Community Efforts to Improve Access to Nutritious Foods in Post-Hurricane Puerto Rico

Gabriela Rivera, 2020, Anthropology
ARECMA- Humacao, Puerto Rico
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Background
- ARECMA is a non-profit established in 1982 in Humacao, Puerto Rico.
- The organization has a community center, clinic library, playground, kitchen, edible forest and space for agricultural use.
- Humacao was the first community in PR impacted by Hurricane Maria in 2016. It took 6 months for water and 9 months for electricity to be restored.
- During this time there was also a severe lack of food due to more than 80% of food in Puerto Rico being imported.

Objective of Research
This research provided the opportunity to investigate the relationship that community organizations play in improving health and nutrition through educational programming and sustainable farming. My objective was to better understand what practices ARECMA has used to improve the nutrition of community members in the time since Hurricane Maria.

Methods
- Spent two weeks at ARECMA while living in Humacao.
- Used ethnographic methods based in observation and participation.
- Worked on various projects at ARECMA including the program schedule, the planning of their annual festival, grant progress reports and applying for 501(c)(3) status.

Reflection
- The food insecurity after Hurricane Maria in 2016 lead to a widespread realization that the island is unnecessarily reliant on imports from the mainland US to survive. This community is reflective of a larger movement in Puerto Rico that seeks to change the relationship that Puerto Rican people have with agriculture and food.
- Community members that I spoke to connected their distress about the current state of Puerto Rico to the islands status as a territory of the United States, and people commonly referred to Puerto Rico as a colony.
- The sentiment of powerlessness was present as they expressed that there is a lack of trust in all leadership. There was a feeling that in Humacao, San Juan, and Washington D.C., those with influence are not looking out for average Puerto Ricans.

ARECMA counters the narrative of corruption and selfishness by basing their work on the needs of the community. The director explained that since their beginning, the principle that has connected all of their work and projects has been a philosophy of close listening to the people they are serving.
- This community has greatly benefited from the connections and vision of ARECMA. Local leaders have challenged the status quo by removing ARECMA from dependence on the power grid after the Hurricane and critically examining how the history of colonialism in Puerto Rico has shaped the island into one that struggles with diseases linked to poor nutrition like diabetes and obesity.

Looking ahead
I am grateful to have had the opportunity to begin my own anthropological field work this summer. The experience of doing research has been invaluable, and it has impressed upon me the power of ethnography in order to more deeply understand issues of global health.

Questions
- How can ARECMA be a model for other communities in Puerto Rico that are looking to enact positive change through close listening?
- What is the role of policy in supporting the work that organizations like ARECMA are doing to improve community health through encouraging nutritious eating and small farms?

Conclusion
- ARECMA has brought attention to the issue of poor nutrition with programming and resources in the form of the community farm and kitchen. These efforts bring to the forefront the impact that both historic involvement from the U.S., and current policy, have in shaping community health and nutrition in Puerto Rico.

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