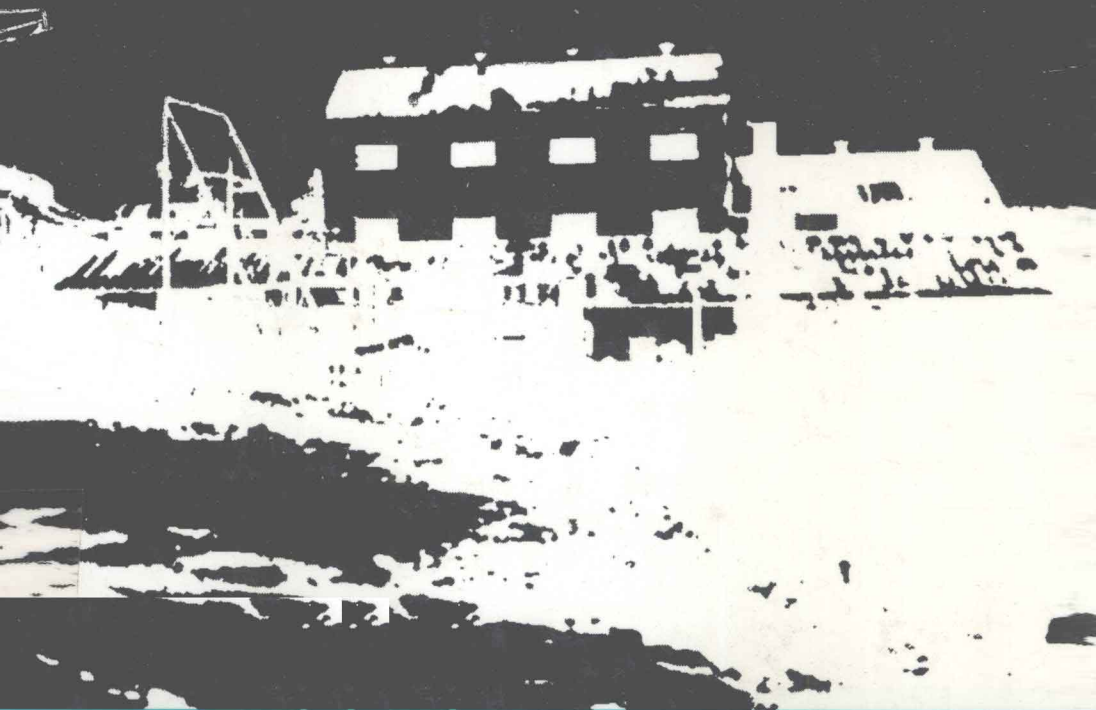


society, environment, and place

KICKING OFF THE BOOTSTRAPS

Environment, Development,
and Community Power in
Puerto Rico

Déborah Berman Santana



Kicking Off the Bootstraps

Environment, Development, and Community Power
in Puerto Rico

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List of Abbreviations

ADT	Autoridad de Derecho al Trabajo (Right to Work Authority)
AEE	Autoridad de Energía Eléctrica (Electric Energy Authority)
AES	Applied Energy Service
AFOFL	American Federation of Labor
ARPE	Autoridad de Reglamentos y Permisos (Regulations and Permit Authority)
ATP	Asociación de Trabajadores Puertorriqueños (Puerto Rico Workers' Association)
BFI	Browning Ferris Industry
CCPP	Comité Comunal Playa y Playita (La Playa/Playita Communal Committee)
CGT	Confederación General de Trabajadores (General Confederation of Workers)
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
COINTELPRO	Counterintelligence and propaganda
CRUV	Corporación para Renovación Urbana y Vivienda (Corporation for Urban Renewal and Housing)
ECLA	United Nations Economic Commission on Latin America
EIS	Environmental Impact Statement
EQB	Environmental Quality Board
FEPI	Federación Estudiantil Pro-Independencia (Pro-Independence Student Federation)
FLT	Federación Libre de Trabajadores (Free Federation of Labor)
FUPI	Frente Universitaria Pro-Independencia (University Pro-Independence Front)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNP	Gross National Product
JTPA	Job Training Partnership Act
MAREA	Movimiento al Rescate Ecológico Ambiental (Movement for Environmental and Ecological Defense)

xii Acknowledgments

MPI	Movimiento Pro-Independentista (Pro-Independence Movement)
NOAA	U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
OSHA	Federal Occupational Safety and Health Act
PCP	Partido Comunista Puertorriqueño (Puerto Rican Communist Party)
PIP	Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño (Puerto Rico Independence Party)
PNP	Partido Nuevo Progresista (New Progressive Party)
PPD	Partido Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Party, or <i>populares</i>)
PRIDCO	Puerto Rico Industrial Development Corporation
PSP	Partido Socialista Puertorriqueño (Puerto Rican Socialist Party)
PT	Propiedad Trabajadores (Worker-owned enterprise)
PUEDES	Pueblo Unido en Desarrollo de Salinas (People United in Salinas's Development)
RICO	Racketeer-Influenced Corrupt Organizations
SARA	Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act
SCT	Servicios Científicos y Técnicos (Scientific and Technical Services)
SOUS	Sindicato de Obreros Unidos del Sur (United Southern Workers Syndicate)
SURCCO	Sur Contra la Contaminación (South Against Contamination)
UITA	Union Independiente Trabajadores de Aeropuertos (Independent Airport Workers' Union)
UNEP	United Nations Environmental Program
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UTIER	Union de Trabajadores Independiente de Electricidad y Riego (Independent electrical and water workers' union)

Contents

List of Illustrations vii

Acknowledgments ix

List of Abbreviations xi

Introduction: Why Salinas? Why This Book?
A Personal Account 3

- 1 Searching for Alternatives 8
- 2 The Geographical Setting 27
- 3 Exploitation 46
- 4 Resistance 78
- 5 Beyond Resistance 107
- 6 The Obstacles 144
- 7 Lessons of the Salinas Experience 162

Notes 181

Bibliography 193

Index 207

List of Illustrations

Figures

- 2.1 Salinas uplands 29
- 2.2 Natural canals through the Mar Negro Forest 32
- 2.3 Jobos area pharmaceutical cluster 34
- 3.1 Sugar cane in Salinas 49
- 3.2 Central Aguirre: Neglected monument to the sugar era 60
- 3.3 Phillips petroleum refinery: "Thousands" of jobs no, pollution yes 73
- 5.1 "The People's Chronicle" 111
- 5.2 Making traps for fishing 125
- 5.3 Procesadora del Sur 134

Maps

- 2.1 Area of Study 28
- 2.2 Jobos Industrial Areas 36
- 3.1 Salinas-Jobos Industrial Areas and Impacted Environment 68
- 4.1 Struggle for Coastal Resources 96

Table

- 3.1 Comparison of Economic Indicators in Salinas, Puerto Rico, and San Juan 75

Kicking Off the Bootstraps Environment, Development,
and Community Power in Puerto Rico

Introduction Why Salinas? Why This Book?

A Personal Account

My first visit to Salinas took place in October 1990, while accompanying an environmental educator on a speaking trip. He had been invited to lecture to junior high school students on the dangers of hazardous waste dumping and incineration, as well as to educate them about recycling. His visit was part of a local campaign to unite Salinas against the proposed siting there of a regional toxic waste landfill. Driving south from San Juan on a sunny, hot morning, we ascended and crossed the island divide between the humid north and more arid south in less than an hour. As we began our descent we could see the vegetation change to less vividly green, more drought tolerant plants. We rounded one bend and suddenly the calm Caribbean Sea spread out before us, sparkling like a jewel. To the east, only smoke pouring from an industrial complex along the coast marred the perfect blue of the sky. We soon left the highway and the rocky, mostly brown hills behind for the coastal plain. Passing the entrance to an army base located in the hills, as well as a nearly dry river, we then entered the *pueblo* of Salinas, a compact, typically Puerto Rican town made up of one- and two-story, mostly older concrete or wooden buildings, many painted in pastel colors, and clustered around a tree-shaded plaza.

We arrived at the school and were greeted by teachers and two “thirty-something” men from the local community newspaper. They took us to the first class, where the students were very interactive, asking questions, laughing, and otherwise reacting to the information presented. Everyone in the room seemed to know about and oppose the proposed landfill. The students also had very definite ideas about action; to the speaker’s question of what they could do to stop the landfill, several called out, “Strike!” The students clearly enjoyed this break from their normal routine. At the same time they were curious about the stranger who was engaging them in an entertaining matter about serious and potentially frightening issues. At

one point a girl leaned over and whispered to me, "Is he a politician?" I asked her in turn if he sounded like a politician to her, to which she replied, "Yes!"

At the end of class the mayor of Salinas and one of the municipal assembly members took my friend and me to lunch at a large seaside restaurant. Our table was one of many on an expansive porch overlooking Rincón Bay, not far from a pier where dozens of pleasure boats were docked. At the time I thought that the delicious fresh fish we ate had been locally caught. (Later I learned that only the smaller restaurants regularly used the local catch; the bigger establishments, which were often not locally owned, bought their fish elsewhere.) I noted the strong show of unity against the regional landfill displayed by the two politicians despite their belonging to rival parties. The assembly member explained that this particular restaurant was located close to the neighborhood where she had grown up, a poor *barrio* of fishermen and ex-sugarcane workers like her father. I was impressed with the beauty of the bay and said as much, whereupon both politicians expounded on Salinas's barely tapped potential for the fishing and tourist industries.

After lunch the assembly member brought us to the local newspaper, housed in a modest wooden building not far from the plaza; there I again saw the two men whom we had met at the school, along with several other people. Through informal conversation I learned that these were some of the local community activists who were responsible for organizing opposition to the landfill. They were Salinas natives who had dedicated themselves to looking for alternatives to Salinas's problems of poverty, unemployment, and environmental degradation. Their newspaper, put together on a Macintosh Plus computer, contained local news, stories, poetry, and other features. It was also full of information about the dangers of regional landfills, as well as the political intrigue involved in its proposed siting in Salinas. The assembly member was treated with great camaraderie by the others, even though she did not share the same ideological background. The activists spoke of their successful campaign some ten years earlier against construction of a Monsanto Corporation herbicides plant, not far from where I had eaten lunch; ironically, I was familiar with the story, because a college friend of mine had mentioned it in her dissertation about the politics of environmental regulation. I further learned

that these activists and I had friends in common among the Puerto Rican community in New York: people with many connections among leftist, feminist, and progressive circles around the island. We left Salinas late that afternoon and began the ascent to the mountains and towards San Juan. But the visit sparked my interest in Salinas and the people there, and I felt that I would return.

Why do academics become interested in particular projects? Part of it, of course, has to do with the learning experience of taking what you've studied from books and measuring it against real life. There is also the opportunity to visit places and meet people whom you might otherwise not have an opportunity to know. You hope that they will also benefit in some way from the interaction. For example, you might be able to make certain resources and information available to them, or at least lend a helping hand to whatever they need done. Perhaps your outsider's perspective might even trigger new ideas for resolving problems that are sometimes too close to be seen clearly by those most involved.

What academics often do not admit is that they also get involved in particular research projects for very personal reasons. In my own case this was clear: as a Puerto Rican reared mainly in New York City but from the same class background as most *salinenses*, I found I had much in common with many of the people whom I got to know. As often happens in "outside/insider" situations, the commonalities sometimes masked or confused the differences among us. Though at times painful, this experience later allowed some insights into the dynamics and difficulties of the work in Salinas. I also learned that my personal struggle to define, determine, accept, and empower myself—to decolonize myself, so to speak—was very common among Puerto Ricans, both on the island and in the United States. Nor is this struggle limited to Puerto Ricans; the need and desire to see and define ourselves, and to gain the power to determine our own lives, is at the heart of all struggles for self-determination, for independence (political or otherwise), and for a more ecologically and socially sustainable development alternative.

My doctoral dissertation provided a detailed description and analysis of how the Salinas initiatives came to be. Yet, I was more interested in understanding the lessons to be learned from the experience, particularly how "sustainable development" might practically be approached. This book

is therefore a product of life experience, academic knowledge, and the desire to learn from both in order to help bring about positive and lasting change.

The book's organization is as follows: the first chapter recognizes the fact that while everyone seems to support "sustainable development," it is at present conceived of too vaguely to be of much practical use in actually guiding real strategies. I begin by breaking down the concept into its components of development and sustainability; I review the traditional understandings of them, explore their roots, and discuss some of the weaknesses that (among other things) make sustainable development so problematic. I also begin to address the problems of scale, the meaning of "community," and the idea of participation. Chapter 1 ends by introducing the Salinas story as appropriate and useful towards achieving a clearer idea of what sustainable development should mean.

After I describe and discuss the geographical setting in chapter 2, I provide in the next two chapters a historical background for the failures of "development" that have inspired present-day activism in search of locally based alternatives.¹ In chapter 3 I tell a story of economic, social and environmental exploitation, within the context of colonial domination and development strategies. Then, because people individually and collectively respond to forces acting on them, I recount, in chapter 4, a history of resistance that leads directly into present-day activism in Salinas.

Recognizing that, as one local put it, "resistance is not enough," I go, in chapter 5, beyond resistance to look at the present efforts to develop positive alternatives. Who are the activists? What are their motivations and influences? What kind of projects have they started, and how have they fared? How do they attempt to mobilize their community, and how successful have they been? How have they worked with government, non-profit organizations, and others? Have they formed coalitions with other like-minded groups throughout the island? In sum, what have they accomplished so far? Because the present activism is engaged in a long-term, uphill struggle, I discuss and analyze, in chapter 6, the obstacles the alternatives face within Salinas (and among the activists), as well as the most serious roadblocks posed by factors outside of Salinas. The chapter also details what would be necessary (if not sufficient) for successful implementation of the proposed alternative.

With the Salinas experience in mind I return in chapter 7 to “sustainable development,” and attempt to rethink both development and sustainability in a clearer and less contradictory manner. I also consider and reject the idea that local sustainable development is not possible as I explain why I believe the only way out of our present destructive path is to figure out how to make alternatives like that of Salinas possible. After going beyond “participation” to talk about power, I consider the lessons of the Salinas experience in offering a working definition of sustainable development. Finally, I ask in this closing chapter where we go from here: what can we do? I address the issue of appropriate and necessary roles of various sectors and interests in achieving alternatives. For example, what are the roles of community leaders? Nongovernmental organizations and other outside activists? Local business? Local and central government? My feeling grows that there may be an appropriate (and in some cases necessary) role for each; however, one problem is that even when these roles are acknowledged they are not often well understood. As a woman whose roots have informed her chosen career, I also discuss the role that concerned academics might play in promoting real alternatives, for real people, in real places. My sincerest hope is that this book will contribute in some small way to this great endeavor.

1 Searching for Alternatives

This is a story of a beautiful place with serious problems. Although Salinas, Puerto Rico, is rich in resources, it is plagued by poverty and dependence. Its people and environment have suffered from the effects of modern colonialism and “development.” But Salinas also is home to a group of activists who are looking for alternatives. They have dedicated themselves to working to develop programs based upon community-directed, environmentally and socially responsible use of local resources. By doing so they seek ways to empower their community to make the key decisions concerning local economic planning. In this, Salinas is hardly unique, for stories abound of similar efforts throughout the world among the least powerful and most marginalized people. Examples of “grassroots” groups — as distinguished from nongovernmental organizations from outside the target population (Bebbington and Thiele 1993, 7) — range from community development cooperatives in depressed industrial towns of eastern Canada (Cossey 1990) to locally initiated economic projects in rural Mexico as part of a wider demand for community control of needed natural resources (Blauert and Guidi 1992). They are as well known as the “base communities” associated with Latin American “liberation theology”; they are also as obscure as local efforts to develop economic alternatives for an ex-logging town in California’s Sierra Nevada.

These stories, spanning continents and crossing borders between the so-called First and Third Worlds (or North and South), point to the widely recognized need for something radically different from the status quo. This is a fairly recent phenomenon, since a generation ago strong criticism of development theory and practice was rejected by mainstream policymakers; moreover, talk of environmental limits to economic growth was relegated to the intellectual and activist fringes. Scarcely twenty years have passed since the publication of *Limits to Growth* (Meadows 1972) first

attracted widespread attention to development's ecological costs. Subsequent reports and international conferences, aided by the creation of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) in 1972, began increasingly to insist that the world agenda include the environment. But it was not until the World Commission on Environment and Development published a report in 1987 that the issue took center stage (Stokke 1991).

This widely heralded and much quoted document, titled *Our Common Future* but commonly known as the Bruntland Report, called for a reordering of the world's priorities to include a commitment to "sustainable development," defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations. WCED 1987, 8). The Report's condemnation of the practice of borrowing "environmental capital from future generations," as well as its call for an "international sustainable economic order," seemed to finally gain the ears of global leaders during the 1992 World Conference on Environment and Development in Río de Janeiro, Brazil.

Since the Bruntland Report's publication sustainable development has become increasingly acceptable in the centers of political and economic power, from national governments and international organizations to corporate boardrooms. It has even become part of the U.S. government's war on drugs: as part of this campaign the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has been enlisted to teach "sustainable development," which, according to the agency's semiannual report "includes local participation, democratic institution building, and social programs for the poor," as an alternative to the cultivation of coca in Andean countries (USAID 1993, 5).

And herein lies the problem with sustainable development: if everyone can be for it — activists, intellectuals, bureaucrats, corporations — regardless of the obvious conflicts of interest among them, then how useful can the definition be when concrete strategies are actually attempted? Critics charge that the concept is being packaged in terms as vaguely defined and broadly acceptable as possible, that neither challenge the notion of development as growth nor speak clearly of the need for political and economic restructuring. Moreover, concern for equity or social justice often appears to be quietly de-emphasized, and replaced with a call for an