

"Yo Soy Boricua"

Tapping into the strength of the Puerto Rican community to reclaim control over its political, social, and economic future.

Authors: Eamon Riley ('18)
Jonathan Reyes Colon ('19)
and David Yovanoff ('18)
Advisor: Prof. Kim Diana Connolly

 **University at Buffalo**
Clinical Legal Education
School of Law

INTRODUCTION

In response to Hurricane María's devastation, the University at Buffalo School of Law chose ten students to learn about disaster recovery in context through the Puerto Rico Recovery Assistance Legal Clinic. Following two weeks of independent research and three weeks of six-hour-a-day intensive classes to prepare, student attorneys travelled on a 10-day trip to the islands in January of 2018. There they worked on urgent legal issues alongside local experts, and provided humanitarian relief that spanned all corners of the island. When they returned, students wrote research papers related to their work, including the co-authored paper outlined on this poster.

The manuscript speaks directly from the experience of delivering legal and humanitarian aid as part of the islands' recovery efforts following Hurricane María. Instrumental in its creation, the authors seized on over a dozen individual meetings with various experts, stakeholders, government officials, community activists, and students. The paper begins with a discussion on Puerto Rico's experience with colonialism, the federal government's consistent reaffirmations of this status, and the unsustainable political, economic, and social outgrowth of this relationship. It then argues that economic development in Puerto Rico should refocus to facilitate community-based economic development with the intent of localizing necessary economic goods. The focus on these goods ensures that the islands are resilient, self-sufficient, and responsive in the face of economic, environmental, and political shocks by reducing dependence on imports. After explaining a model for community economic development, the paper then presents two applications of that model to Puerto Rico's agriculture and energy sectors.

"Yo Soy Boricua," went on to unanimously win the University of Puerto Rico Law School's Nilita Vientós Gastón Writing Contest on disaster and the law, and was deemed, "the most complete and important in terms of substantive recommendations and contextual relevance; specifically, in light of the contest's criteria." This gave the authors the opportunity to return to Puerto Rico for four additional days, and attend the Law Review's symposium, Law in Times of Disaster: Puerto Rico's Fiscal and Humanitarian Crisis. Presenting the paper on the islands was validating both in terms of the work completed, and conferring further with experts and scholars on our continued effort. Additionally, the manuscript was published in the University of Puerto Rico's Law Review.

CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES

Effective Collaboration

The group's broad ideological diversity which while beneficial, frequently created fragmented objectives that inhibited the group's capacity to be effective. At the outset of the clinic, each student attorney was tasked with a white paper that explored impactful structural and disaster-recovery related topics, including: insurance law, social services, blockchain technology, elder law, land use and agriculture, energy, fiscal oversight, foreclosures, employment benefits, and criminal law. During the classroom period, this diversity was vital to gaining the wide-ranging knowledge needed to be successful on the islands.

When we moved from the classroom to spending 10-days in a post-disaster relief zone it became a challenge keep track of everyone's progress and continue to support and incorporate their work. In addition to providing legal aid twice, three humanitarian trips, curriculum programming, satisfying sponsorship expectations, and generating content, each student was expected to organize community outreach and topic-oriented meetings with Puerto Rican experts on their selected topic. Giving the time commitments and constraints, these conditions made it difficult for the group the push their ideas forward.

For the authors of "Yo Soy Boricua," the challenge of balancing all of these tasks helped produce an insightful and collaborative contribution to the island's recovery. However, this success also hinged on the ability of the three authors to coalesce around a common goal and effectively implement an action plan that complemented each other's work. This manner of deep collaboration achieved a level of understanding that allowed three disparate ideas to become a unified working thesis. This was beneficial to each of the authors in a personal and professional way because it made us better at heuristic collaboration that yielded practical solution.

Recommendation: For those who did not thrive under these conditions, there are some measures that could refocus the group to allow everyone to be more impactful. While ideological diversity helped us learn, more effort should have been used to foster collaboration. Specifically, flexibility to abandon unsurmountable individual ideas in favor of more workable collaborative solutions would have allowed greater efficacy. Allowing students to more easily combine forces would have better anchored expectations and goals of the program.

Nimbleness

Visiting a post-disaster zone with such a large group required a rigid logistical structure to be effective. Throughout our ten days on the island, our group's size created issues with everyday activities like transportation, food, accommodations, scheduling, and overall effectiveness. In some instances, this requisite rigidity hindered our service-oriented mission, and became a significant challenge due to our lack of flexibility.

One of the most unforeseen yet difficult aspects was the chemistry-altering ramifications of a large group entering intimate spaces. One of our legal aid experiences brought the entire group of fourteen of us to a small community center in a dense urban village. The session was focused on vulnerable persons at risk for losing their homes. Our group was so large that we exceeded the total amount of community members and organizers in attendance. While ultimately our team

was able to help those in attendance, it did not go unnoticed the extra strain our group was putting on the organizers. What's more, the group's size nearly changed the focus of the event more on the clinic's presence than the delivery of legal services.

Recommendation: Sensing what people are thinking and feeling, and responding appropriately, is vital to the delivery of humanitarian services. While inclusiveness and capacity are important for a team, more important should be the ability to be flexible, and pivot as necessary in sensitive situations to maintain goal achievability. In some instances, group capacity outmatched the needs of the situation. The takeaway here is that it is okay to deviate from preconceived expectations, and adapting to a given situation's realities.

FINAL REFLECTION

During our trip in January of 2018, we were able to deliver humanitarian aid to over 800 families, and helped Legal Ayuda's team appeal FEMA denials. Our success on the islands depended on our collaborative effort with community groups, stakeholders, government entities, and other non-profit groups. Only because we were able to tap into community level social capital, or local repositories of power, were we able to deliver aid in an effective manner.

However, it is possible that our most meaningful act was simply stopping and listening. Hearing about hardship and neglect resulting from the disaster and ongoing recession, directly from those who experienced it, allowed us to reflect critically on the ways our own community in Buffalo, as one of the nation's most distressed cities, deals with similar forms of hardship.

The case studies discussed in the paper serve as a flexible framework for grassroots, community organizers anywhere. The opportunity now exists for Puerto Rico to strengthen intralocal and interlocal networks, encourage small business development, and to create an education pipeline to ensure that community labor has the necessary skill sets their localities need. Increasing these capacities within communities empowers the islands to be resilient, self-sufficient, and responsive in the face of economic, environmental, and political shocks.

Sharing our knowledge of solutions implemented in Buffalo, and learning about the innovations being made in Puerto Rico, highlighted the need for greater exchange and collaboration across communities. As well, it made clear that empowering the systems that facilitate these types of collaborative initiatives are imperative.

