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# Revitalizing the Puerto Rican Economy After Hurricane Maria

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## ABSTRACT

Puerto Rico is an island in the Caribbean that is an unincorporated territory of the U.S. It is naturally beautiful and caters heavily to tourists. However, it is currently in the midst of an economic crisis that has been building for years and is struggling to rebuild in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. Additionally, popular culture and statistics have demonstrated that many Puerto Ricans are emigrating from the island. Puerto Rico must address these issues to ensure that its citizens can continue to have a good quality of life on the island. To do this, the U.S. government must work closely with Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico and the U.S. need to implement a solid fiscal plan and spend federal aid to rebuild the island after Hurricane Maria, use sustainable energy resources (e.g., solar, wind, hydroelectric) to shift to a more resilient green economy, and employ ecotourism as a primary source of revenue. This will limit emigration from Puerto Rico and help people living there find new opportunities locally. The autobiography *When I Was Puerto Rican* by Esmeralda Santiago was read in detail to understand attitudes surrounding the migration experience for Puerto Ricans. This book highlighted how the local Puerto Rican landscape impacted the author during her childhood. Additionally, the film *The Vessel*, directed by Julio Quintana, added to this argument by demonstrating the effects of a local disaster on a Puerto Rican community. This put the magnitude of larger disasters, such as Hurricane Maria, into perspective.

**KEYWORDS:** Puerto Rico, Hurricane Maria, territory, immigration, ecotourism, green economy

## INTRODUCTION

Popular culture and statistics have demonstrated that many Puerto Ricans are emigrating from the island. In 2018 alone, approximately 133,500 Puerto Ricans moved to the mainland U.S., with one-third of them going to the state of Florida (Glassman, 2019). The main causes for Puerto Rico's high rate of migration are the current economic crisis and effects of natural disasters on local infrastructure. According to the Associated Press, Hurricane Maria in 2017 created over \$100 billion in damages, which has only exacerbated the negative state of the economy (Coto, 2021). To address these issues, Puerto Rico and the United States need to implement a solid fiscal plan and spend federal aid to rebuild the island after Hurricane Maria, use sustainable energy resources (e.g., solar, wind, hydroelectric) to shift to a more resilient green economy, and employ ecotourism as a primary source of revenue. This will limit emigration from Puerto Rico and help people living there find new opportunities locally.

Puerto Rico has been in the midst of an economic crisis for decades, but it has only gotten worse on the island

since 2014 after three credit agencies devalued bonds issued by the Puerto Rican government. This, coupled with high rates of government debt, unemployment, and financial corruption, has caused an extremely dire economic situation (García et al., 2020). These issues and the lack of job security have prompted many Puerto Ricans to migrate to the mainland U.S., exemplified through a 14% drop in population on the island from 3.7 million people in 2010 to 3.2 million people in 2019 (García et al., 2020). Hurricane Maria only added to these problems by creating major devastation and loss of life in 2017. The U.S. government failed to provide support to the island's residents as they struggled for medical attention and resources; a public health study determined that approximately 4,000 Puerto Ricans perished in the hurricane, a much higher number than the official toll of 64 people (García et al, 2020).

Puerto Rico has consistently had high emigration rates in the past, and they have only increased with these recent developments. These high rates mainly stem from the neocolonial efforts of the U.S. in Latin American states throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As

Latin American states became independent from European colonial powers, the U.S. came into these states to take control under the guise of the Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary; these policies authorized military intervention in other countries without the actual practice of colonialism (*CLAS*, pg. 33). Puerto Rico was heavily involved in this practice, as the U.S. took political control of the island in 1898 after Spain lost its colonial claim. Promptly after this occurred, Americanization efforts were employed in full force to get Puerto Ricans to assimilate into U.S. customs (*CLAS*, pg. 34). Since then, many movements and political groups have risen in Puerto Rico to argue for independence from the U.S. This is an ongoing debate, as Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens but are granted limited rights (e.g., they cannot vote in presidential elections and do not have voting rights in Congress).

## METHODOLOGY

Two sources of Puerto Rican media were analyzed by the author to understand attitudes on the island. One of these was the book *When I Was Puerto Rican* by Esmeralda Santiago, which details a personal immigration experience to the U.S. The other was the fictional film *The Vessel*, which focuses on natural disasters and closely parallels the impact of Hurricane Maria on Puerto Rico.

The 1993 autobiography *When I Was Puerto Rican* by Esmeralda Santiago offers much insight to the attitudes surrounding the migration experience for Puerto Ricans. Santiago describes her childhood during the 1950s and 1960s in vivid imagery. One of the major topic areas of this book is financial instability, which is shown to be a reason for Santiago's family leaving the island. This is still a strong motivator for those emigrating from Puerto Rico, as many people on the island want to find better ways of life on the mainland U.S. In *When I Was Puerto Rican*, there is also an entire chapter dedicated to the Americanization efforts of elementary school children. Essentially, this demonstrates the neocolonial attitude of the U.S. towards former Latin American colonies, especially Puerto Rico, and highlights the pervasive effects of gunboat diplomacy in this period (*Faces*, Chapter 1, pg. 35).

The 2016 film *The Vessel*, directed by Julio Quintana, provides another glimpse into the effects of a local disaster on a Puerto Rican community. Even though this film is fictional, it puts the magnitude of larger disasters, such as Hurricane Maria, into perspective. *The Vessel* takes places in a coastal Latin American town (likely in Puerto Rico). It essentially details the aftermath of a tidal wave sweeping into the local school and killing 46 children. This film is relevant because it exemplifies how

disasters impact people long after they occur. This is clearly seen with Hurricane Maria, as local infrastructure on the island is still severely destroyed and underdeveloped. Another major theme that this film covers is religion and its effects on people. There are a lot of connections to *marianismo*, which is a concept that women are supposed to be submissive, stay quiet, and be pure (*Faces*, Chapter 4, pg. 226). *Marianismo* is based on the image of the Virgin Mary, and it is still prominent in Latin America today (*Faces*, Chapter 4, pg. 226). In the film, women in the town who step out of line are shunned by everyone else, which definitely demonstrates the application of *marianismo*.

## DISCUSSION

In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, one of the most important steps that can be taken to reduce these migration levels is the creation of a solid fiscal plan between the U.S. and Puerto Rico. This would need to be a joint effort between the Congress of the U.S. and Puerto Rico's elected local government. Without federal funding and aid to rebuild infrastructure, Puerto Rico is unlikely to ever be able to pay back its economic debt. Since Puerto Rico still retains its unincorporated territory status under the U.S., the federal government should be somewhat responsible in assisting the citizens living on this island. This would tangibly be accomplished through social programs approved by the federal government. However, this has clearly not been achieved at this point. This is mainly because the U.S. passed laws that prevented Puerto Rico from receiving assistance under the federal bankruptcy code (Acevedo, 2021). Essentially, the federal government can only provide aid to states that are bankrupted, not territories. The Obama administration created the Fiscal Oversight and Management Board to help manage Puerto Rico's financial state, but this group is not enough (Acevedo, 2021). The first step towards creating an effective fiscal plan should be amending these bankruptcy codes to include territories.

To combat the negative outcomes created by Hurricane Maria and other natural disasters that have hit the island, Puerto Rico should shift to more renewable energy resources. As seen in *The Vessel*, which was shot on location in San Juan, Puerto Rico has a large variety of natural resources to offer. By changing fossil fuel energy sources to more sustainable methods, such as solar, wind, and hydroelectric energy, Puerto Rico can work to build a more resilient green economy (Massol-Deyá et al., 2018). These natural sources of energy have shown to combat the effects of global warming and are more reliable in the face of disasters when compared to fossil fuels. For example, communities in Puerto Rico have already adopted solar energy to restore power to communities after Hurricane Maria (Peñaloza, 2019). Many citizens on the island now understand that Puerto Rico's Electric Power Authority (PREPA), which currently distributes power across the island, is not a sustainable solution (Peñaloza, 2019). The shift to natural energy sources is

definitely more labor-intensive and will take much effort to be established across local communities. However, if this resilient green economy is successful on the island, Puerto Rico will be better equipped to deal with future hurricanes and disasters that commonly occur (Massol-Deyá et al., 2018)

Another action item the Puerto Rican government can undertake is building upon their ecotourism industry. Ecotourism is specifically targeted towards the natural environment or resources that a state or location has to offer. This would pair well with increased sustainable energy resources, and ecotourism is a growing field in itself throughout Latin America. For example, Costa Rica's picturesque natural environment consistently attracts a large number of annual tourists, and this has provided more than \$1 billion directly into the state's ecotourism industry (*Faces*, Chapter 3, pg. 197). However, it is a fine line between legitimate ecotourism (by appreciating nature) and greenwashing, or the complete commercialization of this industry and deceiving the public that engages with the environment (*Faces*, Chapter 3, pg. 200). Puerto Rico's natural karst cave systems, wetlands, and coral reef reserves already attract many tourists currently (Hall & Day, 2014). The island has five separate state forests that are very accessible for residents and tourists, and these locations could serve as primary ecotourist destinations (Hall & Day, 2014). Puerto Rico should capitalize on this strength by coupling it with a greener economy to help build a steady stream of revenue for the local government. However, it should also make sure this does not become a form of greenwashing, as that would be extremely harmful for the creation of responsible ecotourism on the island. If this ecotourism is used in concert with federal aid from the U.S., Puerto Rico could work to pay out its massive debt to shareholders and persuade more people to stay instead of migrating out.

This plan of action to assist Puerto Rico's debt crisis is a potentially strong starting place. Hurricane Maria wreaked havoc on an already unstable island, and those wanting to emigrate from the island are leaving more frequently as Puerto Rico seems unable to solve its problems. However, with the proper support and action framework, these damaging effects can be mitigated, and more people can come to the island as it develops into an environmental and economic stronghold. Hopefully, some kind of assistance will be provided in the coming years to better support Puerto Rico, after which the island can work on rebuilding itself and represent Latin America proudly.

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