life” used car batteries to Adjuntas to serve as solar storage.

Adjuntas was in the last 30% of Puerto Rico to get its energy restored. A significant proportion of FEMA’s budget goes to overhead. The money goes to buy things from U.S. companies, and does not support the Puerto Rican economy. In the reconstruction, they rewired Puerto Rico the way it was before—energy from fossil fuels extracted from somewhere else. According to Casa Pueblo, Puerto Ricans pay \$300M per year for fossil fuels.

Casa Pueblo organized a big *Marcha del Sol* in Adjuntas to visibilize the fight for energy independence. The march brought national and international attention to their efforts. Massol Deyá stated “Adjuntas, a town of only 17,000 people in the mountains, is becoming a reference point not just for FEMA but for the whole planet. We’re not doing a barber shop free of fossil fuels. We’re doing a planet free from fossil fuels.” He went on to explain:

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problems while the free movie for next Saturday at the Solar Cinema of Casa Pueblo is still on schedule.

Adjuntas is different today and continues an extraordinary route of change. Not only in “resilience” but in mentality. We know that, as a community, we can protect ourselves and transform our reality. There begins the true process of decolonization. Our solidarity is with everyone on the Island and the Caribbean. Thank you all for your consistent support. This energy and community insurrection is in progress.

#AutogestiónComunitaria #AdjuntasPuebloSolar

Arturo Massol-Deyá

Board of Directors”

9 PREPA is the government-owned utility responsible for electricity generation, power distribution, and power transmission. Then-Governor Roselló signed a new law to privatize the utility. The law establishes the transfer of the operation and maintenance of the transmission and distribution of energy to a public-private alliance, the Puerto Rico Public Private Partnership.



“Energy is the capacity to do work. We don’t enjoy the wealth made from our work. One way to decolonize Puerto Rico is in practical terms: create energy independence. We can be producers, not consumers. We don’t need coal and gas. We have sun and wind. In 2010, we were defending ourselves from a pipeline. Now we are on the offensive. Now we are the threat. We’re calling for an energy insurrection. We’re not going to wait for the government. We’re going to unplug ourselves.”

But the point isn’t solar. It’s about who produces, distributes, and controls energy. The point is governance. As an example,

even if FEMA *had* been able to get there the day after the hurricane, they wouldn’t have had the relationships, trust, or understanding of the community that Casa Pueblo does to decide

who to prioritize for solar installation. That restaurant they decided to help solarize? The owner was the one who cooked every day for the elderly for free during the hurricane. So they know that if they solarize his business, he’ll do it again. They’re building resiliency based on deep relationships. It’s about governing at the scale of the thing you’re trying to govern. Just transformation and just recovery are about redistribution of resources and power down to frontline communities to build a visionary economy for life.

**JUST TRANSFORMATION AND JUST RECOVERY ARE ABOUT REDISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES AND POWER DOWN TO FRONTLINE COMMUNITIES TO BUILD A VISIONARY ECONOMY FOR LIFE.**



## IF IT'S NOT SOULFUL, IT'S NOT STRATEGIC

Art and cultural workers are at the center of Puerto Rican social movements.

Puerto Rican movements exemplify the principle of the Just Transition framework, “If it’s not soulful, it’s not strategic”—that we must become creators, not just consumers, of culture; that we must ground our work in joy, play, and the wisdom of our ancestors; that we must make the revolution irresistible; that if folks don’t see themselves in it and uplifted by it, it won’t win; that we must organize to change the story.

Ausuba, an all-women bomba group, gives a workshop on bomba in Bartolo, Puerto Rico.

PHOTO BY BROOKE ANDERSON.





Dey Hernández Vázquez of AgitArte leads a workshop using their 170-foot painted scroll depicting the resistance and resilience of the Puerto Rican people.

PHOTO BY BROOKE ANDERSON.

**Bomba** is Afro-Puerto Rican music, characterized by a call-and-response or interactive relationship between the singer, dancer, and drummers. Bomba was developed by enslaved Africans in the sugar plantations as a means of communication and as a source of spiritual strength and resistance. It was at the bomba dances that enslaved Africans celebrated births and unions, and also planned rebellions.

**Plena** (which used to be called *periodico cantado* or “sung newspaper”) is another Puerto Rican musical tradition that came out of Puerto Rican working and lower classes (brothels, bars, etc.) as a form of social commentary and parody.

**Perreo**, a form of dancing or twerking associated with reggaeton, played an important role in the 2019 uprising against then Gov. Ricky Reselló. A popular slogan of the rebellion was *Sin Perreo No Hay Revolución* (“There’s no Revolution Without Perreo”). The *Colectiva Feminista en Construcción*—along with the queer, trans and non-binary



youth—used *perreo* to generate freedom spaces and people’s political power during the uprising. The *perreo combativo* was an important collective action that articulated political critique, resisted state censorship and criminalization, and confronted racism, homophobia, and misogyny<sup>10</sup>.

**Místicas.** At many Puerto Rico social movement gatherings, organizers open the space with a “mística” as a way to call in the ancestors, ground participants in culture, connect with heart energy and with one another, and create the collective space.

**AgitArte** is “an organization of working class artists and cultural organizers who create projects and practices of cultural solidarity with grassroots struggles against oppression, and propose alternatives that generate possibilities for transformations in our world.” They are comprised of artists, designers, puppeteers, musicians, and organizers working with art at the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ideology to use art to build social movement. AgitArte is an integral part of the network of mutual aid in Puerto Rico that started after Hurricane María.

**CULTURE HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE GROUNDING FOR ANY TRANSFORMATIONAL SHIFTS IN OUR SOCIETY. SO IT ONLY MAKES SENSE FOR US TO USE ART AND CULTURAL WORK TO CONSTRUCT AND ENVISION A NEW SOCIETY BASED ON FUNDAMENTAL VALUES WHICH CONTRADICT THE COMMON SENSE OF DOMINANT IDEOLOGY. SUGEILY RODRÍGUEZ LEBRON**

One of those artists, Sugeily Rodríguez Lebron of AgitArte explains, “Culture has always been the grounding for any transformational shifts in our society. So it only makes sense for us to use art and cultural work to construct and envision a new society based on fundamental values which contradict the common sense of dominant ideology.”

As one example of using art to envision a new society, AgitArte developed a 170- foot long **Painted scroll** that depicts the history of Puerto Rico, from Indigenous Peoples through

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2019/08/07/dj-sessions-puerto-rico-protests>

colonization, freedom struggles, Hurricane María and into a liberatory future, which they've toured all over Puerto Rico and the U.S. as an educational tool to talk about "struggle and resistance to U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico and its diaspora."

AgitArte also houses and supports a theatre collective called Papel Machete through the Popular Education and Performance Project (PEPP). Papel Machete is "a workers' street and community theater collective dedicated to puppetry, masks, and performing objects for educational and agitational performances as a means of supporting the struggles of the working class and marginalized communities of Puerto Rico."

Inside the space that currently hosts Papel Machete exists a workshop space called Casa Taller. Casa Taller is run by the permanent resident artist and member of the collective group Papel Machete, Sugeily Rodríguez Lebron. Aside from serving as a space for creative development of our members, Casa Taller is also a space of resistance and collective emancipation through popular education. Workshop space has strengthened AgitArte's ties with the community in Santurce, Puerto Rico through the development of new projects that have allowed them to continue to collectively contribute to Puerto Rico's social liberation.

Additionally, post-Hurricane María when the government was moving an aggressive program to shut down public schools and move in private charters, AgitArte created "a social media poster campaign, under the hashtag #defiendelaeducaciónpública ("defend public education)", to highlight educators, parents, and students engaged in the struggle to save public education."

According to Jorge Díaz Ortiz, AgitArte's Executive and Artistic Director, "Cultural organizing and art has always been at the center of radical transformational change. The way we express our struggles, envision the future and construct our paths to liberation are tied to the practices and ideas of the new culture of solidarity we are creating."

# Jardín de Plantas Medicinales

## Farmacopea Caribeña

Digestivas Respiratorias Malestares y Dolores

Yerba Buena, Pachuli, Juntón, Sabila,  
Flor de Jamaica, Orégano Brujo, Aguacate,  
Poleo, pasote, Saúco, Mangonilla,  
Higuera, Cúrcuma, Yerba dulce,  
Saúco, Limoncillo, Menta ...

Guarapillo: se  
prepara con  
agua hirviendo.

Nitrógeno

Potasio

Fósforo

Tintura: Remedio  
medicinal preparado  
con alcohol (vodka)  
rum

Agua de Fuego

Baños

## IF IT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO, WE HAVE EVERY RIGHT TO DO IT

Centros de Apoyo Mutuo occupied an abandoned school and turned it into community housing.

The movement in Puerto Rico, especially post-Hurricane María, is a battle between enclosure and the commons (what Puerto Ricans often call bienes comunes de la naturaleza)—or between privatization and access to collective resources to make a dignified, sustainable livelihood. It is about whether Puerto Rico will continue to concentrate wealth and power in the hands of the few

Mural of the Farmacopea Caribeña medicinal garden at Centro de Apoyo Mutuo Jíbaro Bartolo in Lares.  
PHOTO BY BROOKE ANDERSON.



# MUTUAL AID GROUPS WITHIN P.R. & U.S. MAINLAND



Some of the organizations that received relief support after Hurricane Maria's devastating impacts—as well as some organizations that did not receive help—have since undertaken the work of local community transformation in order to not be forced to rely on charity. This map tells the narrative of the emergence of self-reliance on the island by featuring organizations that are following the principles of mutual aid.

To those who are off the island and looking to send direct support to Puerto Rico, please consider financially supporting these projects. If you want to send support through ideas, labor, or supplies, please first ask the people what they need. Contact them, and be patient as they may receive a lot of emails. Please understand that they are working and that many don't have electricity.

A note from the presenters: If you want to coordinate, email us. Tell us what you want to offer, and if there are any restrictions. Be aware that we might not take it if it interrupts our work. We have a suggestion for writing emails: subject lines: clearly state "I have (they) or I know how to do (this)". Concrete offers will stand out in inundated inboxes.

Luis Rodríguez - Proyecto de Apoyo Mutuo Mariana, Puerto Rico: [luis@apoyomutumariana.com](mailto:luis@apoyomutumariana.com)  
 Jessica Santos - Community organizer in the diaspora, New York City: [jessicasantos@gmail.com](mailto:jessicasantos@gmail.com)  
 Raquela Delgado Valentin - MariaFund, Puerto Rico: [raquela@mariafund.org](mailto:raquela@mariafund.org)

For more information and a full list of clickable links, please visit [publiclab.org/csf14](http://publiclab.org/csf14).

## FOR US, BY US: A NETWORK OF SUPPORT

On the island of Puerto Rico, the devastation of Hurricane Maria has left a trail of destruction. In the aftermath of the storm, many people have been left without power, water, or food. In the face of this crisis, a network of mutual aid groups has emerged, providing support to those in need. These groups are not just helping people survive, but they are also working to build a more resilient and self-sufficient community. They are sharing resources, skills, and knowledge, and they are working to address the root causes of the crisis. This network of support is a testament to the power of community and the ability of people to come together in times of crisis.



## MAP INFORMATION

1. Brigada Solidaria del Oeste: Coalition of community-based organizations focused on community empowerment.
2. Casa Pueblo: Non-profit environmental working and community-based organization in Adjuntas.
3. Casa Taller: Initiative by social partner union group Agente in the neighborhood of Santurce.
4. Centro de Apoyo Mutuo Barrio (CAM Barrio): Center to support the neighborhood of Canales, Barrio, Santa Rosa, Barrio, and Barrio de San Juan in San Juan.
5. Centro de Apoyo Mutuo Barrio (CAM Barrio): Center for community support in San Juan, focused specifically on the neighborhood of Barrio.
6. Centro de Apoyo Mutuo de Caguas: Center for community support and food security in Caguas. Provides social and educational workshops, and more.
7. Centro de Apoyo Mutuo de Cayey (CAM Cayey): Center for community support in Cayey.
8. Centro de Apoyo Mutuo de Ponce (CAM de Ponce): Center for community support in Ponce. Provides food security, food sovereignty, and other support in the neighborhood of Ponce.
9. Centro de Apoyo Mutuo de San Juan (CAM de San Juan): Center for community support in San Juan. Provides food security, food sovereignty, and other support in the neighborhood of San Juan.
10. Centro de Apoyo Mutuo de San Juan (CAM de San Juan): Center for community support in San Juan. Provides food security, food sovereignty, and other support in the neighborhood of San Juan.
11. Proyecto Apoyo Mutuo Maricao: Center for community support in Maricao. Provides food security, food sovereignty, and other support in the Maricao neighborhood.
12. Centro de Apoyo Mutuo de Vieques (CAM de Vieques): Center for community support in Vieques. Provides food security, food sovereignty, and other support in the Vieques neighborhood.

Map of Mutual Aid groups within Puerto Rico and the United States, created by [PublicLab.org](http://PublicLab.org) in July of 2018.  
 PHOTO BY BROOKE ANDERSON.

or return land, labor, and life into community control. Community control must begin with and be in dynamic relationship to indigenous sovereignty.

One of the incredible things coming out of the hurricane was the experience that people had of the government disappearing and communities instead learning to collectively meet their own needs. When communication and transportation were restored to the archipelago, people retained some of that sense of "we can do this ourselves," or ability to practice self-governance in place.

At the heart of building that radical self-governance in Puerto Rico is the Centros de Apoyo Mutuo (Centers of Mutual Aid). The Centros de Apoyo Mutuo represent people-to-people, self-governed solutions. As such, they exist in direct opposition to the colonial relationship and la Junta in Puerto Rico. This strong independence from not just the state, but also from funders, 501c3 non-profits, and often paid leadership.

As Scott Barbés Caminero from La Jornada se Acabaron las Promesas explained: “When Hurricane María hit, we got to experience what independence was like. The radio, telephone were all out. The state disappeared. The movements that jumped in showed what Puerto Rico could be like. We established Mutual Aid Centers to attend to the needs of the people, with the people as protagonists. It [the weeks following Hurricane María] wasn’t a rally. It was a daily struggle to survive.”

The Centros de Apoyo Mutuo are building self-determination by meeting the needs of the people in many different ways. Some centros (community hubs) include areas to stay during disasters while others are an agricultural schools, healing centers, comedores sociales and more. Some of the components of Centros de Apoyo Mutuo are: solar energy, clean water, housing, food and health, rescue, multiplication and distribution of seeds, managing trauma and healing, and political formation and organizing.

As one example of the work of the Centros de Apoyo Mutuo, Bartolo is one of the communities where the government has shuttered schools as part of the manufactured “debt crisis.” After the hurricane, the community cut the chains to an abandoned school, cleaned out the building, and converted it into community housing. The building has 14 apartments and now houses some 12 families. They are also practicing agroecology to achieve food sovereignty. Residents are growing medicinal gardens full of plants that aid in respiratory, skin, and digestive ailments, as well as for pain management. Also on the grounds are a theatre cafe run entirely by the youth, a communal kitchen for small-scale commercial use, a computer and media lab, basketball courts, an art room, and a museum and gallery. The housing, and many other parts of the complex, are powered by solar energy.

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A resident leaves his apartment in Bartolo, where residents occupied a school closed by the government and converted it into solar-powered community housing with a theatre, media lab, collective kitchen, cultural museum, and medicinal garden.

PHOTO BY BROOKE ANDERSON.

Elisa Sanchez of Centros de Apoyo Mutuo Jíbaro Bartolo explains: "The School was closed in 2015. After the hurricane, a group of people from the community rescued and occupied it with the support of Centro de Apoyo Mutuo Jíbaro Bartolo. In this process we have integrated several community projects but the priority of rescuing and occupying was to offer housing to a group of small farmers from the community that had been abandoned by the government after the hurricane and a group of single women families who lost their rental homes that were not repaired by the landlords. When the project started, we made several alliances such as with the Architecture School to make a design to transform the classrooms into homes. We currently have 14 apartments and 12 families living in the school. We set up a solar energy system that provides energy to homes, Teatro Café, and the computer room. We are developing a project to rescue the agricultural school (founded in 1922, this was the first agricultural vocational school in Puerto Rico that had an agricultural cooperative) and we are forming



a micro-enterprise cooperative to give jobs to community members and support local farmers. Right now we are making a pastel (traditional Puerto Rican Food) production with the intention of forming a pastel (and other community traditional foods) factory in the future. We are also implementing agroecological projects planting bananas, platanos, coffee, tomatoes, and beets, among others, and growing animals.”

The Centros de Apoyo Mutuo Jibaros (in rural areas) want to see peasant-jíbara communities reconstituted as the nucleus of grassroots power capable of self-governing their own sustainable development and to resist the structural forces (for instance, the state, capital, ecological collapse)—that have promoted the displacement of the people living in the mountains.

The peasant, or jíbaro, vision overlaps with what they call community sovereignty. The concept of community sovereignty refers to a proactive relational process of grassroots power in which inventiveness and resistance come together to create self-management initiatives that break the relations of domination and subordination—in body and spirit—to which the peasant-jibara communities are subject. The community sovereignty is constituted by four interconnected dimensions: food/medicinal sovereignty, educational/recreational sovereignty, economic sovereignty, and organizational sovereignty. The jíbaro CAM's assert that the basis for a grassroots counter-power begins with these dimensions of community sovereignty and empower communities to resist displacement. Some of the Centros de Apoyo Mutuo are using instruments of social action coming from the peasant jíbara's traditions and new social formations such as cooperatives, subsistence agriculture, traditional medicine, and audiovisual media.

The cooperative movement has a strong history in Puerto Rico. There is a cooperative of cooperatives, Cooperativas de Ahorro y Credito, a governance entity for all the cooperatives that is anchored by the credit unions. After Hurricane María, credit unions provided their members with access to their cash when the banks were rationing ATM withdrawals due to lack of cash. This is one way that everyday Puerto Ricans got to experience the value of self-governed institutions such as cooperatives and credit unions.



Elisa Sanchez of Centros de Apoyo Mutuo Jíbaro Bartolo (left) speaks with members of the delegation.

PHOTO BY BROOKE ANDERSON.

Many Puerto Rican social movement leaders repeatedly expressed that they were most successful when they were both grounded in a clear analysis of the material conditions on the ground and a vision for Just Transformation and base-building and organizing around people's immediate needs. If we organize right, they said, we can build structures that meet people's needs in times of crisis (during both the shocks and slides) through mutual aid, and where people find themselves building a just transformation even before they necessarily start identifying as "activists" or "leftists."

# BUILDING A MOVEMENT OF MANY MOVEMENTS

Building grassroots solidarity & internationalism across borders.

Political formation (or political education) and mutual exchange with social movements around the world are key strategies through which Puerto Rican social movements are growing their militancy and strengthening their political power to achieve just transformation, self-determination, and sovereignty. Through these learning exchanges, they are building trusting relationships with other Global South social movements, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean.

For example, los Comedores Sociales, la Jornada se Acabaron las Promesas, and la Colectiva Feminista en Construcción have all been sending leaders to Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), the Landless Workers Movement of Brazil, which is also a Grassroots International partner. The MST is the largest peasant movement in Latin America with 1.5 million members. For 35 years, the MST has been defending the rights of peasant families to land, challenging the industrial agriculture model, and settling thousands of families on reclaimed, unproductive land in Brazil. Puerto Rican social movement leaders have been attending MST's radical political school to learn strategies for land occupation and how the MST organizes such a massive movement.

In the words of MST, learning exchanges and political formation “include education of the mind, body, and spirit to support people in fully engaging in collective movement work, share skills and techniques, build critical analyses of current contexts, and develop strategic action plans to transform reality toward one that is more just.”

Women from Organización Boricua, Comedores Sociales, and other Indigenous-jíbara women have also been participating in the Zapatistas Women Encounters to learn more about



how the Zapatistas are building their autonomy and self-governance. Grassroots International has been supporting Zapatista autonomy work through Enlace Civil—a civil society organization founded at the behest of, and serving the expressed interest of, the autonomous indigenous movement in Chiapas.

Additionally, the Centros de Apoyo Mutuo Jíbaros organize a learning exchange with Grassroots International partner OFRANEH (Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña / Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras) to learn about how the Afro-Indigenous Garifuna People in Honduras defend their ancestral territories and exchange ancestral agriculture and agroecological practices.

Internationalism is at the center of Puerto Rican social movements' ideologies and praxis. According to Comedores Sociales, internationalism and the connections with other movements around the world allow them to deeply understand Puerto Rican political realities because what is happening in Puerto Rico is not new. For example, while the debt has more recently become a focal point of Puerto Rican social movements, other countries have been organizing around this since the 1980s. Movements in Puerto Rico are taking advantage of the wisdom of their siblings in Haiti that have already faced this struggle. Also, Organización Boricúa has been building strong alliances and exchanging knowledge and strategies with peasants in the Caribbean to strengthen food sovereignty and build power at the bioregional level.

This social movement exchange and coordination across and between bioregions—developing critical mass in place and then radiating out into other places—is what the Just Transition framework calls trans-local organizing.



## DISMANTLING HETEROPATRIARCHY AS A PILLAR OF THE EXTRACTIVE ECONOMY

Women and queers, bringing a “doble militancia” (double militancy), are leading Puerto Rico’s liberation movement.

So much of who is holding down social movement building in Puerto Rico are women and queer women. We got a chance to meet with la Colectiva Feminista en Construcción (Feminist Collective in Formation), an anti-racist, anti-imperialist collective from different walks of life, including working-class women, queer women, and women of

Vanessa Contreras Capó speaks about La Colectiva Feminista en Construcción.

PHOTO BY BROOKE ANDERSON.

different ages and social groups who converged through various resistance struggles in Puerto Rico, including student movements, anti-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-patriarchal struggles, and LGBTTIQ movements. Inspired

by the Combahee River Collective, the collective mobilizes to create popular power, collective political analysis and consciousness, holds feminist schools, and trains its members to be

spokespeople. Vanessa Contreras Capó called it a “doble militancia” (double militancy) that women hold in social movements in Puerto Rico (meaning militant resistance to colonialism, patriarchy, and racism). She went on to say “The problem wasn’t the hurricane. The problem is the system. We’re not just against the government. We’re going to take care of our people with or without the government, by any means necessary.”

**THE PROBLEM WASN'T THE HURRICANE. THE PROBLEM IS THE SYSTEM. WE'RE NOT JUST AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT. WE'RE GOING TO TAKE CARE OF OUR PEOPLE WITH OR WITHOUT THE GOVERNMENT, BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY.**  
**VANESSA CONTRERAS CAPÓ**



# #RICKYRENUNCIA

Moments of mass mobilization built on decades of social movement organization.

In July 2019, Puerto Ricans captivated international news with mass mobilizations of upwards of half a million people calling for the resignation of then-Governor Ricardo Roselló. Protests were catalyzed by 900 pages of group chats published in which Roselló mocked Hurricane María victims, made misogynistic and homophobic comments, and made violent comments against political opponents.

However, the protests were in response to much more than just the revelation of the chats, or as the people called it, “TelegramGate.” Rather, the mobilizations were reacting to the rampant corruption in Roselló’s administration at a time when the archipelago was at its most vulnerable following Hurricane María.

Puerto Rico was already in a deep recession before Hurricane María hit. Both before and after the hurricane, Roselló’s administration had been implementing severe austerity measures. Those measures included: closing hundreds of public schools, cutting funding for the University of Puerto Rico, and proposing cuts on government pensions. Meanwhile, top members of his cabinet—including the people in charge of education and health care—were later accused of fraud, money laundering, and other corruption charges.

Fueling popular rage was that the governor maintained the official death toll of Hurricane María at 64 lives for months despite increasing evidence that the actual number was over 4,000.

The protests not only successfully booted Roselló from office, but like the slogan “Ricky renuncia, y llevate la Junta” implied, the people didn’t stop with the governor. They continued to demand that all corrupt politicians go, that la junta and PROMESA go, and that the debt be audited. Specifically, they demanded:

- ▶ Prosecution of those accused of corruption and abuses through the courts: accountability, not impunity.
- ▶ Dismantling of the Fiscal Control Board (la junta) and ending their neoliberal plan, and an audit of the \$72 billion public debt through public participation.
- ▶ Declaration of a state of emergency to address the spate of femicides and violence against women in the archipelago and to protect the right to an abortion.
- ▶ Protection of public services, land, public education, pensions and labor rights against privatization, and the right to protest.

The near-month of sustained actions were built on the decades of anti-imperialist, feminist, basebuilding organizing that had been done on the island, with many of the above-named organizations (our grantees and future partners!) at the center, especially La Colectiva Feminista en Construcción, whose horizontal, or leaderfull, organizing model provided critical leadership in the mass demonstrations.

Following the resignation of Gov. Rosselló, a series of people's assemblies were organized throughout Puerto Rico as a way to keep the popular movement going and practice radical democracy. The work of holding popular assemblies to engage the people in redesigning their own democracy was critical in channeling the popular resistance towards "building the new" in a way that strengthened collective capacity to vision and develop as leaders of their own lives and communities.

## **ADDITIONAL READINGS AND RESOURCES ON PUERTO RICO**

Climate Justice Alliance:

[Moving toward a Just Recovery](#)

Naomi Klein:

[The Battle for Paradise](#)

*The Nation*:

[Feminists and LGBTQ Activists Are Leading the Insurrection  
in Puerto Rico](#)

*Civil Eats*:

[Agroecology as a Tool of Sovereignty and Resilience in  
Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria](#)

*Jacobin*:

[Puerto Rican People's Assemblies Shift From Protest to  
Proposal](#)

Movement Generation:

[Transition Is Inevitable, Justice Is Not: A Critical Framework  
for Just Recovery](#)





## ABOUT GRASSROOTS INTERNATIONAL

Grassroots International connects people in the U.S. with global movements that defend land, territory, water, food, seeds, and the earth. Together we address the root causes of injustice and oppression, and build alternatives that nurture human rights, ecological justice, and liberation. We do this through grantmaking, social action, and philanthropic leadership.

In the immediate aftermath of 2017's hurricane season, Grassroots made a decision to do emergency funding to support our political allies in Puerto Rico, and other groups that we knew were resisting disaster capitalism and committed to doing community-based just recovery in the context of social transformation.

We quickly learned about the radical self-managed movements across the archipelago, working at the grassroots, based on the capacity and potential of communities to identify their own needs, organize their own reconstruction, and build long-term collective resilience and resistance. We learned about how their rebuilding work is centered on multiple sovereignties, including territorial and food sovereignty, energy independence and solidarity economy, as well as an understanding of grassroots feminisms' important political role in pushing a transformational vision. Grassroots did an initial round of Just Recovery emergency response grants to several groups in Puerto Rico, and our solidarity work has evolved into ongoing programmatic support for long-term movement building.

We have been building trust relationships based on aligned values and political principles with social movements and grassroots organizations working towards decolonizing the archipelago. We are also supporting them in protecting the integrity of the social movements. Our long haul political commitment is to fund the resistance and alternatives that will lead to Puerto Rico's decolonization while accompanying

social movements and frontline communities as they build and move forward their agenda of justice and liberation. This kind of relationship building has the potential to help us constantly improve our model of solidarity philanthropy based on accompanying social movements for the long-term, with political and funding accountability, trust, and hard work.

Our funding strategy involves a full-spectrum approach to nurturing systemic change. It includes properly resourcing grassroots organizing; building solidarity in the region and internationally; and recognizing the importance of healing, art, culture, wellness, spirituality and sanctuary in building community resilience and resistance.

### **GRASSROOTS INTERNATIONAL'S PARTNERS AND ALLIES IN PUERTO RICO:**

- Centros de Apoyo Mutuo Jíbaros
- Comedores Sociales de Puerto Rico
- Colectiva Feminista en Construcción
- La Jornada Se Acabaron las Promesas
- Organización Boricúa de Agricultura Ecológica de Puerto Rico
- Casa Pueblo
- The Colectivo Ilé
- AgitArte
- La Coordinadora Paz Para las Mujeres
- Junte Gente



## **ABOUT MOVEMENT GENERATION**

Movement Generation Justice & Ecology Project inspires and engages in transformative action towards the liberation and restoration of land, labor, and culture. We are rooted in vibrant social movements led by low-income communities and Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities committed to a just transition away from profit and pollution and towards healthy, resilient and life-affirming local economies.

Movement Generation is one of dozens of co-founders of the Climate Justice Alliance (CJA) and currently co-chairs the steering committee. MG develops and implements curriculum tools, training for trainers, multi-day political education and strategy retreats, workshops, cultural production, and praxis work to advance a just transition in concert with grassroots groups and movement organizers. We continually seek models and stories to lift up and share across communities so that organizers can better learn from each others' work. Over the years, MG has organized and participated in intentional exchanges with grassroots organizations in places like Detroit, Boston, Buffalo, LA, Portland, and Puerto Rico and with the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) of Brazil.

This report comes out of more recent history of learning and exchanges with our comrades in Puerto Rico. After Hurricane Maria in 2017, CJA worked with Greenpeace to fill the Arctic Sunrise ship with supplies to bring to farmers in Puerto Rico to help the on-the-ground efforts to rebuild long-term food sovereignty. Movement Generation supported two members of our political home community to be on that ship and share the Just Transition Framework with organizers in Puerto Rico, along

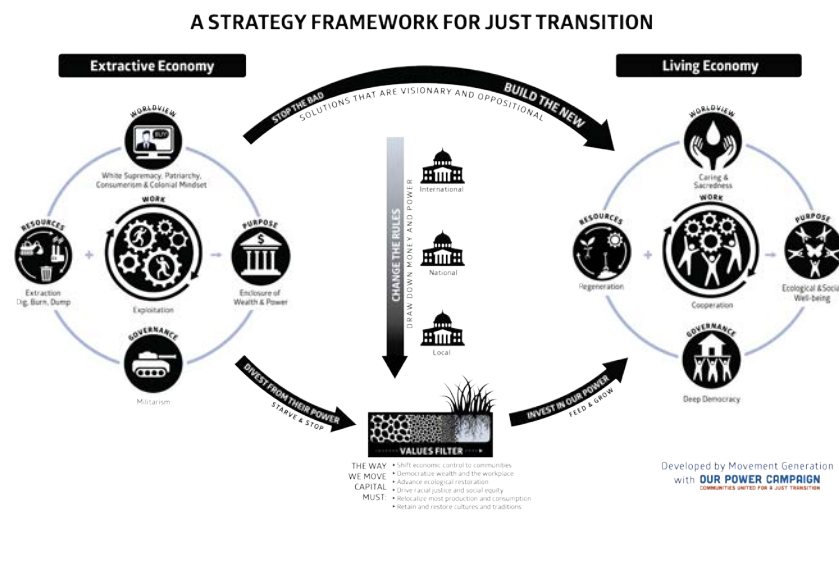


with several boxes of the Spanish version of the Just Transition Framework Zine. These members brought back and shared stories of just recovery in action.

As MG works to support organizers in developing our collective capacity to harness ecological and political shocks and slides towards the systemic shifts we need, we have continued to prioritize learning from Puerto Rican social movement groups while acting in solidarity. In 2018, MG wrote [Transition Is Inevitable, Justice Is Not: A Critical Framework for Just Recovery](#) to aid in the exchange of learning between frontline organizers increasingly having to respond to crises.

In June 2019, MG sent staff to both train and learn from Grassroots International's Just Transformation & Ecological Justice retreat for funders and movement organizers in Puerto Rico. This document is a result of that process. MG continues to build relationships and shared work in Puerto Rico, through our partnerships with CJA member groups such as UPROSE and Organización Boricua.

Our commitment is to uplift, support, and where requested, contribute from our skillset to groups we are in relationship to. This then supports our work to learn from and help disseminate lessons to other frontline organizers. We remain humbly and deeply inspired by the powerful work of just transition and just recovery in Puerto Rico, and hope to contribute through our work and continue to be a movement building bridge to other communities across the US and around the world.



## APPRECIATIONS

Grassroots International and Movement Generation would like to express our appreciation to everyone who made this report possible:

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