



Mutual Aid and Survival as Resistance in Puerto Rico

Faced with an onslaught of disasters, government mismanagement of life-threatening crises, and the injustices of colonialism, Puerto Rican communities have bet on their own survival. Their mutual aid efforts testify to both the power of grassroots organizing and the scale of state neglect.

Isa Rodríguez Soto

To cite this article: Isa Rodríguez Soto (2020) Mutual Aid and Survival as Resistance in Puerto Rico, NACLA Report on the Americas, 52:3, 303-308, DOI: [10.1080/10714839.2020.1809099](https://doi.org/10.1080/10714839.2020.1809099)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714839.2020.1809099>



Published online: 27 Aug 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 792



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

ISA RODRÍGUEZ SOTO

Mutual Aid and Survival as Resistance in Puerto Rico

Faced with an onslaught of disasters, government mismanagement of life-threatening crises, and the injustices of colonialism, Puerto Rican communities have bet on their own survival. Their mutual aid efforts testify to both the power of grassroots organizing and the scale of state neglect.

I grew up hearing a common saying in Puerto Rico: “*Mándeme más si más me merezco*”—send me more if I deserve more. I always heard this used to signal suffering. It was a way to indicate that a higher being was “sending” obstacles and that you should be able to manage them or overcome the hardship. The phrase likely feels fitting for many people across the world to sum up the experience of the year 2020 so far.

As I scroll through social media and come across memes that capture that sentiment—what else is 2020 going to throw at humanity?—I think of Puerto Rico. But for Puerto Rico, it is not only 2020 that has brought disasters, death, and suffering. Rather, 2020 has been a more complicated year than usual because its crises have a compounding effect. People in Puerto Rico have long endured colonialism, corruption, and a deep economic recession. Then, in 2017, two major hurricanes devastated the archipelago amid an ongoing debt crisis. Thousands of Puerto Ricans died as a result of Hurricane María and thousands more lost their homes. A little over two years later, a 6.4-magnitude earthquake was felt across Puerto Rico on January 7, 2020, plunging the archipelago into a total power blackout for days. Though earthquakes are common in Puerto Rico, they are usually not very strong, and it had been

more than 100 years since one had caused homes to crack and collapse. All these events, realities, and experiences amplified the effects of the next crisis.

And yet, in Puerto Rico there’s another common saying: *Solo el pueblo salva al pueblo*—only the people save the people. This mantra became a rallying cry for Puerto Ricans on the archipelago and in the diaspora in Hurricane María’s devastating aftermath. Puerto Rico is a colony of the United States, and despite being U.S. citizens, Puerto Ricans are relegated, as are other colonial subjects, to second-class citizenship. The inequalities of this relationship are lived on all fronts, from political disenfranchisement at the federal level to the management of disaster aid at the local level. Since the Obama administration assigned a fiscal oversight board in 2016 to manage Puerto Rico’s budget in the face of its multimillion-dollar debt load, it has become increasingly clear that no one is going to step in and do right by the people of Puerto Rico.

This realization has led to increased grassroots organization focused on addressing the immediate needs of different sectors of the population. During a 2017 student strike against austerity and cuts to public education at the University of Puerto Rico (UPR), activists organized *comedores sociales*, community kitchens for socialized food distribution. The

Mutual aid in Puerto Rico is a story about injustice and lack of access to resources and power channeled into action in order to survive.

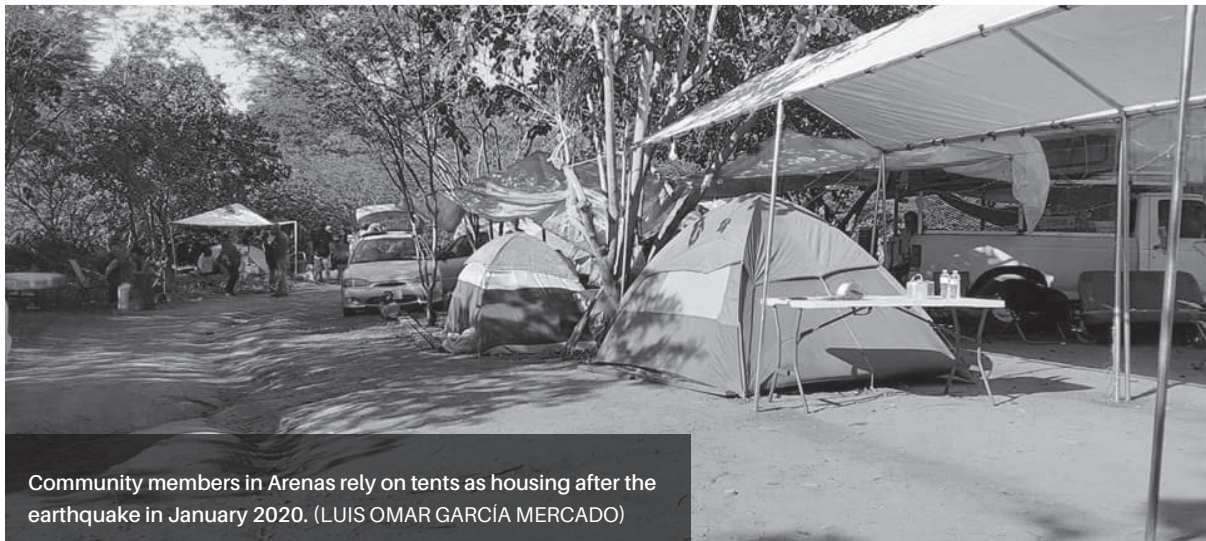
initiative grew out of earlier student organizing to address food insecurity on UPR campuses in 2013. These efforts aimed to assure that the basic needs of people suffering hunger would be met at least in some small way, and these experiences would become all the more important when the next crises hit.

Mutual aid in Puerto Rico is a story about injustice and lack of access to resources and power channeled into action in order to survive. Tired of watching people die after Hurricane María, Puerto Ricans needed to do two things: fill the immediate gaps in order to keep people alive and, at the same time, continue to demand accountability and action from governments. Disaster relief funds and supplies were slow to reach communities in need. Some people buried their dead in their backyards, thousands left for the U.S. mainland, and a year after the hurricane some people were still living without electrical service. It was evident: The state had collapsed.

The protest signs that read “Only the people save the people” took on a new and raw meaning.

If Puerto Ricans were to wait for the state—federal or local—to address the absolute devastation and lack of resources, many would die waiting. During that time, multiple organizations—mostly based on grassroots groups that existed prior to the hurricane—quickly organized to channel aid. The *Brigada Solidaria del Oeste* (Solidarity Brigade of the West), ISER Caribe, Puerto Rico Rises–Forever Preciosa, and the *Centros de Apoyo Mutuo* (Centers for Mutual Aid) are some examples of the multiple organizations and initiatives that helped with collecting and distributing supplies and rebuilding. All Puerto Ricans gained some level of experience with these activities.

Amid these grassroots efforts, the concept of mutual aid—and the idea that doing something for your neighbors meant also doing something for yourself—gained traction. I am an activist and a scholar and, having been an activist far longer than I have been a scholar, I have tried my best to use my anthropological skills to support community organizing and mutual aid efforts. Community-based work in the face of multiple crises in Arenas, a small community Puerto Rico’s Guánica municipality, shows just how crucial these lessons would be in 2020.



Community members in Arenas rely on tents as housing after the earthquake in January 2020. (LUIS OMAR GARCÍA MERCADO)

From Aftershocks to Mutual Aid

The earthquake that woke Puerto Ricans up on January 7, 2020 was felt in every town across the archipelago. Hurricane María left the entirety of Puerto Rico cut off and in a terrible state, but the earthquake's destruction was more localized, specifically in the towns of the Southwest and in the central mountainous region. The type of disaster was also novel. After a hurricane passes, you step outside and start cleaning up. Earthquakes of the magnitude we experienced do not just pass—they continue with multiple aftershocks. After the initial days of the blackout, once we could go out and purchase goods, caravans of cars loaded with water, food, camping tents, and other supplies began arriving in the most affected areas. Many communities and groups were already organized due to their experience with Hurricane María. This enabled them to immediately carry out disaster-relief work with the framework of mutual aid.

As residents and communities, we created grassroots structures and informal networks that would be critical to channeling aid and addressing the community needs quickly. It took the federal and local governments several weeks to start fulfilling their obligations. As the ground continued to tremble and shake, every weekend car and truck caravans showed up with people seeking to offer a helping hand. They looked on as damaged homes, business and places of worship came close to collapsing with every aftershock. Affected people slept in their cars, on air mattresses outside their homes, and in tents pitched on municipal baseball fields.

In the community of Arenas, we—both outside volunteers and residents—developed and administered a brief community census to get a sense of the demographics, damage, and residents' needs. This allowed the community and volunteers to channel supplies to meet specific needs. For example, community leaders knew which families had small children and were able to direct clothes, games and toys, and diapers accordingly. Tents and cots were distributed to residents who, for fear of their homes



Community member in Arenas conduct a census and distribute supplies. (AUREA RODRÍGUEZ SANTIAGO)

collapsing, were sleeping outside. Community leaders also created a code to identify the homes where people with mobility difficulties lived in order to respond rapidly in the event of a building collapse.

As of this writing in July 2020, families affected by the earthquake remain without safe homes. That is the thing with mutual aid. Mutual aid ensures that your neighbors have water and food, or that the family sleeping outside in the ballpark has a tent and a plastic box for their food so rodents don't eat it. But mutual aid does not generate the massive capital needed to solve the problems of those affected, and it cannot replace the role the state needs to play.

Mutual aid is not the same as charity. Mutual aid is based on respect for the people affected, acknowledging that they know what they need, that they must be listened to, and that they must lead the initiative. Mutual aid disrupts charity's narrative of assistance as something framed from the side of

the person giving, not those receiving. Mutual aid empowers communities and individuals and creates relationships that then form the basis of how supplies, programs, equipment, and other goods and services are organized and used in the community. Charity is transient, but mutual aid is meant to be long lasting. Mutual aid fills some gaps in order to keep people and hope alive, and to create a social foundation to continue to rally together and send the message: “We are still here; we are not defeated. We are still alive.”

Only the People Save the People

Arenas is a small community of about 500 households located in Guánica, a town close to the epicenter of the January 7 earthquake. Many residents are family members. After the quake, multiple residents activated their personal networks to channel supplies to address immediate needs in the community. Eventually those individual efforts to get food, water, tents, gas stoves, air mattresses, and other supplies started to coalesce into a network that could provide aid not just for their own neighbors, but also for surrounding communities. From the initial community survey, we identified that the residents were mainly older folks, 60 years of age and above, and many of them had multiple chronic health conditions. Many of the towns most affected by the earthquakes are very poor. Arenas is a community of working-class families, and Guánica has a high rate of unemployment. As with most natural disasters, the human-made disasters of poverty, exclusion, and marginalization left those most vulnerable in a worse situation.

After the aid caravans had dwindled, we saw a trend similar to what happened after Hurricane María: Groups that had popped up to fill a gap became semi-permanent organizations. Well-established nonprofits also partnered with communities to engage in long-term community work. Arenas began a process of identifying the needs and desires of the community. As part of that process, they began an emergency preparedness plan and training, because

the earthquakes continued, and hurricane season was just a few months away.

Then came the plot twist that 2020 threw the entire world: Covid-19. The first cases made their way to Puerto Rico in March 2020, first through cruise ship passengers, then through Puerto Ricans returning or visiting from the U.S. mainland. As a colony, Puerto Rico cannot independently decide to close its airport or ports, and so we all watched in frustration, unable to do anything to stop the influx of possible cases. We shifted focus from emergency preparedness for earthquakes and hurricanes to Covid-19 prevention.

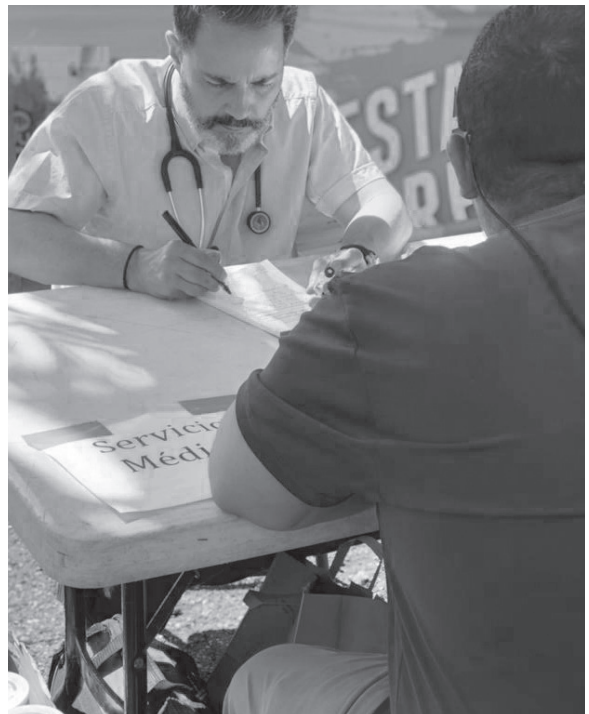
We did what we do best. We looked in our contacts lists and wrote to every epidemiologist, public health specialist, and medical anthropologist we knew. We asked for information and for collaboration, and as so many times before, we stated: “Only the people save the people.” We knew it was more complicated because, across the globe, almost everyone was in a similar situation of feeling scared, lacking information, and not trusting elected leaders to handle the pandemic effectively and swiftly. Once again, we knew that the idea of mutual aid and community *auto-gestión*, or autonomous organizing, would be key to our survival.

The compounding effects of the long list of events that Puerto Rico has faced, together with the ongoing economic crisis, meant that marginalized communities stood to be greatly affected by the spread of Covid-19. We knew that we did not have anyone else we could count on other than our neighbors. We were well aware that the electrical grid could collapse and that even if the United States had ventilators available, Puerto Rico would be the last to get them. The cycle of lifting our communities through mutual aid and by helping each other out repeated itself. While some communities in the U.S. mainland may have consciously engaged in mutual aid for the first time during the pandemic, in Puerto Rico it was familiar territory for most, just in a new context. Arenas, with the collaboration of experts in public health, epidemiology, and social sciences, rallied together to take care of each other. From those initial contacts, a network of

health experts organized into the *Red Comunitaria de Respuesta* (Community Response Network) to create educational content about Covid-19 to share on social media and to collaborate with community-based initiatives.

In Arenas, community members designed and carried out a series of initiatives to help prevent the spread of Covid-19. The community started by recording messages that they played on a loudspeaker anchored to a vehicle, similar to a public service announcement, informing their neighbors about Covid-19 symptoms, prevention measures, proper hand washing technique, how the virus spreads through droplets, and telephone numbers to call in case of illness. This strategy of communicating directly with the community helped to minimize confusion amid the proliferation of misinformation that circulated on social media, especially in the early weeks of the pandemic. Community leaders developed a list of phone numbers—at least one per household—and established phone trees that called each household to actively monitor symptoms and to ask about any needs regarding food and medicines. Public health experts later explained that this initiative of calling residents to ask about symptoms, which is called active monitoring, put residents of Arenas at the forefront of such efforts, because few if any communities had been doing active monitoring. Many jurisdictions across the United States and beyond have relied on passive monitoring, which means waiting for people who may have symptoms to call their healthcare providers instead of seeking out those who may be ill early on.

The community network also helped to distribute fresh fruits and vegetables to every household. A physician and a retired nurse who works with the community offered orientation and guidance regarding Covid-19 symptoms, shared successful isolation measures, and provided medical referrals for possible patients to get tested. This was all being done in April 2020, as the community was finishing the process of officially organizing under the name *Unidos por la Comunidad Arenas* (United for the Arenas Community).



A medical professional provides services in Arenas.
(AUREA RODRÍGUEZ SANTIAGO)

The community also organized and distributed packages that included facemasks, thermometers, hand soap, antibacterial gel, and disinfectant supplies. This initiative ensured that every household had the necessarily tools and supplies to practice Covid-19 prevention. If the request was to cover your nose and mouth, practice frequent hand washing, and disinfect your surroundings, then those materials had to be provided in order for people to be able to meet those expectations. If the community is safeguarded, then individuals are safeguarded. As part of another project to promote economic sustainability, a group of residents began sewing and selling facemasks. These initiatives were supported by nonprofit organizations that have partnered with the community. Those nonprofits have access to grants and donations that they channel to support community driven projects, and the residents work to collect, organize, and distribute supplies.

From the beginning of the pandemic, the Covid-19 statistics in Puerto Rico were not clear,

Puerto Ricans share a general mistrust of government data of morbidity and mortality after the state failed to properly count deaths after Hurricane María, grossly underestimating the toll.

and authorities reported deaths due to Covid-19 in confusing ways. Puerto Ricans share a general mistrust of government data of morbidity and mortality after the state failed to properly count deaths after Hurricane María, grossly underestimating the toll. Motivated by this memory and by an article about the small Italian town of Vò that tested all its residents, community leaders and collaborators in Arenas started to brainstorm a way to carry out mass testing in the community. They dedicated May and June to identifying funding sources to purchase a large volume of diagnostic tests and to create the necessary contact tracing structure, as the Department of Health of Puerto Rico has not properly traced contacts of positive cases.

Many of these projects and initiatives will continue after the current health crisis. The mutual aid framework moves beyond momentary charity and enables communities to create structures to address their needs in the absence of the state and effective elected leaders. The networks created to deal with one crisis will already be in place when the next one emerges.

Challenging Injustice

As I list these initiatives and intense community work, many of which I myself have participated in, I realize I may be idealizing mutual aid. But that's because I know it works. We have seen it in action. Yet we must be extremely aware that although people step in to help and happily give whatever they can out of an understanding of their moral obligation to their neighbors and compatriots, these mutual aid efforts do not—and should not—replace the state's obligation to its people. The Puerto Rican saying that “Only the people save the people” comes not from mere benevolence, but from a place of exhaustion and survival. We will not sit and risk death while we

wait for a government to act in accordance with its mandated role. We will not sit and wait for corrupt politicians to rob us of the aid and opportunities that communities need to survive. Some might be tempted to call this grit, but it is injustice and inequality.

In the wake of Hurricane María, there were a number of scandals involving supplies meant for affected people that were never distributed—bottled water was left on an air strip, shipping containers disappeared, and warehouses of supplies including cots, tents, and camping stoves were never distributed. Many communities, like Arenas, decided to act and to organize. Their work is a reminder that, in Puerto Rico, the colonial state has collapsed.

We must continue to hold our elected officials accountable and not rest on the monumental efforts of mutual aid groups and community organizations to ensure the survival of their neighbors. These strategies and tactics of looking out for each other should not be reduced to some slogan about resiliency or about Puerto Rico being strong. These efforts highlight the ongoing colonialism, injustice, and inequality fueling our desire to live and to not just survive, but also thrive. Mutual aid sustains us to continue to challenge these unjust systems. We will continue to work for the communities we deserve.

Isa Rodríguez Soto is an independent scholar and applied anthropologist in Puerto Rico. Her research interests include gender, health, and social movements in Puerto Rico. She received her PhD in Global Health from Arizona State University. She has coauthored articles that were published in *CENTRO Journal*, *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, and *Current Anthropology*.

Email: isarodriguezsoto@gmail.com