

**Farming For Borikén, Nourishing Food Sovereignty:
A Case Study of El Departamento de la Comida**

By

Louis J. Aquino

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ABSTRACT

Food sovereignty in Borikén (Puerto Rico) is constrained by colonial racial capitalism and disaster capitalism, notably after Hurricanes Irma and María in 2017. As a result, agrarian organizations promote agroecology to build resilient, locally controlled food systems. However, major challenges remain to achieving food sovereignty. This study examines agroecology as a movement through a case study of a prominent agrarian organization: El Departamento de la Comida (El Depa). El Depa is a nonprofit food hub in San Salvador, Caguas. This research analyzes how members at El Depa (contractors, directors, and volunteers) perceive and address barriers to food sovereignty and the role of relationships in movement-building. Using qualitative methods (fieldwork, interviews, and surveys), this thesis demonstrates that El Depa's members identified capitalism and colonialism as interconnected systems that create financial and public health barriers to food sovereignty. In response, members first view decentralization as an important ethic for building local economies to reclaim food sovereignty from colonial capitalism. Second, members at El Depa see mutual aid as challenging but essential. Mutual aid sustains participation and resists disaster capitalism by building networks of resource and information sharing. Third, El Depa's members see community integration—through co-education and food sharing—as essential to building grassroots support for food sovereignty. As a standard case of an agrarian organization, El Depa demonstrates both the complexities and possibilities of building food sovereignty in Borikén through agroecology.

Keywords: agroecology, Borikén, colonization, food sovereignty, mutual aid

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Dedicado a las tierras y los pueblos injustamente amenazados,
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Food Sovereignty & Beyond	1
1.2 Research Questions	3
1.2.1 Research Overview	3
1.2.2 Research Significance	3
1.3 Thesis Structure	4
II. LITERATURE REVIEW	5
2.1 Key Scholarship	5
2.1.1 Agroecological Food Hubs	6
2.2 Background & Theory	7
2.2.1 Farming For America	9
2.2.2 Systemic Vulnerability	10
2.2.3 Farming After María	12
2.2.4 Catalysts & Movements	13
III. METHODS & RATIONALE	16
3.1 Research Design	16
3.1.1 Fieldwork & Recruitment	17
3.1.2 Thematic Analysis	18
3.1.3 Survey Follow-Up	19
3.2 Sample Size Limitations	20
IV. CASE STUDY	22
4.1 El Departamento de la Comida	22
4.1.1 El Depa's History	23
4.1.2 El Depa's Team	25
4.1.3 El Depa's Mission	27
V. RESULTS & FINDINGS	28
5.1 Findings Overview	28
5.1.1 Decentralizing Food	28
5.1.2 Mutual Aid Networks	33
5.1.3 Community Integration	37
VI. CONCLUSION	43
6.1 Thesis Summary	43
6.2 Future Research	46
WORKS CITED	49
APPENDICES	59

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.	Picture of El Depa's property	22
Figure 2.	Geography of Caguas, Puerto Rico	25
Figure 3.	Barriers to food sovereignty	29
Figure 4.	Decentralizing food systems	31
Figure 5.	Challenges and examples of mutual aid	34
Figure 6.	Social networks of members at El Depa	36
Figure 7.	Pathways for community integration	39

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.	Description of interviewees at El Depa	18
Table 2.	Demographics of survey respondents at El Depa	26

PREFACE

My feet sink slowly into the dry grass as I follow my guide. I try to copy their movement, tracing where they avoid the deep indents in the field. Each step of my boots lands with a hard crunch. I steady myself when I can, trailing slowly behind. “The cows have not been here... That is why the grass is so tall,” Tara says in English, smiling almost apologetically. I can feel the cows’ presence in every step; the weight of their hooves pressed deep into the ground. The neighboring farmers have not let their cows graze the field since the last rotation. I reassure Tara that I am managing fine.

I observe Tara as they lead the tour. Tall and slender, they switch between English and Spanish. I told them I was comfortable in either. A piercing cuts through the bridge of their nose—slightly off-center. The piercing was the first thing I noticed, that, and their calm cadence. Tara speaks from much experience, as the co-founder and co-director of *El Departamento de la Comida*. *El Depa*, for short, is an agrarian organization that they have nurtured for sixteen years.

We stop and look out toward a nearby mountain. Tara forms a triangle with their hands and aligns their fingers with the peak. This area is Indigenous *Taíno* land, they explain. The *Taíno* live in this watershed. The *Taíno* carve petroglyphs and pictographs: images of people, animals, and spiritual symbols. Holding the triangle shape, Tara tells me the *Taíno* use a similar symbol to represent a mountain. A sacred gathering place. Some of those older petroglyphs still remain nearby. This land is sacred, they tell me. *El Depa* is lucky to live here.

We push through the tall grass and step onto the main road running through *San Salvador*. Gravel crunches beneath my mud-painted boots. “This is the town center,” Tara

says, smiling. I shield my eyes from the afternoon sun and peer out. A few low, cement and rectangular buildings line the road, mostly single-story with flat roofs. There are some empty lots. The nearest convenience store is a four-minute drive away, up and down the mountain road.

You can not really walk anywhere here. There are not many sidewalks, and the terrain is steep. Not that the difficultness matters much, there are not many people living here anyway. Every half-hour or so, a lone car rattles past. Its engine roars as the car speeds toward another town. My ears, still adjusting from the spike in elevation, crackle faintly at the fleeting sight.

Tara notices my curiosity peeking outwards. They urge me to take in the landscape. I listen to Tara's advice and absorb the scenery. Behind *El Depa*, I hear the soft rush of water. As we approach, bamboo trees tower over the water. The stalks are alive and full. Its branches feathering out like giant fans, swaying in the slow breeze. As a kid, I had only ever seen them stripped bare at the Bronx Zoo. Here, the bamboo is natural and free.

The air is sweet and humid. The air tastes faintly of fresh-cut grass and the salty sweat running down my head. There may not be much human-made infrastructure, but there is vast nature. The heavy canopies of green and crystal clear streams.

Tara leads me back inside El Depa, where the tour began earlier. Inside the building, I take a long swill of luke-warm water from my trusty travel bottle. They smile and formally welcome me as an intern. I settle my bag down and ask, how can I help?

I. INTRODUCTION

“The vulnerable underbelly of any society is its food system.”

Félix & Holt-Giménez (2017)

1.1 Food Sovereignty & Beyond

Food sustains life, yet colonialism has stripped many societies of this sovereignty. *Borikén*, the *Taino* indigenous name for Puerto Rico, is the world’s oldest colony. Colonialism is the process of subordinating another society and imposing sociopolitical conditions that limit self-governance (Caban, 2005). Spain first colonized Borikén, which was later surrendered to the United States. To date, the U.S. controls Borikén’s laws, economy, and political decisions without full representation or consent (Caban, 2005). Colonialism especially weakened Borikén’s agriculture, shaping it for dependency rather than self-sufficiency. Colonial rule prioritized cash crops over local needs (Charles, 2017; Febles & Félix, 2020), leaving Borikén vulnerable to environmental and social crises.

In 2017, Borikén faced one of its most devastating events: Hurricanes Irma and María. The storms decimated Borikén and exposed the entrenched failures of colonial governance. The infrastructure collapsed. Food supply chains broke down. Recovery was slow, leaving many without support. The death toll reached up to 2,975 (Andrade et al., 2020). Each hurricane season revives locals’ losses (Hernandez, 2023). For many, time is now marked as BM (Before María) and AM (After María) (Hernandez, 2023). Yet, the hurricanes’ destruction was not purely natural (Félix & Holt-Giménez, 2017).

Borikén’s vulnerability stems from “colonial racial capitalism,” which argues that capitalism emerged from colonialism and continues to rely on dispossession, exploitation,

and racial inequality (Fernández-Preston, 2024). Capitalism is based on private ownership and profit-driven markets, characterized by competition, wage labor, property rights, and ongoing growth (Harris & Delanty, 2023). In Borikén, these joint systems continue to shape power, control, and inequality (Fernández-Preston, 2024). As a result, the archipelago remains vulnerable, especially in their food systems. Borikén produces low yields of agriculture and is highly susceptible to shocks (Diaz & Hunsberger, 2018).

In response, *Boricuas* (Puerto Ricans) have organized to build food sovereignty. Food sovereignty is the right to healthy, culturally appropriate food produced through ecological methods (La Via Campesina, 2025). Enter agroecology: the science, practice, and movement. Agroecology integrates research, education, and action to support ecological, economic, and social justice (Gliessman, 2018). Agroecology is also participatory and transdisciplinary, meaning many different people can collectively challenge industrial food systems (Gliessman, 2018). Agroecology is political and shaped by social and ecological relationships (González de Molina et al., 2020). For this reason, agroecology is foundational to food sovereignty (Diaz & Hunsberger, 2018; Félix, 2023).

The path forward for Borikén's food sovereignty is complex and contested. Boricuas are championing agroecology for local food systems (Adams, 2026), but understanding food sovereignty requires learning from agrarian organizations. These groups promote agroecology and food sovereignty through activities such as farmer training, market creation, and advocacy (Diaz & Hunsberger, 2018). Agroecological farmers and activists make up these agrarian organizations (Diaz & Hunsberger, 2018). Agrarian organizations are not monolithic. Their members have diverse backgrounds and perspectives. This study uses qualitative methods to engage with those differences.

1.2 Research Questions

This thesis is guided by two research questions: 1) How do agrarian organizations perceive and address barriers to food sovereignty? And 2) What role do social relationships play in strengthening agroecological and food sovereignty movements?

1.2.1 Research Overview

To answer these questions, I conducted a case study with a prominent agrarian organization in Borikén: *El Departamento de la Comida* (The Department of Food), or *El Depa*. El Depa is a nonprofit food hub located in the mountainous neighborhood of *San Salvador, Caguas*. As a food hub, El Depa coordinates the procurement and distribution of local foods, connecting farmers, consumers, and the broader community. Over its 16-year history, El Depa has become a key force in promoting agroecology and advancing food sovereignty across Borikén.

This thesis focuses on the movement dimension of agroecology. To understand movement-building, the research focuses on El Depa's members—directors, contractors, and volunteers—who run daily operations and shape the organization's future. This study traces members' perceptions and careers through fieldwork, interviews, and surveys.

1.2.2 Research Significance

Agroecological transitions are underway globally. McKay et al. (2024) argue that these transitions require changes in social relations, including social organization. Social organization refers to the relationships, roles, and institutions that shape how communities function. Social organization helps explain who participates, how groups are structured, and how alliances or tensions influence agroecology.

This study of El Depa examines how an agrarian organization operates in practice. This study shows how people with different backgrounds and roles put these values into action. As McKay et al. (2024) note, internal differences help explain how movements grow or struggle. Case studies and qualitative methods can explore social organization.

A key goal of qualitative research is cognitive empathy: understanding how participants see themselves and their world (Small & Calarco, 2022). Researchers focus on perception, meaning, and motivation. In this study, I examine how El Depa's members understand their lives and labor within Borikén's colonial context, including agroecology, food sovereignty, and grassroots work. Qualitative methods also capture heterogeneity, or differences in experiences, beliefs, and motivations within the organization. In short, this study explores the social organization of agroecology.

A single case provides in-depth findings but is not generalizable. This study examines a bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015): El Depa's members since 2020. I neither extrapolate nor make causal claims. The data offer insights into this organization's lived realities, while recognizing that some agrarian organizations may differ or be alike.

1.3 Thesis Structure

This thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 presents the historical and theoretical background on Borikén's food systems. Chapter 3 describes the qualitative research methodology, including the rationale and steps. Chapter 4 introduces the case study of El Depa, outlining its history, members, and mission. Chapter 5 presents the major findings from the analysis of the interviews and the surveys. Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by summarizing the main findings and offering future research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

“Thus, sovereignty is the process of imagining decolonized futures...”

Natasha A. Fernández-Preston (2024)

2.1 Key Scholarship

Previous coverage of El Depa has largely come from U.S. media outlets. Journalists have documented the organization over the years. However, there is limited academic research on it. Two notable exceptions are Diaz and Hunsberger (2018), who mention El Depa in a broader study of agroecological growers and organizations, and Rebeil et al. (2023), who provide a focused case study of El Depa.

Diaz and Hunsberger (2018) provide a helpful agroecological framework for this study. They draw on interviews with coffee farmers and agrarian organizations to show the importance of agroecology for food sovereignty in Borikén. They also offer useful historical context by situating agriculture within colonial and global market systems. However, they do not focus on a single organization. El Depa appears only briefly, as they only spoke with El Depa’s co-director and did not analyze the organization as a case.

Rebeil et al. (2023), from the Duke World Food Policy Center, provide a clear case study of El Depa. They use a policy and development framework to examine how El Depa fits within Equitable Food-Oriented Development (EFOD). Their study highlights El Depa’s relationships, adaptability, and community-rooted strategies. Rebeil et al. also demonstrate that disaster capitalism and U.S. policy shape local food systems. They then discuss how El Depa responds.

These differences lead to a distinct contribution. Diaz and Hunsberger (2018) provide the theoretical grounding for agroecology and food sovereignty. Rebeil et al. (2023) show how El Depa operates within a policy and development framework. Together, these studies complement one another and provide a broader understanding.

This thesis builds on both studies while taking a different approach. Like Rebeil et al. (2023), I focus on El Depa as a single case. Like Diaz and Hunsberger (2018), this thesis is grounded in an agroecological and food sovereignty framework. However, this research differs in both perspective and method. This study focuses on members' lived experiences, meanings, and relationships. I also use a mixed-methods approach to capture heterogeneity across members' backgrounds and perspectives.

This research extends previous scholarship by linking agroecological theory to the case of El Depa. This study focuses on how agrarian organizing supports the food sovereignty movement. In particular, I examine El Depa's agroecological interventions as a nonprofit food hub.

2.1.1 Agroecological Food Hubs

El Depa is an agrarian organization that promotes agroecology and food sovereignty as a food hub. Understanding food hubs helps explain how members of the organization carry out this work.

Conventional food distribution is fragmented, costly, and carbon-intensive (Sanz-Cañada et al., 2023). Food hubs respond to these problems. Food hubs act as local logistics centers where small producers collaborate to store, transport, and market food (Sanz-Cañada et al., 2023). Food hubs connect producers and consumers and address gaps in the food system.

Many food hubs are guided by goals of equity and sustainability. Nonprofit-driven hubs, in particular, focus on improving access to affordable, healthy food while strengthening local economies (Papargyropoulou et al., 2024). Food hubs also support food security and resilience, especially for marginalized communities. In addition, food hubs provide training and education that build capacity skills for more sustainable food systems (Papargyropoulou et al., 2024).

In agroecology, food hubs take on a broader role. Food hubs often function as producer cooperatives. Food hubs reduce costs, improve access to local food, and support more sustainable distribution (Sanz-Cañada et al., 2023). In addition to distribution, agroecological food hubs are also spaces for social interaction, learning, and organizing (Vicente-Vicente et al., 2025). Through activities such as community dinners, community supported agriculture (CSA) networks, and food rescue, agroecological food hubs build relationships and share knowledge. Agroecological food hubs also challenge dominant food systems through solidarity-based practices (Vicente-Vicente et al., 2025).

Therefore, agroecological food hubs combine food access, community-building, and political action. These food hubs support food sovereignty by linking local production with social relationships and collective action. El Depa operates similarly in response to Borikén's historically flawed food system.

2.2 Background & Theory

The history of Borikén begins with the Indigenous Taíno. The Spanish first used the term “Taíno” to describe the population they encountered in 1493 (Brás, n.d.). The Taíno, an *Arawak*-speaking people, migrated from South America about 2,000 years ago and settled on the archipelago they called Borikén (Brás, n.d.). The Taínos cultivate

diverse crops, including cassava, corn, pumpkins, beans, guava, and soursop (Febles and Félix, 2020). As in many societies, the women produce most of the crops (McIlvaine-Newsad et al., 2020).

Spain began colonizing Borikén in 1508, following Christopher Columbus's claim to the archipelago in 1493 (Ayala, 2024). By 1521, the archipelago had undergone several name changes before becoming Puerto Rico (Brás, n.d.). At this time, Africans were also forcibly brought to the archipelago (Lakhani, 2021). The slave trade shaped agriculture across the Americas, as cash crops like sugar and coffee depended on the labor and agronomic knowledge of enslaved Africans (White, 2021).

After the Spanish arrival, the Taíno faced near-extinction due to disease, forced labor, and warfare (Ayala, 2024). The population declined from about 50,000 to 3,000 in twenty years (Bergman, 1977). Today, Taíno descendants continue to claim their ancestral roots in Borikén, although in smaller numbers.

As the longest-held colony in the world, Borikén has no single point of return. Decolonization in Borikén is politically challenging. The United States continues to legally hold the archipelago as a territory. At a minimum, all people should understand how oppression persists in Borikén. To challenge this political system, Boricuas must make their hardships visible.

Borikén's struggles reflect "colonial racial capitalism." Colonialism, race, and capitalism are often studied separately, thereby obscuring their interplay (Fernández-Preston, 2024). This racial capitalist framework argues that capitalism grew from colonialism and still depends on dispossession, exploitation, and racial inequality (Fernández-Preston, 2024). These processes continue today in Borikén.

To understand colonial racial capitalism today, scholars can further examine history. After all, research exists within social and historical conditions (Clayson et al., 2002), including systems of power (Fitzpatrick, 2012). Joseph P. Fitzpatrick identifies four influences on Boricua society: Taíno culture, Spanish colonialism, slavery, and U.S. rule after 1898 (Lloréns, 2021). For this thesis, I focus on agricultural transitions after U.S. rule and propose a fifth influence: disaster capitalism after María.

Disaster capitalism describes how corporations exploit crises to advance profit-driven policies, often at the expense of vulnerable communities (Félix & Holt-Giménez, 2017). Coined by Naomi Klein (2007), disaster capitalism refers to using ‘shocks,’ such as war and extreme weather events, to expand privatization and impose neoliberal reforms. After Hurricanes Irma and María, the ensuing disaster capitalism shaped El Depa’s development and services (Rebeil et al., 2023).

2.2.1 Farming For America

Through neoliberal policies and industrialization, the U.S. enforced colonial racial capitalism in Borikén. Under U.S. rule, agriculture shifted to cash-crop plantations. The U.S. prioritized sugar, tobacco, and coffee, with sugarcane dominating (Nagovitch, 2020; Febles & Félix, 2020). The sugar monoculture collapsed in the 1930s with the sugar industry (Nagovitch, 2020). Still, Borikén continued exporting agriculture. In the 1940s, agriculture made up over 40% of GDP, and Borikén produced 65% of its food (Charles, 2017; Kenner et al., 2023; Febles & Félix, 2020). Still, local growers could not compete with U.S. markets, leaving the economy vulnerable (Ayala, 2024).

In the late 1940s, *Operación Manos a la Obra* (Operation Bootstrap) shifted the economy from agriculture to manufacturing (Lloréns, 2018; Nagovitch, 2020). Tax

incentives attracted polluting industries and drove rural-to-urban migration (Lloréns, 2018). By 1956, manufacturing surpassed agriculture. By 1964, farm sales had dropped by two-thirds (Charles, 2017). In the last two decades, farm numbers continued declining (Rodríguez-Cruz et al., 2022).

Moreover, import dependency grew under U.S. policies like the Jones Act (Diaz & Hunsberger, 2018; Rebeil et al., 2023). The Jones Act requires that goods shipped between U.S. ports, including Borikén, be carried on ships built, owned, and crewed by U.S. citizens (McCune et al., 2019; Zollinger, 2022). While granting citizenship to Boricuas, the act limits their political representation and raises the costs of living, creating a “second-class citizenship” (Febles & Félix, 2020; Ayala, 2024).

Colonialism also stigmatized farming. Plantation systems and harsh conditions led to its association with poverty and low status (Charles, 2017; Lakhani, 2021). Many Boricuas were pushed toward industrial jobs, accelerating the decline of agriculture during mid-century industrialization (Velasquez-Manoff, 2022). The decline of agriculture in Borikén was not just historical; the erosion of local foods was systemic.

2.2.2 Systemic Vulnerability

Food is essential to any society. In Borikén, agriculture has been systematically reduced, leaving communities vulnerable to extreme events. Hurricanes Irma and María struck an already weakened food system. The scale of devastation was not purely natural, but shaped by existing conditions.

Disasters are produced through social, economic, and historical factors that shape vulnerability and resilience (Félix & Holt-Giménez, 2017). Vulnerability is socially produced and disproportionately affects marginalized groups. Resilience depends on

access to financial, cultural, and political resources (Félix & Holt-Giménez, 2017; Febles & Félix, 2020).

Food systems can also be resilient or vulnerable. Resilient food systems recover from disruptions and maintain agricultural production and ecosystem services (Febles & Félix, 2020). This reflects social-ecological resilience: the ability to sustain function despite external shocks (Berkes & Folke, 1998; Holladay et al., 2019). Borikén lacked social-ecological resilience, and its food system was “exceptionally vulnerable” to extreme weather events (Diaz & Hunsberger, 2018).

As one of a few Small Island Developing States (SIDS), Borikén faces high import dependence, climate risk, and limited infrastructure (Bezares et al., 2025). SIDS have higher rates of increased food insecurity, especially after disasters (Bezares et al., 2025). Borikén relies on one main port and a few shipping companies (Marrero et al., 2022b). Hurricanes can shut down ports and roads, disrupting supply chains. Without local production, ports must reopen quickly to avoid food shortages (Marrero et al., 2022b). In Borikén, compared to the mainland, disaster relief arrives more slowly, and federal support is lower, delaying or limiting recovery efforts for affected communities (Rebeil et al., 2023). These vulnerabilities left Borikén unable to withstand Hurricane María, leading to widespread impacts.

As disasters intensify, state officials, private companies, and foreign groups weaken safety nets. After Hurricane María, rebuilding contracts were awarded to private companies, leading to delays, higher costs, and poor-quality work (Rebeil et al., 2023). Additionally, foreign relief organizations also sidelined community-rooted organizations (Rebeil et al., 2023). Foreign organizations can redirect funding away from

community-rooted groups without improving local conditions (Rebeil et al., 2023). These power dynamics allow external actors to profit from crises, often harming vulnerable communities (Félix & Holt-Giménez, 2017). Ultimately, in Borikén, disasters and other shocks have enabled neoliberal policies that benefit corporations and weaken local resilience (Ayala, 2024).

2.2.3 Farming After María

Hurricane María devastated Borikén's agriculture. Before María, the farming industry was slowly growing, increasing 3–5% annually from 2011 to 2017 (Robles & Ferré-Sadurní, 2017). The storms reversed this trend. Irma caused \$45 million in damage, and María destroyed 80% of crops, with losses reaching \$780 million (Robles & Ferré-Sadurní, 2017; USDA, 2024).

Today, commercial farming is minimal. Most families no longer rely on agriculture (Kenner et al., 2023). Farming is low-paying; about 53% of farmers earn under \$5,000 annually (Marrero, 2022). Staple crops have declined in both production and cultural value (Félix, 2023; Fernández-Preston, 2024). Less than 5% of supermarket produce is local (Nagovitch, 2020). About 80% of food is imported, and agriculture adds less than 1% of Borikén's GDP (Marrero, 2022; Velasquez-Manoff, 2022; USDA, 2024).

The landscape has also changed. Farmland declined from 70% in 1960 to 20% in 2020, while forest cover rose to about 60% (Félix, 2023). From 2012 to 2018, the number of farms and farmers decreased sharply, while the average farm size increased (Febles & Félix, 2020; Félix, 2023). This data suggests farmland consolidation was already underway before Hurricane María. Farming in Borikén was shaped for extraction rather

than local needs (Rebeil et al., 2023). Cash crops and industry were prioritized over food sovereignty. State negligence had adverse consequences for public health.

Boricuas face major health issues linked to agriculture and diet. Marrero et al. (2022b) call this “dietary colonialism,” the marginalization of local food systems by colonizers and corporations. The rise of fast food and supermarkets increased reliance on imported, processed foods (Marrero et al., 2022a). Bezares et al. (2025) describe a “diabetogenic” food environment in Borikén. Diets are composed of imported foods high in sugar, refined carbohydrates, and unhealthy fats. The overdependence of these unhealthy foods reflects dietary colonialism.

These impacts are clear. Island states have high rates of obesity and diabetes (Marrero et al., 2022a). In Borikén, diet-related disease is widespread (Puerto Rico Department of Health, 2020). About 16.8% of adults have diabetes, among the highest rates in the Northern Hemisphere (Marrero et al., 2022a). Many also face cholesterol and obesity issues. Amid these financial and public health conditions, resistance has emerged.

2.2.4 Catalysts & Movements

Veena Das (1998) defines “critical events” as disruptive moments with lasting effects. Critical events can reshape politics and lead people to organize in response to state failure (Ficek, 2018). Hurricane María is one such event in Borikén (Ficek, 2018). These events can also build resilience. Some communities seek to improve conditions rather than return to the past (Holladay et al., 2019). In Borikén, María “awakened” people and led to agrarian organizing for food sovereignty (Fernandez-Preston, 2024).

Agroecology then becomes important for food sovereignty. Agroecology can reduce the impacts of disasters and strengthen food systems (Holladay et al., 2019; Febles

& Félix, 2020). Agroecology already exists in Borikén. Smallholders practice agroecology in backyards and forests, supported by local and informal exchange networks (Marrero et al., 2022a; Marrero et al., 2022b). Networks are central to its expansion. Agrarian organizations support agroecological farmers by building these networks and providing the infrastructure needed to distribute their produce across the archipelago (Diaz & Hunsberger, 2018).

After María, agroecology expanded through mutual aid networks. In Borikén, grassroots organizing mobilized communities and led to the formation of mutual aid groups from 2016 to 2019 (Dazzo, 2025). Mutual aid is a form of political participation based on reciprocity and horizontal relationships. Communities meet needs through solidarity and direct, non-hierarchical support (Skyer et al., 2025).

Mutual aid means treating people equally and providing direct support without relying on formal structures or policies. For example, after an extreme weather event, community members may share meals or lend one another supplies. Whether these ideals of equal participation and shared responsibility are fully realized in practice is debatable. More on this topic in the results discussion.

After María, mutual aid groups first met urgent needs, such as rebuilding homes and providing basic resources. Over time, these groups developed into lasting community organizations. The *Centros de Ayuda Mutua* (CAM) provides food, health services, and community support. CAMs also work with agroecological groups to support local agriculture, promote decentralized systems like solar energy, and reclaim abandoned spaces (Dazzo, 2025).

Mutual aid did not end after María. In rural Borikén, mutual aid networks contribute to food sovereignty through everyday, community-led practices (Mercado & Darling-Hammond, 2026). Organizations share resources, labor, seeds, and knowledge across communities. These organizations also support agroecological and decolonizing education through community-rooted and intergenerational learning (Mercado & Darling-Hammond, 2026).

These efforts show agroecological pathways for strengthening food sovereignty. However, agriculture in Borikén still faces challenges from global trade, climate change, and food insecurity (Marrero et al., 2022b). Scholars call for more research. Bezares et al. (2025) emphasize the need for context-specific studies on local food production that address climate change, land access, tenure, and knowledge. Marrero et al. (2022a) call for research that goes beyond standard indicators to capture the social and nutritional benefits of agroecology. In short, more research on local agroecological interventions is needed. This thesis responds to those calls.

III. METHODS & RATIONALE

“This study was designed...to initiate social change, empowerment, and advocacy.”

Abrania D. Marrero (2022)

3.1 Research Design

This research design is ambitious and combines complementary approaches. The design can be visualized as four layers that guide data collection and interpretation.

First, this study follows the *transformative paradigm*. Traditional research can create power imbalances and exploitation (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2012). In response, this approach prioritizes ethical, community-based research. Transformative studies use emancipatory and participatory methods to support marginalized communities (Mertens, 1999, 2017). Redman-MacLaren and Mills (2015) propose “transformational grounded theory” (TGT) to share power and engage participants as co-researchers.

TGT requires attention to positionality. Reflection is essential. Qualitative research seeks to understand how people experience and interpret the social world, including the researcher. Qualitative research is both introspective and scientific.

Second, this study aligns with *dirtbagging*, a term coined by Rubin (2021). Dirtbagging is not a method, but a research style. This style emphasizes showing up, doing the work, and learning through participation in the field. Dirtbagging values flexibility and responsiveness. In other words, a rigorous study does not have to be rigid.

Third, the study uses qualitative methods for data collection, including fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and surveys. These qualitative methods help examine meaning, process, and variation, rather than relying only on statistics. Interviews and

surveys were compensated. All research tools and processes were approved by the UW–Madison Institutional Review Board.

Fourth is the *grounded theory* analysis. Grounded theory is iterative and inductive, with data collection and analysis happening together (Tie et al., 2019). Researchers begin with broad questions and allow patterns to emerge through observation, coding, and comparison. This is a bottom-up approach. Grounded theory remains flexible. Researchers bring prior knowledge but stay open to new insights, balancing theory with data-driven findings.

3.1.1 Fieldwork & Recruitment

Being reflexive about my positionality was important to the fieldwork. I had to examine how my identity, background, and biases influenced my research (Goundar, 2025). As a master’s student at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, I came from a position of power. I am also not a diasporic Boricua. I am a bilingual 23-year-old Mexican American from the United States, the colonizing nation. Because of this, I did not want to take from the community without giving back.

I did not enter Borikén as only a researcher. I also entered as a volunteer. After a month of networking and learning with agrarian organizations, I interned at El Depa. This study used purposive sampling to select a case. I defined the criteria in advance. The site had to be grassroots or nonprofit, support agroecology and food sovereignty, have enough members, and be willing to grant access. El Depa fit the criteria.

During my internship, I volunteered at El Depa. I supported the tree nursery and kitchen and helped with daily operations. Volunteering was a way to contribute tangibly and build trust. I also shared with the team that I was a student and a beginning

researcher. Transparency helped build trust and enabled the study. After a month of interning at El Depa, I began conducting interviews.

Table 1. Descriptions of members at the time of interviews in June-August 2025

Name	Role at El Depa	Job Tenure
Tara	Co-founder and co-director	15 years
Carolina	Grants and project manager	5 years
Eríka	Nursery educator	1.5 years
Cocuani	Head chef / kitchen director	3 years
Carmen	Community volunteer and liaison	5 years
Marielisa	Operations and project manager	3 years

I invited current and former members of El Depa to participate through *Slack*, their communication app, and in person. I conducted six semi-structured interviews, each lasting 40–50 minutes, with contractors, directors, and volunteers who are all residents of Borikén (Table 1). Interviews took place between July and August 2025, either in person or on Zoom. Questions focused on perceptions, meanings, and motivations related to agroecology, food sovereignty, and work at El Depa (Appendix A). Questions were available in English and Spanish. All members gave informed consent, and interviews were recorded. Members also consented to being named when quoted.

3.1.2 Thematic Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai in their original language, then translated into English. Audio recordings were deleted. Analysis followed an iterative, thematic coding process informed by grounded theory. While not planned, the

coding process closely resembled Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for grounded theory.

First, I became familiar with the data through transcription and translation. Next, I manually did descriptive coding in NVivo 15. I assigned short summaries to segments of data and wrote memos to track patterns. I then grouped codes into broader categories. This step is similar to "searching for themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As I coded new transcripts, I revised categories, merged them, or divided them into subthemes. Finally, I developed a thematic framework and identified key themes (Appendix C). This aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2006) last steps of defining, naming, and reporting themes. All modeling of figures was done on NVivo 15.

3.1.3 Survey Follow-Up

Qualitative research is iterative. Data is shaped through interaction, so studies evolve over time. I entered the field without fixed questions or a confirmed site. After gaining access to El Depa, the study developed and required follow-up. That is, collecting new data to address emerging questions (Small & Calarco, 2022).

In this study, I did not capture basic demographic data, which limited representativeness. A survey helped address this gap. During early interview analysis, I found that members are connected through social networks. The survey helped clarify these networks. Overall, the survey refined the focus on El Depa as a case.

In February 2026, all individuals who had been involved with El Depa were invited to complete the anonymous survey. Questions were written in Spanish, and open-ended responses were later translated into English. The survey was distributed digitally through El Depa's Slack and administered on Google Forms. The survey was

sent to all eligible members and was not linked to interview participation. Despite reminders and compensation, the survey had a very small sample size (n=4). The low sampling posed limitations, as discussed further below. However, the few responses did illuminate important information.

The survey offered some insight into members' professional development. Questions asked about members' careers, educational backgrounds, and how members joined the organization (Appendix B). These questions helped identify whether their professional developments were influenced by specific people or groups. Additionally, some of the survey respondents were members of El Depa that I did not interview. This increased participation helped broaden the range of voices.

The survey also provided basic information on members' social networks. Social networks examine how relationships shape behavior, influence, and access to resources. This data is often studied through Social Network Analysis (SNA), which maps individuals or organizations as nodes linked by relationships. SNA can analyze patterns like density and cohesion (Steketee et al., 2015). The low survey response rate prevented a full SNA. That analysis requires more data to computationally map networks and test the validity of relationships against social theory. Instead, the survey data were used to complement the thematic findings where relevant.

3.2 Sample Size Limitations

This research is limited in its sample size. The recruitment was difficult to secure enough members for the interviews (n=6) and the survey (n=4). The study was ambitiously designed to be transformative and community-engaged, which required much more time and effort. Building relationships was essential, especially as a non-diasporic

Boricua. I also did not enter Borikén with a fixed site in mind. I took a month volunteering and networking to connect with El Depa. I took another month to build trust with the team. Volunteering was necessary, but reduced the time available for interviews.

Remote interviews were also challenging. Internet access in San Salvador is unreliable. During one Zoom interview, the connection dropped, briefly pausing the conversation. Consequently, the interviews may not have reached saturation. This means that additional interviews might have produced new insights or themes.

Survey participation was also low (n=4). Low sampling may introduce non-response bias, meaning the sample may not reflect the full organization. As a result, the study reflects the experiences of only a few members. The findings are not generalizable to all of El Depa or other agrarian organizations in Borikén.

At the same time, this is a qualitative study. The goal is not statistical representation, but an in-depth understanding of individuals. Each perspective adds value. While the sample is small, the analysis is careful and systematic. Moreover, El Depa is a standard case that examines common, everyday phenomena that recur across similar sites (Yin, 2013). As a standard case, El Depa demonstrates how other agrarian organizations can pursue similar activities under similar conditions and toward similar goals. This study's findings offer meaningful and relevant insights even beyond the organization.

IV. CASE STUDY

“¡Creemos en compartir recursos para lograr nuestra soberanía alimentaria!”

El Depa's webpage (2026)

4.1 El Departamento de la Comida

El Departamento de la Comida is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit with a board of three voting members and one non-voting member. The property is about 2,000 square feet, with a small yard, and is powered by solar panels and a rainwater collection system (Figure 1). The building was leased starting in 2020 from the local family who originally built it. The organization rented the property until July 15, 2025, when the family sold the property to them. The purchase happened on the same day I began my internship.



Figure 1. Front view of El Depa in San Salvador, Caguas (Aquino, 2025).

Modeled as a food hub, El Depa collects agroecologically grown crops from local and elderly farmers, processes the crops to add value, and distributes the products. El Depa aims to promote sustainability, social justice, and food sovereignty. These goals

align with other agroecological food hubs (Sanz-Cañada et al., 2023; Vicente-Vicente et al., 2025). El Depa also emphasizes resilience, monitoring, and continuous improvement. Tara, the co-founder, described the organization as shaped by “constant adaptation.”

4.1.1 El Depa’s History

El Depa has evolved over the past 16 years (Bustos, 2020; Rebeil et al., 2023). The for-profit organization was founded in 2010 in Santurce by Tara Rodríguez Besosa and Olga Casellas Badillo. The organization began with Borikén’s first multi-farm CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) delivery program. The co-founders, two young queer women, distributed produce from 15–20 farms to about 150 clients (Abarbanel, 2017; Alder, 2018).

By 2012, CSA deliveries ended, and El Depa shifted to a warehouse. There, the team sold local produce and plant-based meals. About 80% of ingredients were sourced from local agroecological farms (PBS, 2015; Kennedy, 2015). In 2016, El Depa moved into a formal restaurant space in Punta Las Marías, becoming one of Borikén’s first organic food hubs (Gordinier, 2015).

In 2017, Hurricane María marked a turning point. Flooding destroyed the restaurant and many partner farms (Abarbanel, 2017). In response, El Depa shifted to long-term recovery and resisted the encroachment of disaster capitalism. After the hurricane, many foreign nonprofits entered Borikén but often provided limited support to affected communities (Rebeil et al., 2023). These foreign organizations can sideline local grassroots groups that better understand and serve their communities.

In response, El Depa supported off-grid, sustainable food systems. These efforts helped farmers pursue community-rooted recovery (Bustos, 2020). El Depa also provided

disaster relief grounded in local knowledge (Rebeil et al., 2023). The organization coordinated more than 60 volunteer brigades, raised up to \$200,000 through the Resiliency Fund, repaired farms, and distributed meals through pop-up kitchens across Borikén (Adler, 2018; Bayne, 2018; Diaz & Hunsberger, 2018; Riley et al., 2018; Bascomb, 2019; Rebeil et al., 2023). During this period, El Depa also built a mutual aid network with advocates (Bustos, 2020; Rebeil et al., 2023). This network remains central to its current work on food sovereignty.

Following the recovery period, El Depa formally transitioned into a nonprofit food hub. Members had extensive experience in food service and food systems, which members used to reorganize their work. This shift focused on long-term efforts to build food sovereignty. Rather than feeding customers, El Depa prioritized nourishing communities. More on this topic in the results discussion.

In 2020, El Depa was re-established in San Salvador, Caguas (Figure 2). The organization initially rented and later purchased the property in 2025. San Salvador is rural, mountainous, and subtropical. El Depa's relocation to Caguas was important because of the municipality's history of social activism.

Many groups in Caguas organized mutual aid after María to provide disaster relief (Dazzo, 2025). The Centros de Ayuda Mutua (CAM) first began there when university activists and community members occupied an abandoned building and started cooking meals to meet urgent needs (Dazzo, 2025). In response to the housing crisis, other groups also reclaimed abandoned buildings for community use and placemaking in central Caguas. Organizations like *Urbe Apié* manage these spaces for art, gardens, and public programs, working with CAM to build a “social neighborhood” (Dazzo, 2025).

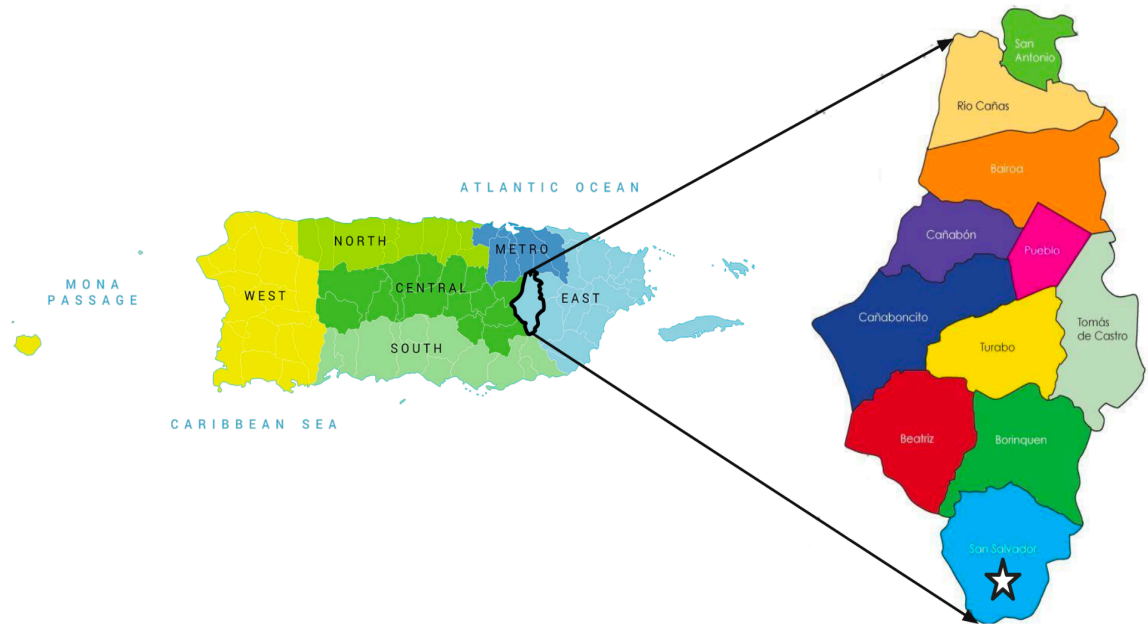


Figure 2. Geography of Caguas, Puerto Rico. El Depa, represented as a star, is located in San Salvador, the southernmost barrio (To Puerto Rico, n.d.; Pinterest, n.d.).

Although San Salvador is about a 20–30 minute drive from central Caguas, these places remain connected by people. El Depa collaborates with CAM through educational and activism events. For example, I observed their chefs preparing and offering free *sancocho* (traditional stew) at Urbe Apié for a transportation justice event. Overall, Caguas has a strong history and culture of mutual aid and organizing against disaster capitalism. Caguas’ setting influences El Depa’s work there as a nonprofit food hub.

4.1.2 El Depa’s Team

El Depa’s work is both meaningful and demanding. Its members—contractors and volunteers—are essential to carrying out its mission and services in the community of San Salvador and beyond. This research highlights their voices.

During my 2025 fieldwork, El Depa had a team of 10–12 people. In our interview, Tara, co-founder, shared that 95% of the team identified as women, queer, or non-binary, and their ages ranged from 22 to 64. This demographic aligns with the survey data.

The survey responses (n=4) were too low to fully represent the organization's demographics. However, the data provide a subsample on some members' backgrounds (Table 2). For the full list of the demographic options on the survey, refer to Appendix B.

Table 2. Demographics of members who responded to the survey in February 2026

Characteristics	Category	Sample(n=4)
Race	Hispanic	3
	Black / African descent	1
Age Range	26–44 years	3
	18–25 years	1
Gender	Women	3
	Genderqueer	1
Sexuality	Bisexual	2
	Heterosexual	2
Education	Bachelors	3
	Some university	1

During my fieldwork, the team included eight contractors (predominantly women and non-binary identifying) who managed daily operations. Although the organization is moving toward formal employment, most people were hired under contracted services at the time. Based on informal conversations with contractors, these contracts lasted a year and paid them for administrative work, gardening, and cooking.

Since becoming a nonprofit, El Depa has relied on both local and external funding sources. Some funding came from organizations in Borikén, like the Segarra Boerman Foundation. Other monetary support came from food justice groups abroad, U.S. government agencies like the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and universities such as Harvard and Dartmouth. Some of these external institutions are tied

to colonial and capitalist systems linked to dispossession and inequality. As a result, El Depa's funding reflects an important tension. The organization seeks food sovereignty through local production, yet it must still sustain itself within global financial systems.

4.1.3 El Depa's Mission

El Depa's mission is to advance food sovereignty in Borikén through community-rooted services and development (Rebeil et al., 2023). At its core, the organization provides tools, seeds, food, and financial support to community members. These resources and direct aid build up community capacity for food sovereignty:

¡Creemos en compartir recursos para lograr nuestra soberanía alimentaria!
Contamos con una cocina, una biblioteca de recursos agrícolas, ofrecemos un programa de apoyo directo y micro subvenciones agrícolas. (El Depa, n.d.)

Food sovereignty prioritizes local economies and farmer-led food systems grounded in environmental, social, and economic sustainability (La Via Campesina, 2025). Food sovereignty calls for fair trade, local control over land and resources, and social relations free from oppression and inequality (La Via Campesina, 2025). The food sovereignty paradigm also emphasizes equitable participation, community empowerment, and action when dominant food systems fail to meet people's needs.

In this context, El Depa's services aim to build alternative, community-led food systems. These efforts meet immediate needs while contributing to long-term change. Rather than transforming all of Borikén at once, members focus on local action in San Salvador. In doing so, El Depa pushes the needle toward food sovereignty by overcoming important barriers.

V. RESULTS & FINDINGS

“...an alternative for sovereignty in Puerto Rico was actually agroecology.”

Marielisa Sabat (2025)

5.1 Findings Overview

Through a thematic analysis of the interviews, members at El Depa identified capitalism and colonialism as interconnected systems that create financial and public health barriers to food sovereignty. In response, three key findings emerged around El Depa’s strategies for decolonizing the food system. First, El Depa’s members view decentralization as an important ethic for building local economies to reclaim food sovereignty from colonial capitalism. Second, members at El Depa see mutual aid as challenging but essential. Mutual aid sustains participation and resists disaster capitalism by building networks of resource and information sharing. Third, El Depa’s members see community integration—through co-education and food sharing—as essential to building grassroots support for food sovereignty.

5.1.1 Decentralizing Food

El Depa’s members described capitalism and colonialism as interrelated systems that produce financial and public health barriers to food sovereignty (Figure 3). As a brief reminder, colonialism is the political and economic control of a place without sovereignty (Caban, 2005). Capitalism is a system based on private ownership, profit, and market competition (Harris & Delanty, 2023). Together, these systems create unfavorable conditions for food sovereignty in Borikén.

In particular, members at El Depa described how Borikén’s food system is centralized around global corporations. Much of the food Boricuas consume is imported. Supermarkets were described as emblematic of globalization. Carolina referred to supermarkets as “the most international place in the world.” Marielisa noted that a tomato can travel thousands of miles as “part of late-stage capitalism.” Erika added that colonialism has filled the “colony” with supermarkets “on every corner because everything is imported.” In Borikén, there is a massification and globalization of food.

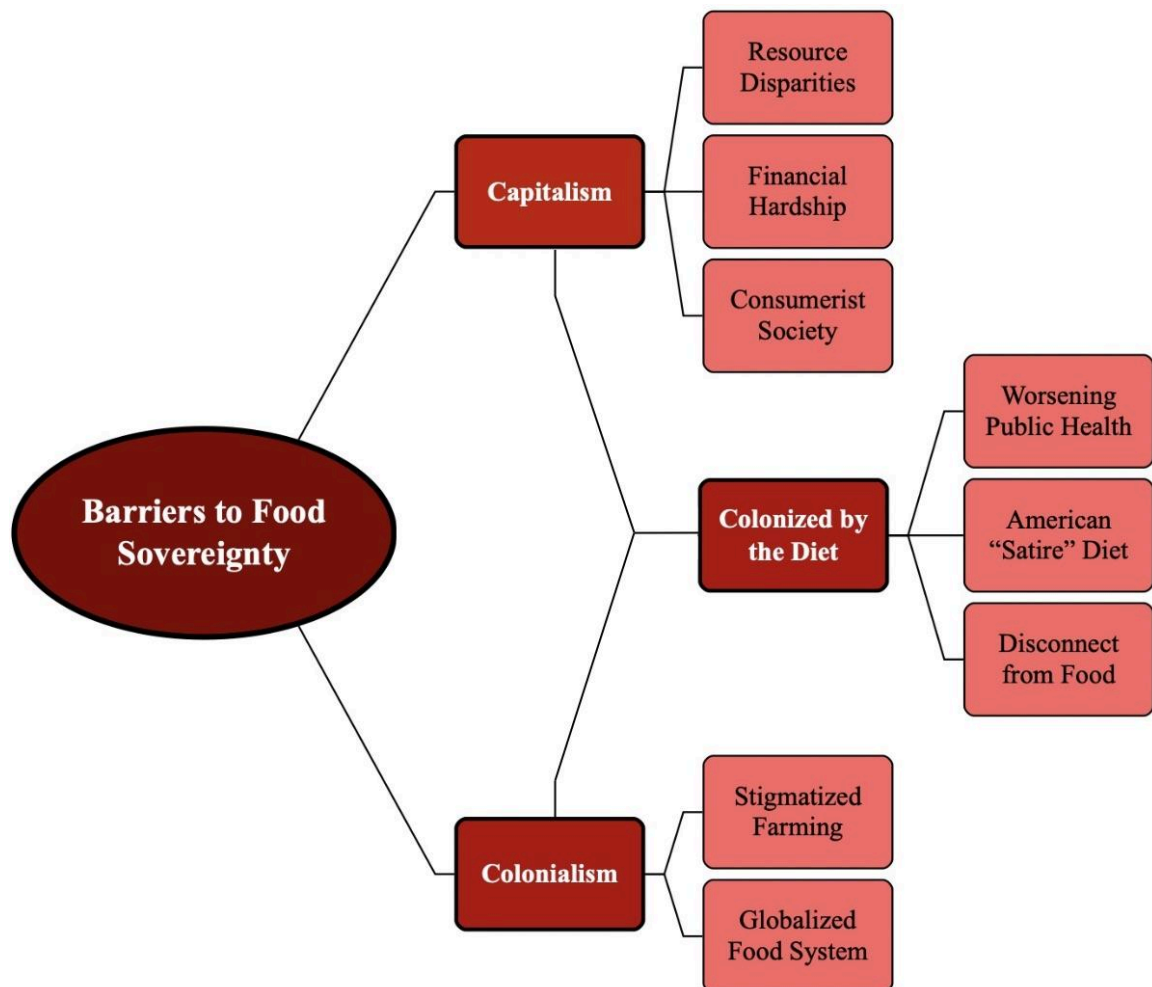


Figure 3. Capitalism and colonialism were the barriers to food sovereignty most frequently discussed by interviewees. These two systems generated multiple and interconnected challenges. The branches show the hierarchy of major themes and subthemes, moving from right to left.

Colonialism was repeatedly identified as another major barrier to food sovereignty. Members at El Depa expressed that colonialism led to the stigmatization of farming. Cocuani said agriculture is seen as “for poor people.” Carolina added that colonization and industrialization devalued farming, treating farming as undignified work. These comments align with research showing that plantation systems and industrial shifts stigmatized farming and pushed migration away from rural life (Charles, 2017; Lakhani, 2021; Velasquez-Manoff, 2022). Altogether, colonial capitalism has distanced local communities from farming.

To counteract the centralized food system, members at El Depa see decentralization as central to their theory of change. To regain power and sovereignty from colonial capitalism, members argue that Boricuas must build local economies (Figure 4). Decentralization is not simply an action, but an ethic and process. Members treat decentralization as a guiding principle for how an economy should function.

For members, decentralization means returning decision-making power to communities. Marielisa described decentralization as essential for sovereignty:

When you decentralize and you localize, that’s when communities gain the power back... these systems become more autonomous and more sovereign. (Marielisa, operations manager)

In this sense, sovereignty is about control over decisions, especially about food. The more localized and participatory these systems are, the more power communities hold. Decision-making is fundamental to autonomy.

This ethic shapes how members understand economic change. Members do not seek to rely on global markets. Instead, members aim to build local economies that

sustain local farmers. Their goal is not only to produce enough food. El Depa seeks to transform the economic structures that govern agriculture. This goal reflects a broader theory of change. Members at El Depa are defining long-term goals, such as food sovereignty, and working backwards to create the necessary conditions.

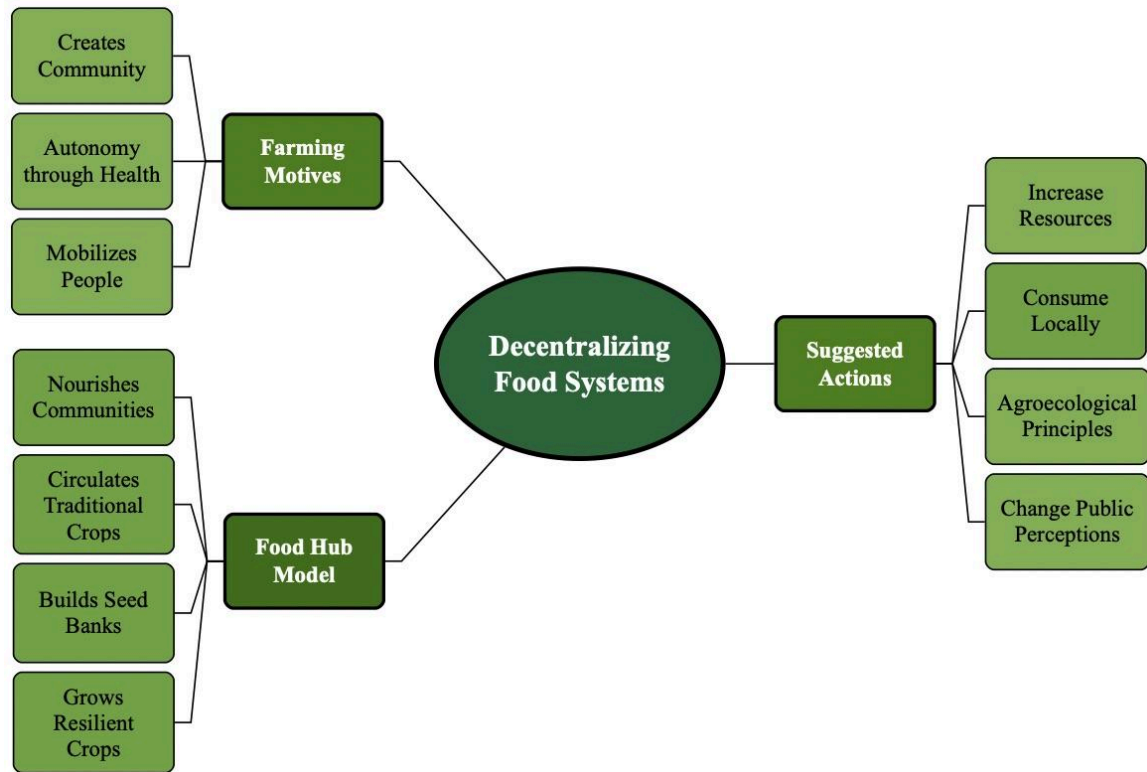


Figure 4. Decentralizing food systems was the most frequently discussed solution to food sovereignty among interviewees. The branches show the hierarchy of major themes and subthemes. The upper-left node represents motivations for farming; the lower-left node highlights how the food hub model puts food sovereignty into practice; the right node presents interviewees’ suggestions for increasing local food systems.

El Depa’s ethics reflect a common agroecological critique of capitalism. Members highlighted many noncapitalist practices, such as mutual aid, cooperation, and gift exchange, that prioritize community needs over profit (Adams, 2026). In this way, El Depa promotes noncapitalist relationships rooted in collective care and mutual support. Altogether, El Depa’s ethic aligns with the agroecological critique of capitalist systems that exploit people and ecosystems (La Via Campesina, 2017; Jonas, 2024).

Tara, co-director, further described this agroecological vision. They emphasized the need to create an economy in which farmers can be sustained long-term, without relying solely on food sales. To Tara, the food hub model supports alternative forms of exchange, including mutual aid, barter, and shared resources:

...to be able to see a day where farmers can be a part of an economy... that doesn't necessarily depend on food being sold... there are other eco economies...
(Tara, co-founder)

Tara reflects an agroecological and noncapitalist outlook that prioritizes human needs over profit in the food system (Diaz & Hunsberger, 2018; Adams, 2026). This is a shift away from conventional market logic, which prioritizes competition and profit maximization. Therefore, decentralization points El Depa toward alternative markets for food sovereignty.

Members also emphasized that decentralization is possible. Several noted that Borikén “has land for planting” (Cocuani). Others stressed that growing food is not inherently difficult, as “Puerto Rico is not Antarctica” (Marielisa), and that even “the smallest spaces have very fertile land” (Carolina). These statements reinforce the feasibility of local food production.

Central to this ethic of decentralization is the motivation to farm. Members described farming as a way to build community, support autonomy, and mobilize people. Carolina explained that farming with community was personally important:

And furthermore, how can I guarantee my health and well-being in my territory is farming, is growing our food, is being connected as communities. And it's also

understanding that we cannot carry the weight of the world, but it can actually be very much carried within a community, right? (Carolina, grants manager)

This quote highlights the importance of community for members at El Depa. The “weight” of challenges to food sovereignty is eased when more people are involved. In this way, decentralized food systems depend on broad participation and strong relationships. This quote again underscores the importance of a localized, participatory food system.

Together, these perspectives demonstrate that decentralization is not just a strategy, but a guiding ethic. Through local production, noncapitalist practices, and alternative economies, members at El Depa seek to shift power away from colonial capitalism and toward food sovereignty.

5.1.2 Mutual Aid Networks

Members at El Depa consistently described the government as neglectful. Carmen noted that the state is not “focused on feeding its people.” Marielisa extended this critique, explaining that many sectors in Borikén “lack support and resources.” Cocuani added that the government does not work “in favor of the community” and instead prioritizes land for “commerce,” such as tourism.

Land, in particular, has become more limited after María due to disaster capitalism. Rebeil et al. (2023) similarly found that agricultural land in Borikén is expensive and difficult to access. They argue that recent U.S. policies increased gentrification and reduced local access to land after María. These policies left much of

the most productive farmland under corporate control (Rebeil et al., 2023). Together, our findings point to broader patterns of state neglect.

As a result, organizations rely on one another through mutual aid. Mutual aid is a form of political participation based on reciprocity and horizontal relationships (Skyer et al., 2025). Communities meet needs through solidarity, often outside or alongside state systems, through direct support, shared responsibility, and non-hierarchical collaboration (Skyer et al., 2025). In this way, mutual aid strengthens collective power. Mutual aid is also a noncapitalist practice that reflects agroecology's broader pushback against capitalism (La Via Campesina, 2017; Adams, 2026). In Borikén, mutual aid networks expanded agroecology through education, resource sharing, and solidarity (Dazzo, 2025).



Figure 5. Interviewees discussed mutual aid. The branches show the hierarchy of major themes and subthemes. The left node represents challenges to mutual aid; the right node highlights examples of solidarity.

Members at El Depa described mutual aid in Borikén as both essential and challenging. Mutual aid is necessary to sustain the food sovereignty movement, but can be difficult to maintain. Members identified differences in organizational ideology and unequal workloads (Figure 5). Carolina described this imbalance:

...I feel like we are all rowing in the same direction, but some of our boats are heavier and are slower, and some boats are more agile, right? And we are like, not necessarily like agreeing on, like, what is the absolute north? No. (Carolina, grants manager)

This quote shows that some organizations carry more responsibility than others. The quote also highlights a lack of shared direction, which Carolina calls the “absolute north,” or a common vision. She later argued that organizations need an “ideological conviction” to serve as an “educational base” for building a movement. In her view, groups must first agree on why they are doing the work.

Whether mutual aid needs a fixed long-term vision is debated. Some organizers might argue that mutual aid groups do not require a fixed “true north.” But groups do need shared principles of solidarity and voluntary action to meet community needs. For Carolina, however, alignment is necessary for advancing food sovereignty.

Although mutual aid can be challenging due to organizational differences, members highlighted examples of solidarity. Rebeil et al. (2023) also found that El Depa builds mutual support networks by leveraging community assets rather than creating dependency. This approach strengthens local capacity. Similarly, this study shows how resource and information sharing within mutual aid networks supports members’ professional development.

Members at El Depa described learning about agroecology and food sovereignty through their social networks (Figure 6). Cocuani was introduced to agroecology through *Madre Tierra* at farmers’ markets. She also participated in the Centro de Ayuda Mutua (CAM). As discussed, CAMS emerged after Hurricane María to meet community needs (Dazzo, 2025). The CAMs connect members at El Depa to wider mutual aid networks.

Other members described similar educational pathways. Erika learned through the resistance camp *Playas Pal Pueblo*, where she joined farming brigades and first encountered El Depa. Carolina became involved through an agroecology and horticulture

course with *El Josco Bravo*, which Carmen also attended. Marielisa discovered agroecology through a university student garden, *Huerto Atabey*. One survey respondent mentioned Huerto Callejón Trujillo. These examples show that many members entered agroecology through multiple organizations and social networks. Together, these groups connect people with knowledge, resources, and support, much like mutual aid networks.

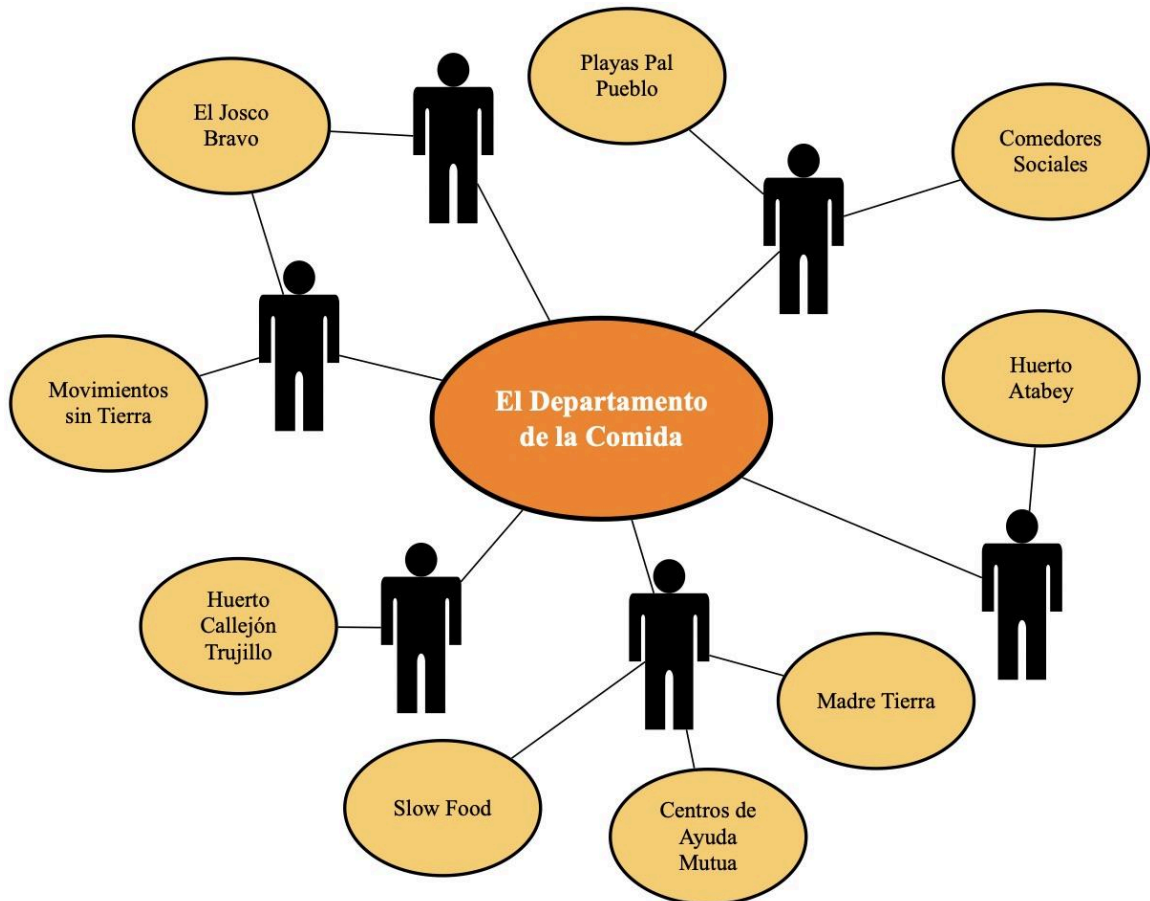


Figure 6. Social networks of El Depa’s members, based on interviews and survey responses. Nodes represent groups that members have engaged with. Information flows through members’ social networks, and back to El Depa.

For some members at El Depa, these groups influenced their professional development. Among survey respondents who participated in other agroecological groups (n=3), most reported gaining experience through volunteering or service. Some members identified developing skills such as community outreach, as well as knowledge in

agroecology, horticulture, plant breeding and genetics, and farm management. Overall, some members developed through hands-on experience with other groups.

People in the workforce were also important to members' development. Before joining El Depa, some members described how mentors and peers influenced their careers. Most survey respondents (n=3) said mentors influenced their career paths through guidance, trust, and skill development, helping them grow in their roles. Peers also played an important role. Most respondents (n=3) said colleagues influenced their development through shared work, conversations, and new ideas. However, this experience was not true for everyone. One survey respondent said that they lacked mentors or influential peers. They described their career path as self-guided by personal interests. Altogether, these experiences suggest that workplace relationships can meaningfully influence some members' career pathways and involvement in El Depa.

Altogether, mutual aid has emerged in response to state neglect. Members at El Depa rely on mutual aid networks to share information about food sovereignty and agroecology. These connections shape career pathways and influence how members come to join El Depa. Once involved, members continue sharing knowledge and resources across their networks. As Erika reflected, "I'm at a base where people come and it's like a web that's forming...from the kitchen to the library to the seeds." In this way, mutual aid builds solidarity and helps sustain the food sovereignty movement.

5.1.3 Community Integration

There are also public health barriers to food sovereignty. Members at El Depa argued that capitalism and colonialism negatively shape diets and health. Members linked these systems to poor nutrition and rising health problems. Cocuani described available

foods as ultra-processed and low in nutrients. She pointed to increasing issues such as obesity, heart disease, and poor eating habits, noting that even “farmers are also eating poorly.” Carolina similarly described Borikén as “a very sick society,” both physically and emotionally. For Carolina, “Puerto Rican culture was... colonized through diet.”

Marrero et al. (2022b) also argued that poor-quality food weakens populations. Rebeil et al. (2023) similarly found that imported foods often “appease hunger or pain or need,” but do not necessarily nourish or heal people. These findings align with the experiences of members of El Depa who participated in this study. Members linked declining public health in Borikén to imported, unhealthy foods.

Food and health then become important for change. In response, members at El Depa see community integration—through co-education and food sharing (Figure 7)—as essential to building grassroots support for food sovereignty.

When asked which projects they valued most, members often highlighted those that directly engaged the community. Carolina shared that El Depa’s neighbors and collaborating farmers became her “family.” Most survey respondents (n=3) also ranked “community” as highly relevant to their work at El Depa. These findings suggest that relationship-building is important for grassroots support of food sovereignty.

Members emphasized co-education as a key practice for building these relationships. Co-education means learning with and from the community. Co-education is a shared process that benefits everyone involved. One of the most cited examples was *Proyecto Ceiba*. This apprenticeship paid young farmers stipends to work with older farmers on ecological projects.

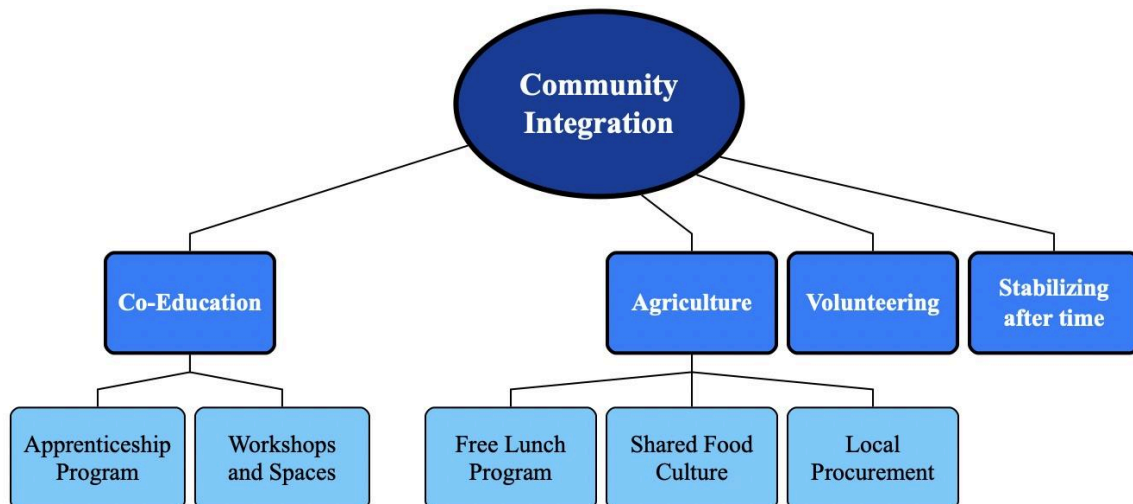


Figure 7. Interviewees described how El Depa integrates with the community of San Salvador, Caguas. The branches show the hierarchy of major themes and subthemes. The leftmost nodes represent key integration pathways: co-education, agriculture, volunteering, and stabilizing over time.

Proyecto Ceiba was initiated by Carolina to support older farmers beyond micro-grants. She drew inspiration from *Campesino, a Campesino*, a popular agroecological model and movement in the global south (Rosset et al., 2011). Carolina’s goal was to sustain social and educational relationships through structured exchange. Proyecto Ceiba also resolves generational disparities in resources and knowledge, and addresses the aging agricultural workforce (Rebeil et al., 2023).

Eríka first joined El Depa through this apprenticeship. She described Proyecto Ceiba as “very enriching in terms of wisdom,” especially during a time she described as “vulnerable,” as she was relocating and changing careers. She explained her growth:

...when it comes to agriculture, most of it was knowledge and wisdom from the old men and women here in San Salvador. (Eríka, nursery educator)

Through Proyecto Ceiba, Eríka gained agricultural “wisdom” from experienced farmers while contributing to their work. This co-educational model strengthened

relationships and built shared capacity. She now applies this knowledge at El Depa's nursery, demonstrating how learning circulates within the organization and community.

After the apprenticeship, Erika began practicing more agroecological farming techniques at El Depa's nursery and in community gardens. She practices agroforestry, cover cropping, intercropping, composting, and cultivating native and climate-adapted plants. She also avoids fertilizers and synthetic agrochemicals. Instead, Erika continues the agricultural "wisdom" of her elders, which reflects agroecology's emphasis on reclaiming ancestral and traditional practices.

Food sharing is another pathway for community integration and food sovereignty. As a food hub, El Depa connects people to food through production, distribution, and shared spaces. One highly discussed service was *Almuerzos pal barrio*, a weekly free lunch program. These plant-based meals are prepared from local or donated crops and served to the public every Wednesday at no cost. During my observations, many locals came to collect food, from elderly grandmothers to young children. Carmen described the meals as hearty, with "all the nutrition and all the nutrients." This nutritional value is especially important given concerns about declining health and diet quality in Borikén.

Cocuani, the head chef, explained that these lunches were key to building relationships in San Salvador. As a queer- and feminist-led organization, El Depa initially faced challenges integrating into a more "traditional" and rural community. Food became a way to bridge that gap. She described how the program helped build trust:

I even received private messages saying, "Wow, what you are doing, you are getting into the heart of San Salvador through the food," and so I increasingly feel that they are allowing us to integrate into the community... (Cocuani, head chef)

The quote demonstrates how sharing food can create entry points for relationship-building. Importantly, the program emerged from community input. Carmen, a resident of San Salvador, had identified hunger as a pressing issue. The organization responded by securing funding. Since then, the program has grown from serving 20 meals to 160 meals.

Almuerzos pal barrio may be a newer program, but food sharing has been central to El Depa since its early days as a restaurant. El Depa still serves meals as a food hub, continuing this core practice. Tara, co-founder, reflected on this continuity:

You know, what I say about that cycle going back is like we are still cooking. The commercial kitchen is still at the head... Even though now I feel it has shifted, because it's not in the city anymore, and it's not a restaurant. (Tara, co-founder)

This shows that El Depa has remained grounded in its original purpose of connecting people to food. Although the organization's legal structure and location have changed, food sharing remains central to its mission of food sovereignty. Today, this core practice continues through Almuerzos pal barrio.

Furthermore, these plant-based meals reflect what Marrero et al. (2022b) describe as neo-traditional diets. These diets prioritize locally sourced, minimally processed foods and reduce reliance on imports. In this way, Almuerzos pal barrio contributes to 'decolonizing diets.' Carolina linked the program directly to food sovereignty in practice:

...all these ideas we talk about, we inhabit this every single week as we serve every single one of those lunches. Right? We are saying like it's not only possible, like you're eating it. (Carolina, grants manager)

For members at El Depa, the free lunch program makes food sovereignty tangible. Almuerzos pal barrio shows that local, agroecological, and nutritious food can be practiced through weekly community support. Like other food hubs, El Depa improves access to affordable and culturally appropriate food while also promoting healthier diets and public health (Papargyropoulou et al., 2024).

Through these free lunches, food takes on a new meaning. Previously, members described a broader societal disconnection from food. Cocuani said colonialism creates a lack of care, where people are “not respecting the land... the food... the people.” Carolina added that industrialization has “disconnected” people “from the source,” reducing food to “just food,” or a commodity. Through the relationship-building from the weekly lunch program, food becomes a point of connection. Food shifts from a commodity to a shared, community-centered practice.

Shared meals are common in agroecological food hubs (Vicente-Vicente et al., 2025). In a Berlin food hub, weekly dinners brought people together to cook and share local, agroecological foods, helping strengthen community ties and encourage more local, plant-based diets (Vicente-Vicente et al., 2025). Similar to El Depa, these meals go beyond food access by building relationships, sharing agroecological knowledge, and practicing food sovereignty in everyday life.

Ultimately, El Depa relies on relationships among farmers, consumers, and community members. Their services connect food production, distribution, and education into a shared system. Through co-education and food sharing, El Depa builds grassroots support for food sovereignty and expands the adoption of agroecological practices.

VI. CONCLUSION

“Invertir en El Depa es invertir en resiliencia territorial a largo plazo.”

El Depa's webpage (2026)

6.1 Thesis Summary

After two months of fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and a follow-up survey, I presented the case study of El Departamento de la Comida. Through this case, I explored two guiding questions: (1) How do agrarian organizations perceive and address barriers to food sovereignty? and (2) What role do social relationships play in strengthening agroecological and food sovereignty movements? To that end, I traced the perceptions and careers of El Depa's members, including directors, contractors, and volunteers. Their collective insights revealed how El Depa's mission and work responded to historic and social conditions.

This case study offers useful findings for other agroecological and food sovereignty studies. El Depa is a standard case that can be compared to other agrarian organizations in Borikén. Standard case studies examine common, everyday phenomena that recur across similar sites (Yin, 2013). Rather than focusing on an unusual example, a standard case helps researchers understand broader social and organizational processes through one representative example (Yin, 2013).

Although El Depa is not generalizable to all agrarian organizations in Borikén, many groups face similar conditions, pursue similar activities, and work toward similar goals. By taking a deep look at one group, this study helps explain broader social processes within the agroecological movement. For this reason, the standard case offers

meaningful insight beyond the organization itself. The in-depth qualitative findings may provide direction and feedback for other agrarian organizations pursuing similar agroecological interventions for food sovereignty.

For starters, many agrarian organizations in Borikén, like El Depa, have been shaped by disasters. A key moment that influenced El Depa's services and mission was the disaster capitalism that followed Hurricanes Irma and María. Many actors used these crises to expand privatization and profit-driven policies at the expense of vulnerable communities (Félix & Holt-Giménez, 2017; Klein, 2007). In response, El Depa focused on building socioecological resilience, or the ability of communities to withstand external shocks (Berkes & Folke, 1998; Holladay et al., 2019). Food access becomes especially important after extreme events. Therefore, El Depa sought to strengthen local, resilient food systems in preparation for future disasters and state negligence.

To build a local, resilient food system, the organization must overcome key barriers to food sovereignty. Members at El Depa identified capitalism and colonialism as interconnected systems that create harmful economic and public health conditions. In response, members emphasized decentralization, mutual aid, and integration as ways to decolonize the food system and advance food sovereignty.

Members at El Depa point to decentralization as a guiding ethic. Decentralization means returning decision-making power to communities. For members, this ethic means building economies that support local farmers and producers and rethinking traditional market logic.

Beyond the agrarian organization, members at El Depa also stress the need for regional solidarity. Mutual aid is already happening through information and resource

sharing across social networks in Borikén. These networks increase participation and help sustain the food sovereignty movement. Members at El Depa described how their networks shaped their career pathways into the organization.

Working toward food sovereignty depends on strong relationships. Community integration is not an outcome. Integration is an ongoing process, built especially through food-sharing and co-education. At El Depa, locals in San Salvador are not just recipients. Members from El Depa and San Salvador exchange support and, over time, gain grassroots support for food sovereignty.

These aforementioned strategies to decolonize the food system are also agroecological. Agroecology is multidisciplinary and understood differently by many people. However, El Depa's mission and services reflect many widely accepted agroecological qualities. As a practice, members use agroecological farming techniques in the nursery and community gardens, including agroforestry, cover cropping, intercropping, composting, and the cultivation of native and climate-adapted plants. Members also avoid synthetic agrochemicals and emphasize traditional and ancestral farming knowledge. These practices support ecological sustainability while reconnecting agriculture to local knowledge and stewardship.

El Depa also reflects agroecology through education and collective participation. Members share agroecological knowledge through workshops, apprenticeships, mutual aid networks, and community events. In this way, El Depa integrates education, research, and action while creating participatory spaces that challenge industrial food systems (Gliessman, 2018). Mutual aid, cooperation, barter, and gift exchange are also common

practices at El Depa. These noncapitalist practices prioritize community needs over profit and reflect agroecology's critique of capitalist food systems.

Importantly, members also understand agroecology as a sociopolitical movement. Agroecology was described as important for collective liberation: the freedom of all systems of oppression. Through local food production, mutual aid, and community organizing, El Depa seeks to build an alternative food system rooted in reciprocity, resilience, and local control. In this sense, El Depa reflects agroecology not only as farming, but also as a sociopolitical movement toward food sovereignty (Diaz & Hunsberger, 2018; Félix, 2023).

At the same time, much of this work remains in a long-term vision stage. El Depa is still a young nonprofit organization, and Borikén remains far from food sovereignty. Like many agrarian organizations, El Depa continues to adapt and experiment with different agroecological interventions. Nevertheless, the organization remains committed to food sovereignty as its long-term goal.

6.2 Future Research

Future research can build on the methods and findings of this study. First, given the importance agrarian organizations place on decentralization, it is worth considering the critiques of localized food systems. Scholars argue that local food systems are not inherently more just, sustainable, or democratic. This notion is often referred to as the “local trap” (Born & Purcell, 2006). The concept challenges the assumption that “local” automatically means better, emphasizing that localization itself is politically neutral (Born & Purcell, 2006).

Much scholarship about the local trap focuses on urban North American cities rather than on a colonized society. In Borikén, localization may therefore hold different political and social significance. Still, the local trap remains important to consider. For agrarian organizations and agroecological movements, localizing food systems may not automatically guarantee equity or justice. Decentralization and localization require careful consideration of how power, labor, and resources are organized.

Another important consideration related to decentralization is the practicality of funding. As noted, El Depa was supported through both local and external funding sources, including institutions tied to colonial histories and capitalist systems. This funding creates tensions. Food sovereignty seeks greater autonomy, yet many organizations still depend on external funding to survive. Future research should examine how other agrarian organizations are funded and whether food sovereignty efforts continue to rely on monetary support rooted in colonial political economies. Future studies can explore the political economy of the food sovereignty movement. If decentralization remains a central goal, agrarian organizations may need to reconcile these tensions and consider alternative economic systems that can sustainably support their programs and services.

Secondly, researchers can examine mutual aid networks across the archipelago. This includes identifying how organizations collaborate, share common goals, and coordinate labor and responsibilities. This is a large task that will require more than one researcher or team. In short, relationship-building must extend beyond the local level and strengthen regional connections.

At the same time, some scholars and organizers caution against romanticizing mutual aid as inherently positive. Mutual aid networks can also reproduce imbalanced power dynamics. As some members demonstrated, tensions can emerge through organizational differences and unequal responsibilities. If mutual aid continues to be pursued as part of food sovereignty efforts, an evaluation of its effectiveness and limitations is needed. Evaluations can help ensure that the ideals and principles of mutual aid are upheld and that they do more good than harm.

Lastly, this work depends on strong partnerships with community members. Transformative research calls for community-partners to be involved at every stage as co-researchers (Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015). I did not fully achieve this, but I made progress. The process was demanding and time-intensive, and required learning along the way. I hope this thesis, through its detail and transparency, can support future scholars and practitioners pursuing transformative research. In this way, I share what I have learned to help ease that path.

Ultimately, members at El Departamento de la Comida show us that an alternative food system in Borikén is possible. Through agroecological farming, communities can nourish themselves. And, perhaps one day, Boricuas can claim sovereignty in food and beyond.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

This was the general outline of interview questions for members at El Depa. Not listed were follow-up questions that further probed members' responses.

Background

1. Did you grow up farming? *If so, where and what was that like?*
 - a. And if not, when did you become interested in farming?
2. Can you tell me the story of how you came to work with this organization? *What drew you to it?*
3. In your role at the organization, what do you do?
 - a. What are your main responsibilities?
 - b. How long have you worked in this role?
 - c. Can you walk me through a day at your job?
4. Which of your past projects have been your favorite? Why?
 - a. What kind of change came from that project?
 - b. What did you learn about agriculture and/or social change from this project?

Understanding Agroecology

5. Is it challenging for locals to grow their own food in Puerto Rico? *If yes, what has been the biggest challenge for you?*
6. What do you think motivates people to grow their own food?
7. Have you seen more locals volunteering or interested in similar organizations?
If yes, when do you think it happened?
8. Can you tell me the story of how you first heard about agroecology?
9. What does agroecology mean to you?

10. How important to you is it to grow/cook with particular foods?
11. Is any food good as long as there is enough, or are there particular foods you want to promote?
 - a. *If they bring up the word traditional or heritage:*
 - i. Can you tell me what “traditional/ or heritage” means to you?
 - i. How many generations old does a practice need to be considered traditional?
 - ii. What are some traditional farming practices?
 - iii. In your organization, have you seen efforts to reclaim traditional farming?

Understanding Food Sovereignty

12. What native crops do you grow in this organization?
 - a. Where do you source your seeds?
 - b. Is the knowledge for growing crops coming mostly from NGOs or from the government department of agriculture?
13. What native crops do you cook with in this organization?
 - a. Where do you source these crops?

Challenges and Perceived Impact

14. What challenges, if any, do you see in expanding agroecology in Puerto Rico?
15. Do you think additional support is needed to increase agroecology? *If yes, what kind of support do you think would be useful?*

Appendix B

These were the survey questions sent to members at El Depa. The survey was formatted and distributed on Google Forms, using Likert scales, open-ended questions, matrix tables, and other tools. Questions were translated into Spanish for members.

1. Thinking of each of the following, how relevant is it to your work in El Depa?					
	Very irrelevant	Somewhat irrelevant	Neutral/ Neither relevant or irrelevant	Somewhat relevant	Very Relevant
Education					
Environmentalism					
Feminism					
Queerness					
Spirituality					
Sovereignty					
Social Justice					

Career Background and Networking

2. Where did you work before joining El Depa? Please list your last three to four positions.
3. Did you have a mentor, advisor, or supervisor in any of these positions who influenced your career direction?
 - a. Yes
 - i. How did they support or influence you?
 - b. No
 - i. Why did you choose this field?
4. Did you have any coworkers, colleagues, or peers who influenced your career?
 - a. Yes
 - i. How did they support or influence you?
 - b. No
 - i. Why did you choose this field?

Training Networking

5. Have you worked, volunteered, or trained with other agroecological groups or farms?
- a. Yes. *Select all that apply.*
 - i. El Josco Bravo
 - ii. Fundacion Bucarbon
 - iii. Organización Boricúa
 - iv. Plenitud PR
 - v. Armonía en la Montaña
 - vi. The Caribbean Agroforestry Institute
 - vii. FiTiCAS
 - viii. Frutos del Guacabo
 - ix. Monte Azul Foundation
 - x. Other: _____
 - b. No
6. In what formats were these agroecological training offered?
- a. Apprenticeship
 - b. Volunteer/Service
 - c. Workshop
 - d. Seminar
 - e. Class
 - f. Other: _____
7. What kinds of skills or knowledge did you learn from these experiences? Select all that apply.
- a. Agronomy
 - b. Agroecology
 - c. Engineering
 - d. Horticulture
 - e. Soil science
 - f. Natural resources
 - g. Plant breeding and genetics
 - h. Marketing
 - i. Farm management
 - j. Outreach
 - k. Consumer behavior
 - l. Other (please list): _____

8. People bring skills and develop others in a job. Which of the following did you bring and which did you develop at El Depa?		
	Brought to El Depa	Developed at El Depa
Budget management		
Conflict resolution		
Decision-making		
Documentation/ record keeping		
Event planning		
Facilitating meetings		
Grant writing		
Public Speaking		
Teamwork / collaboration		
Maintaining communication channels		
Managing shared spaces or materials		
Monitoring and evaluation		
Stakeholder communication		
Social media management		
Supervising / mentoring others		
Time management		
Using organizational tools (shared drives, spreadsheets, project boards)		

9. Thinking about the skills and knowledge that you brought to El Depa, where did you develop them: _____

10. Which of the following experiences were the most influential, important, or useful in helping you develop these skills?
- Apprenticeship
 - Community groups
 - Education

- d. Employment
- e. Volunteer/ Service
- f. Workshop
- g. Other: _____

11. Is there anything else that you would like to share
- a. Yes. *Please explain:* _____
 - b. No

Demographic Background

12. What is your gender identity?
- a. Woman
 - b. Man
 - c. Non-binary
 - d. Genderqueer
 - e. Prefer to self-describe
 - f. Prefer not to say
13. Which race or ethnicity best describes you? (Please choose only one.)
- a. American Indian or Alaskan Native
 - b. Asian / Pacific Islander
 - c. Black or African American
 - d. Hispanic
 - e. White / Caucasian
 - f. Multiple ethnicity
 - i. Please specify which ethnicities
 - g. Other: _____
 - h. Prefer not to answer
14. What is your age range?
- a. 18–25 years
 - b. 26–44 years
 - c. 45–59 years
 - d. 60+ years
 - e. Prefer not to say
15. What is your sexual orientation or expression?
- a. Heterosexual/straight
 - b. Gay/lesbian
 - c. Bisexual
 - d. Asexual
 - e. Queer

- f. Other (please specify): _____
- g. Prefer not to say

Educational Background

16. Have you studied outside of Puerto Rico?

- a. Yes
 - i. What did you study?
 - ii. How long were you there?
 - iii. What type of experience was it? Select all that apply.
 - 1. Apprenticeship
 - 2. Volunteer/Service
 - 3. Workshop
 - 4. Seminar
 - 5. Class
 - 6. Certificate program
 - 7. Degree program
 - a. <If it was part of a degree program> What level?
 - i. Associate's
 - ii. Bachelor's
 - iii. Master's
 - iv. Doctorate
 - v. Other: _____
- b. No

17. What is your highest level of education?

- a. Some high school (did not complete)
- b. Completed high school
- c. GED
- d. Some college
- e. Associate's degree
- f. Bachelor's degree
- g. Some graduate studies
- h. Master's degree
- i. Doctorate
- j. Vocational training
- k. None of the above (please explain): _____
- l. Prefer not to say

18. Is your current job related to your highest level of education?

- a. Yes
- b. No

Appendix C

Table 3. Findings from the thematic analysis of interviews with members of El Depa

Themes and Subthemes	# of Participants per Theme	# of Quotes per Theme
BARRIERS TO FOOD SOVEREIGNTY	6	80
Capitalism is deterring locals from farming	6	34
Difficult to earn income from food systems	4	12
Generational disparities of resources	6	16
Locals live in a consumerist society	3	5
Colonialism dissociates locals of healthy foods	6	46
Colonialism stigmatized farming	3	6
Colonialism subordinated locals through poor health	4	12
Globalization and massification of food	6	16
Locals are emotionally disconnected to conventional farming	3	12
DECENTRALIZING FOOD	6	192
Actions to expand agriculture	6	62
Championing agroecological principals	6	29
Changing public perceptions of farming	5	11
Consuming locally	4	11
Increasing access to resources	4	11
Motivations for farming	6	51
Farming creates community	3	15
Farming for health and autonomy	5	17
Mobilization after extreme events	5	10
The food hub model	6	79

Themes and Subthemes	# of Participants per Theme	# of Quotes per Theme
Building a seed bank with the community	5	8
Growing culturally relevant crops	3	16
Growing resilient and beneficial crops	4	22
Plant-based meals nourish communities	5	32
MUTUAL AID NETWORKS	5	50
Challenges to mutual aid	5	18
State neglect and disaster capitalism	5	9
Organizational differences	3	9
Examples of solidarity	5	32
Learning with other groups	5	26
Outreach through social networks	4	6
COMMUNITY INTEGRATION	6	79
Food bridges locals and newcomers	5	33
Food culture unites a society	3	10
Free lunch program connects people	3	8
Local procurement generates new economies	4	14
Co-Education with the community	5	29
Apprenticeship and knowledge exchanges	2	16
Workshops and educational spaces	5	13
Stabilizing after time	3	10
Volunteering expands program impact	3	7