Introduction

The question of decolonization has always been up for debate in the UN decolonization committee; whether decolonization would benefit Puerto Rico or if it isn’t ready for that independence yet. When hurricane Irma hit Puerto Rico, followed by Hurricane Maria 2 weeks later, (both being category 5 hurricanes) Puerto Rico was left in ruins and they set a pathway for a receding economy due to the mounting debt. The limited economic and political rights that Puerto Rico could exercise as a US territory, put a further strain on Puerto Rico holding it back from recovery.

Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, American Samoa, US Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, are all US territories. A US territory is self-governed but is still controlled by the US federal government. People of these territories are considered US citizens but cannot exercise equal rights as a citizen of the 50 states; this includes the inability to vote or work in congress.

The disinterest and disrespect Puerto Rico received from US president, Donald Trump, as a response to their requests for aid post-hurricane Maria and Irma, caught international attention. Trump visited Puerto Rico after Hurricane Irma and proceeded to throw toilet roles. This act of mockery at the height of a humanitarian crisis sparked outrage. That, alongside many more fundamental issues regarding the relationship between America and its territories came to light. Besides being denied financial aid for home repairs during the first months post-hurricane Maria, as a US territory, Puerto Rico could not receive imports or exports off boats that were not American-built (due to the Jones Act of 1920). This meant that Puerto Rican citizens could not receive any aid from any other country. It is due to the Jones Act set in place as a result of their colonization, that human rights are being violated in Puerto Rico since they had insufficient electricity, food and water, in addition to schools closing up for months following the hurricanes.

Finally, the economic manipulation Puerto Rico was put under was due to raised taxation and the inability to rely on inflation (as most countries in crisis do but Puerto Rico cannot as they use the US
The situation of American colonialism is more a situation of economic terrorism, as they exploited Puerto Rican resources. The economic terrorism started immediately following the hurricanes. Taxes were raised, schools were closed (forcefully) and it can be argued that the local government was intimidated into becoming a ‘puppet’ for the US government. Following hurricane Irma and hurricane Maria, residents’ requests for financial aid for repairing their homes were rejected, instead they were given relocation vouchers. This is believed to be an attempt to wipe out the Puerto Rican population and make way for gentrification, according to the General Assembly, the Special Committee on Decolonization.

**Definition of Key Terms**

**Decolonization**

When a state withdraws from its now-former colony, allowing it to be independent, free of its laws.

**Inflation**

Raising the prices of basic goods and services, with the aim to keep a steady economy. However, in most cases, inflation also applies to the wages of citizens to maintain a proportionality between money spent and income. This simply means that the people of the country can still buy the same things but with more physical money. Overall, this only affects the currency of the country. The currency of the country decreases in value.

**Economic Recession**

GDP is simply the market value/worth of products, goods and services produced by a country. Economic recession is the continuous decline in GDP.

**Unincorporated U.S Territory**

An unincorporated territory is, an area under the control of the United States government that is not ‘incorporated’, although under United States law, for the objectives of United States constitutional law. In Unincorporated territories, the U.S. constitution is only partially applied.

**Jones Act**
A federal law which, polices maritime commerce in the United States. It states that goods shipped between U.S ports (this includes ports of the U.S territories) must be transported on ships that are built, owned, and operated by United States citizens or even permanent residents.

US federal government

It is the national government of the United States, that consists of 50 states, 5 self-governing territories, a federal district, and several islands in possession.

Commonwealth

Commonwealth is defined as an independent, self-determining country or community or democratic republic.

Statehood

A status that entitles a nation to be represented by one centralized government with authority over the geographical area.

Background Information

On July 25, 1898, the United States claimed Puerto Rico as part of the Spanish-American War. And in 1917 they were granted US citizenship but with no effective representation in the US government. Having no real voice in congress means that its government is only in control of local financial matters, and distributing aid coming from the federal government.

The 50 states of the US were ‘incorporated territories’ that eventually became the American states. However, Puerto Rico, along with many other islands ceded by the Spanish, were labelled an “unincorporated state” due to their ‘alien race’. In fact, they were only given passports and officially became US citizens in 1917 so that the US could deploy them in World War 1.

Following their colonization of Puerto Rico, the U.S has been manifesting an image of themselves as “saviors” to their territories. But in fact, it is that due to the oppression and economic black mail set by the US, Puerto Rico has lost many lives over the years. Following hurricane Irma and hurricane Maria, 4000 individuals have died due to lack of basic services like electricity and clean water.

In the first half of the 20th century, there were many independence movements in Puerto Rico, led by Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos. All were unsuccessful and failed. But in 1950, the islands first elected president Luis Munoz Marin reached an agreement to evolve the colonial rule into a more sublime relationship, called commonwealth and it was supported by 81% of the population. This weakened the
Independence movement but provoked a statehood party to flourish. In 1967 when votes were taken on the preferred political status, commonwealth had the majority of the votes in 1993, a second wave of votes were taken, and more people were in favor of statehood. In 1998, another plebiscite was held and they were given the option to choose between commonwealth, free association (this was the first time citizens were presented with this option) , statehood and independence, or none of the above. None of the above had the highest votes. Finally, in 2012 the plebiscite simply asked Puerto Ricans: “Do you agree that Puerto Rico should continue to have its present form of territorial status” and majority voted no. In summary the votes have all reaffirmed Puerto Rico’s commonwealth status.

Limitations set due to colonization

Previously, the American federal government has approached human rights violation accusations with victim-blaming. Puerto Ricans were pleading for their self-determination through protest, and president, Donald J. Trump, responded over twitter that they were not ready to fill a whole government. However, to an extent, it is due to political manipulation from the federal government that the government of Puerto Rico has not been able to prove its ability to function as an independent state. This is because the Governor of Puerto Rico cannot make any economic plans, or any decisions nonetheless, as they are all controlled and could be overruled by the US. Moreover, despite being US citizens their jobs in America are limited, and coincidentally these jobs do not include working in congress. With no representation in the house of representatives, the federal system could keep victim blaming with essentially no one to stand up to them or represent the Puerto Ricans and ask for their rights.

Unlike the 50 states, Puerto Rico does not benefit from the Affordable Care Act (ACA). This is because it has neither, a state-run or a federally assisted individual insurance plan. As a result of the inability of individuals to purchase subsidized individual health insurance through ACA marketplaces as well as, its high poverty rate; Puerto Rico has relied more on public facilities like community health centers, Medicaid, and Medicare. However due to its status as a territory, it receives less support from the federal government for Medicaid than it would if it were a state.

Puerto Rico is in no position to give up. Literally, the territory could not default because it cannot file for chapter 9 bankruptcy protection; this would allow them to negotiate flexible payment plans (under court supervision). And on the other hand, Puerto Rico cannot resort to what most troubled European countries resort to: inflation. This is because it uses the US dollar. This puts Puerto rico in a situation where it must act fast to gain control over its recession, because as of now its debt works out to be more
than $18000 per capita (to put things into context, the most indebted state in the US, Massachusetts, has a debt toll of $11000 per capita.)

**The Jones Act**

Puerto Rico was important to the US because its land was rich in sugar and coffee. It produced; cattle, sugar cane, coffee, and tobacco. When the US took over it disrupted their coffee industry creating a sugar economy to completely erase it. With such a rich land, Puerto Rico was destined to be a rich country but due to manipulation over their trade under the Jones Act, Puerto Rico is in poverty.

The economy faced big changes during world war one when the Jones act was introduced. The Jones act increased the prices of transported goods to and from Puerto Rico, and subsequently prices on the island itself were raised. Not only that, but it also prohibited Puerto Rico from having its own trade relationships, which could have led to a better economic state for Puerto Rico with more long-term positive effects. In modern day Puerto Rico, the Jones act has been the main key holding back its recovery post-hurricane Maria and Irma. As a result of the Jones act, no relief could get to Puerto Rico unless it came from the US mainland. So essentially the situation in Puerto Rico is a case of limited aid, with demolished houses leaving thousands homeless and unemployed as a result of factories closing up due to no electricity on the islands.

To summarize how colonization disadvantaged Puerto Rico by implementing the Jones Act before and especially during the post-hurricane period; it has increased cost of shipped goods to Puerto Rico, by restricting the number of possible vessels through which Puerto Rico could receive delivered goods legally. This gave shipping companies an opportunity to charge higher rates as there was no competition for consumers. A study carried out by the New York Federal reserve showed that actually the cost of importing a container to Puerto Rico from the US was double to cost of a container from a foreign port.

In addition, for the price paid on these goods, the supply arriving on American-owned vessels is small in comparison to the global supply of ships, and simultaneously the demand for these basic goods is only increasing.

**Human Rights (recognized by the UN) violated as a result of the Jones Act**

No relief from other countries could legally arrive at Puerto Rico and thus recovery and response to the hurricane has been very slow. 2 years later and still half the population does not have electricity and 10% do not have access to clean potable water.
Moreover, the Puerto Ricans are stranded on an island with no electricity (unable to communicate with relatives in the mainland), no access to clean and uncontaminated water, or any food. There are whole hospitals running on generators, and there is a nationwide medicine shortage which has contributed to the death of the citizens. Many have died as the power outage has meant they could not use their medical devices (i.e. ventilators).

Officials in Puerto Rico have negotiated having the Jones Act temporarily suspended so that the stranded citizens could get the aid they need. When Trump was asked by reporters if his administration would approve of it, he said, “well we are thinking about that” and hinted of another motivation “a lot of the people that work in the shipping industry… don’t want the jones Act lifted. ” This is because it would mean the loss of a small number of Americans’ jobs.

Violation of Educational Rights

Besides the neglect, the discourse due to hurricanes Irma and Maria is expected to have a negative effect on the future generation. This is because schools have been completely shut down after the hurricanes, some simply did not survive the hurricane whilst others struggled to survive without any clean water and electricity. Students, as young as five, have protested and hung their uniforms at the gates of their schools with endearing messages begging the government to reopen their schools.

A quarter of the public schools on the islands have been completely shut down and there has been a shift towards privatizing the educational system (despite the resistance from the citizens of the island). This will have a snowball effect on the uneducated and unemployed portions of the population; as they cannot afford to send their kids to private schools, their kids will be uneducated, and this will repeat itself in future generations if not changed.

Not only has the neglect compromised education, but the aftermath of the hurricanes has displaced a number of citizens that school children are being diagnosed with depression and anxiety at levels double that of their age group. This will breed a generation of traumatized persons.

Corruption of the Puerto Rican government

Protests broke out in Puerto Rico where the civilians demanded that the now-former governor, Ricardo Rosello, who has sided with American colonials and bowed down to their manipulation, resign from his position. Their wishes were fulfilled as he did step down on 2nd August, 2019. He resigned after a messenger scandal where he and 11 members of his administration made misogynistic, homophobic comments and mocked victims of Hurricane Irma. Starting August 7th, Wanda Vasquez Garced, former justice minister, became governor. This does not relieve the citizens of Puerto Rico as she herself has
turned a blind eye to the corruption and U.S manipulation that occurred in Puerto Rico. She has failed to prosecute or even investigate reported corruption. Another election is to be held November 2019, to hopefully elect a new governor that will come to census with the civilians and evoke self-determination.

**Operation Bootstrap**

Was an initiative to completely industrialize Puerto Rico that was introduced by the first elected Puerto Rican governor, Luis Munoz Marin. In fact, it was successful and cheap labor and low tax laws that made Puerto Rico a lucrative site for U.S businessmen and manufacturers to the island. The island now is dominated by US investors’ companies that pay virtually no taxes to the State of Puerto Rico. According to the Mayor of the capital city, San Juan, this frustrated the citizens; “Puerto Rican people worked and worked only to what led their country become more and more impoverished”.

Initially, operation bootstrap caused the Puerto Rican economy to boom. Industrial factories were being built all across the country and subsequently infrastructure (schools, roads, etc.) improved. As a result, 140,000 new jobs were created and the net income from manufacturing went from $27 million to $486 million in 20 years. Overall Puerto Rico evolved from an agricultural economy to an industrial economy.

Unfortunately, Asian competitors surfaced in the 1960s with lower labor costs which became more profitable for these investors. The fleeing corporations took job opportunities with them, thus the majority of working-class citizens fled to the U.S as a result. This created a vicious fiscal cycle as this meant less people to pay taxes, which the government relied on to pay back debt. Subsequently, the debt crisis is worsening. Currently Puerto Rico’s death works to be $18000 per capita (this is $7,000 more than that of Mississippi, the most indebted of the 50 states)

In an attempt to keep operation bootstrap alive the Puerto Rican government sought after pharmaceutical and electrical companies which failed their agricultural sector and began relying on the U.S. for welfare assistance. The poor standard to which the U.S. supported Puerto Rico and took advantage of the Jones Act triggered the economic recession in the U.S. Post Hurricane recovery was made near impossible, as the country had no agricultural corporations in place to provide for itself when aid from the U.S. was insufficient.
Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

FEMA has provided temporary homes, shelters and hotels for the thousands of displaced families. As of today, over 462,000 households have received $1.4 billion from FEMA. And under their temporary shelters, 7,000 families were housed.

However, it is worth mentioning that the US has driven away any international relief when Trump phrased in a tweet that Puerto Rico has received all the help it needs for a full recovery and $90 billion. When in reality only $40 billion have been issued and none of it has been received by the Puerto Rican government yet due to delays of awaiting federal approval. The only money that has physically reached the country is that from FEMA which only amounts to a total of $3.7 billion.

Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is an NGO based in Puerto Rico and focuses its relief on the underserved populations, who may have been dismissed by other large-scale relief efforts. People that fall into that category are; the elderly and those with disabilities.

Also, this global organization revived the island’s small businesses (i.e, farming, fishing, etc). As a result of their efforts, now 1 in 3 employed citizens are employed by these businesses. They did this by teaching and providing unemployed citizens with the necessary tools, and basic skills; this restored hope for many families across the island and restabilized these businesses as the unemployed population filled in the places of the working class citizens that fled to the U.S mainland after the storms.

The Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA)

It wasn’t until august 2018 (almost a year after the hurricanes) that PREPA managed to restore 100% of their customers’ power. However this leaves larger infrastructures like schools and hospitals still operating on generators.

The generators that these hospitals are running on, do not have sufficient diesel most days. This affects the 6,000 dialysis patients of Puerto Rico the most, as only 43 out of the 46 dialysis centers are classified as operational.

The chief executive of PREPA ahs said that once the hospitals’ infrastructure has been restored he will make it his number one priority to restore adequate energy for at least one hospital in each region.
United States Naval Ship (USNS)

The USNS are non-commissioned ships, but are considered property of U.S navy. USNS comfort hospital ships arrived on October 4th, 2017 to provide humanitarian relief efforts following hurricane Maira, and departed on the 20th November, after treating 1899 patients, executing about 200 surgeries and providing 76,000 liters of oxygen, as well as 10 tons of water.

Cuba

Following the devastating natural disasters of 2017, Cuba offered aid and solidarity to Puerto Rico which was unfortunately rejected by the U.S.

Timeline of Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description of event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 2nd, 1917</td>
<td>Jones Act signed by congress</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 30th, 2017</td>
<td>Hurricane Irma began</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 12th, 2017</td>
<td>Hurricane Irma ended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 16th, 2017</td>
<td>Hurricane Maria began</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 20th, 2017</td>
<td>Hurricane maria makes landfall in Puerto Rico, FEMA coordinates the most complex federal response in U.S history</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 2nd, 2017</td>
<td>Hurricane Maria ended</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 1st, 2018</td>
<td>FEMA Public assistance spends $500 million on debris removal</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 18th, 2018</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 13th, 2018</td>
<td>About 80,877 houses were repaired by the Tu Hogar Renace program, with the help of funding from FEMA.</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 14th, 2018</td>
<td>Transitional Sheltering assistance officially ends</td>
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Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- Decision of the Special Committee concerning Puerto Rico, 19 June 2017 (A/AC.109/2018/L.7)

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Many countries have associated themselves and spoken on behalf of CELAC (Community of Latin America and Caribbean States) in solidarity of Puerto Rico, at the special committee regarding the

decolonization of Puerto Rico, reiterating that the situation of colonization of Puerto Rico is clear colonial domination since they are not even receiving adequate aid from the U.S in time and the relief coming from the neighboring countries of the Caribbean and Latin America is being rejected. The Special Committee has fortunately approved the resolution, without a vote due to the overwhelming consensus in support of Puerto Rico’s independence.

Officials in Puerto Rico have negotiated having the Jones Act temporarily suspended so that the stranded citizens could get the aid they need. When Trump was asked by reporters if his administration would approve of it, he said, “well we are thinking about that” and hinted of his main reason to reject it; that many employees in the shipping industry wouldn’t want the Jones Act lifted because it would disadvantage them. This is because it would mean the loss of a small number of Americans’ jobs. Nonetheless, the Trump administration announced that it would temporarily waive the century-old shipment law for Puerto Rico that officials in the region, said was obstructing disaster relief efforts after Hurricane Maria. The suspension of the law, known as the Jones Act, has already begun to aid the recovery journey for the island as federal and local officials report more supplies coming into the increasingly desperate island.

The government of Puerto Rico has attempted to reverse debt incline by implementing austerity measures. This included: salary freezes, tax increase, postponement of collective bargaining agreements, and reduction of government employment by over 27%. This plan was based on unrealistic assumptions, and thus only resulted in unemployment rates increasing and in fact deepened the economic recession. Not only that, but the increase in unemployment has subsequently encourage emigration from the island of mostly working-class citizens. As a result the majority of the remaining population on the island is an elderly and destitute population.

Possible Solutions

In terms of financial aid, there should be more ready responses from the US and more responsibility in terms of handling the money in Puerto Rico. A viable solution would be to urge the government of Puerto Rico to prepare a clear and thorough fiscal plan (a process of deciding how a government will use available resources to achieve a goal or fulfill the needs of its country) on their spending priorities and call for regulation or policing from the UN to ensure there is no delay to the requests from the US. This fiscal plan should prioritize rights to adequate health care, a steady food supply and education.

Additionally, to restructure the delicate economy of Puerto Rico, public debt must be brought down enough to socially sustainable levels. However this cannot be done through any further austerity because, after 10 years of economic depression, this would further destabilize the provision of basic
public services, i.e. health care, education and social security. This leaves only one possible solution to undo the economic debt, but it would take many years and lead to a slow recovery; that would be to call upon financial sanctions on bond holders, i.e. hedge fund investors, because they are responsible for a significant portion of Puerto Rico’s municipal debt. And simultaneously encourage the Financial Oversight and Management Board and government of Puerto Rico to produce a credible debt restructuring that is based on realistic growth assumptions. When citizens can physically see a change in their country’s economic plans, to a more realistic and accurately calculated fiscal plan they would be more willing to pay tax rather than immigrate to the US mainland.

Along the lines of debt control, tax burdens for families with more than three kids should be reduced and there should be a fairer federal funding for health care schemes. As the commonwealth of Puerto Rico already receives significantly less federal support for public health, expensive medical attention along with increasing unemployment rates have left families with many kids in a very vulnerable situation. Maybe by introducing a law that puts exceptions and guidelines to who should pay tax and have designated percentage reductions for people in vulnerable situations (i.e., single mothers, living alone might not have to pay at all or only 3% of their wage). This should create a more fair taxation policy that pleases the public because as of now, the incredible tax rates and high prices, along with increasing unemployment, have all played a role in leaving no option to the Puerto Ricans but to flee to the U.S. If this continues, no one will be left to pay these taxes even.

**Guiding Questions**

1. What should Puerto Rico prioritize, when spending incoming financial aid?
2. what do you think is holding back Puerto Rico’s recovery?
3. what can Puerto Rico do on its part, to move forward with its recovery?
4. How can the relationship between the U.S and its territories be improved?
5. What can the U.S do now to ensure a quicker recovery process for Puerto Rico?
6. How can the UN regulate or monitor requests for aid, made my the Puerto Rican government, to make sure they are met by the federal government?

**Bibliography**


