

# **The Time is Now for Puerto Rico Food Sovereignty**

By Senator Cristina Pacione-Zayas and Alderperson Jessie Fuentes

Every five years, Congress reauthorizes a multi-year law that funds an array of agricultural and food programs known as the Farm Bill, including nutritional assistance or food stamps. This summer, Congress is set to pass a new version of the bill. This is the opportunity being seized by Chicago's very own Puerto Rican Cultural Center (PRCC) in their request for the inclusion of the Puerto Rico Food Sovereignty in the farm bill. The proposal seeks to dedicate a significant portion of the funds allocated to Puerto Rico for nutritional assistance to support the island's local farmers in a culturally and language competent way.

Food insecurity is among the most vexing challenges our brothers and sisters in Puerto Rico face. Currently, the island imports over 80 percent of its food. By relying almost exclusively on food coming from outside the island, Puerto Rico's nutritional system lacks the necessary sustainability to support itself, especially in an emergency. In the aftermath of Hurricane María, the lack of a robust local agriculture system resulted in thousands of Puerto Ricans going hungry as ships were unable to dock at the storm-battered ports. According to a survey conducted by George Washington University, over 40% of Puerto Ricans experience food insecurity, thus necessitating American Congressional action to address this crisis.

The PRCC's proposal is a culturally competent solution to bringing greater agricultural self-sufficiency. Under the Puerto Rico Food Sovereignty Program, all activities would be conducted in Puerto Rican Spanish and all materials and resources used in connection with the program would also be in the island's native language. This will ensure all eligible organizations and farmers can take full advantage of the program and its resources.

The Puerto Rico Food Sovereignty Program proposal is already gaining steam. In a matter of a few weeks after initially being proposed, the program has already garnered the public support of Mayor Julia Nazario of Loíza, the preeminent Puerto Rican agroecological expert Nelson Álvarez Febles, the University of Puerto Rico College of Agricultural Sciences at the Mayagüez Campus, as well as the UPR's Experimental Station. Puerto Ricans and allies are clamoring for change, and the farm bill is the vehicle to make it happen.

As we all already know, Puerto Rico has been recovering from natural disasters since Hurricane María devastated the island in 2017. Now is the time for the island to move from mere recovery to achieving a sustainable model that will ensure that no Puerto Rican should face the hard decision between affording food or paying for other services. That is why we fully support the inclusion of the Puerto Rico Food Sovereignty Program in the Farm Bill.

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