Conceptualising Self-Determination and Socioenvironmental Justice on the Fringes of the American Empire – A Study of Guåhan and Puerto Rico

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Executive Summary

"...it makes little sense to think of non-sovereignty exclusively in constitutional and political terms, leaving out emic perspectives." (Ferdinand et al., 2020 p. 45)

The following publication is an abridged version of the original thesis, submitted to the University of Glasgow for the completion of an MS.c in International Politics. It argues that, despite their distinct contexts, advocates in Guåhan and Puerto Rico articulate holistic visions of justice that link environmental harm to colonial subjugation, political exclusion, and imposed economic models. While Puerto Rican activism often focuses on resisting privatisation and asserting community rights over public spaces, Guåhan's movements foreground Indigenous identity and opposition to militarisation. In both cases, socioenvironmental justice is inseparable from the pursuit of self-determination. These perspectives challenge the assertions of constitutional scholars on non-sovereign islands jurisdictions, who often use economic metrics to claim these arrangements are economically beneficial due to the better living standards of those living in autonomous states in the Pacific and Caribbean.

The findings of this dissertation are based on a thorough desk review of existing literature, in addition to semi-structured interviews carried out between May and July 2025. Participants were selected based on their involvement in environmental justice, broadly defined to include community organising, scholarship, cultural production, and civil society work. Interview data was then analysed using manual thematic coding, where the codes were developed using interview matrixes prepared prior to the interviews and after reviewing the transcripts.

Introduction

The unequal burdens of environmental degradation and climate change have long been recognised as disproportionately affecting marginalised communities least responsible for ecological harm (Duraiappah, 1998). Across the globe, extractive industries, infrastructure projects, and land dispossession unfold without meaningful consultation, producing resistance (Le Billon and Lujala, 2020; Scheidel et al., 2020). While these global dynamics are well-documented, the experiences of communities in contemporary colonial contexts remain underexamined.

This study focuses on two of the five inhabited United States' (U.S.) overseas territories: the Caribbean archipelago Puerto Rico and the Pacific Island of Guam (henceforth referred to using the indigenous CHamoru spelling Guåhan). The remaining territories are American Samoa, the US Virgin Islands (USVI), and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). Guåhan and Puerto Rico were annexed under the 1898 Treaty of Paris, which transferred

sovereignty from Spain and established the framework for U.S. imperial expansion (Moore, 2017). The Supreme Court's Insular Cases (1901) created the legal category of 'unincorporated territories', a status that institutionalised racialised governance and denied inhabitants full constitutional rights (Ponsa-Kraus, 2022). Citizenship was granted to Puerto Rican inhabitants in 1917 under the Jones-Shaforth Act (Morales, 2020) and increased political autonomy was granted after the federal Public Law 600 established the Commonwealth in 1952 (Issacharoff et al., 2019). Inhabitants in Guåhan obtained citizenship under the Organic Act (1950), which established a civil government but not a commonwealth (Torres, 2025). Both territories are represented by non-voting delegates in Congress and do not have the same constitutional rights as citizens on the mainland.

This unincorporated status leaves the islands at the political periphery of the U.S., with marginal representation in international fora such as the United Nations (UN), and without the authority to sign international agreements or execute other foreign policy mandates. Guåhan is one of the non-self-governing territories (NSGTs) remaining on the UN Special Committee on Decolonization's (C-24) agenda, while Puerto Rico was controversially removed due to its declaration of free association (Constant, 2017), though it remains a regular topic of discussion. These arrangements shape social, political, economic, and environmental governance. Puerto Rico's externally imposed debt oversight has constrained domestic policy priorities, exacerbating austerity and privatisation. In Guåhan, the U.S. military's expansion build-up directly restricts local land use and contributes to ecological degradation. Both cases illustrate what Concepción (1988) and later Atile-Osoria (2014) describe as 'environmental colonialism': the use of island environments for external economic and strategic ends, often at the expense of local communities.

Within the wider constitutional literature, NSGTs are often characterised as 'better off' under metropolitan affiliation, benefiting from access to funding, services, and security unavailable to many small sovereign states. Some critics argue that such framings underestimate the structural inequities produced by these colonial relationships and overlook claims to self-determination. This paper situates itself within this debate by foregrounding the perspectives of environmental advocates from these two territories to assess these claims.

The principal argument advanced is that socioenviromental advocates' perspectives reveal a more critical view of the U.S.-territorial relationship than is acknowledged in the NSGT scholarship. This suggests its economic focus misses critical points about the effects environmental degradation and non-sovereignty have on the territories. The research is also timely. The upcoming 250th anniversary of the U.S. Declaration of Independence is an opportunity to reflect critically on the persistent contradiction in the metropole's celebration of freedom and simultaneous subjugation of its overseas territories (Hammond, 2021). Recent shifts in U.S.

policy pivoting back towards anti-environmentalism also merits renewed attention to the overseas territories.

The Literature

"No independence movement is numerically significant anywhere, though it has attracted vocal supporters in Puerto Rico and Guam." (Connell and Aldrich, 2020, p. 82)

Analysing environmental justice (EJ) in non-sovereign territories requires engagement with multiple streams of literature. Central to this review is the question of how environmental justice frameworks can be applied to interpret the complex socioeconomic, political, cultural, and ecological dynamics that shape perceptions of these political relationships with the U.S. in Guåhan and Puerto Rico, and by extension, other unincorporated U.S. territories.[1]

EJ emerged in the U.S. alongside civil rights activism, with scholars and activists coining the term "environmental racism" to describe the disproportionate exposure of minority communities to environmental harms (Holifield, 2001; Bullard, 1993). Early research emphasised distributive theories of justice, highlighting unequal burdens such as toxic waste sites or pollution concentrated in marginalised communities, including women and children (Cutter, 1995). Researchers extended this theoretical scope, noting that American corporations also disposed of these hazardous industries in poor neighbouring states, describing it as "toxic colonialism" (Bullard and Wright, 1993; Brooks and Sethi, 1997; Liboiron, 2021). Thomason and Samuels-Jones (2022) have since mapped environmental violations in all five unincorporated U.S. territories; many linked to American corporations or institutions.

EJ is inherently multidisciplinary and political (Schlosberg, 2004; Banzhaf et al., 2019). This broader understanding goes beyond the distributive aspect and integrates recognition and participation (Schlosberg, 2007; Walker, 2009), acknowledging that justice revolves around the capacity of communities to shape environmental decisions. In practice, participatory opportunities occur across multiple scales: in local governance, through regional organisations, or within international forums such as the UN Fourth Committee and the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. However, as Málvocis et al. (2019) and interview participants emphasised, participation does not automatically translate to empowerment.

Decolonial approaches extend EJ frameworks by critically engaging with historical and structural forms of domination (Fioret, 2023). Ramcilovic-Suominen et al. (2024) describe a Decolonial

[1] A comparison of all the overseas territories is beyond the scope of this research, given space constraints and complexities arising from examining multiple contexts.

Environmental Justice (DEJ) framework as going beyond the traditional focus on distribution, participation, and recognition. This integrates local knowledge relating to the environment and seeks transformative change that incorporates self-determination and the repatriation of stolen land (Bresnihan and Millner, 2022; Parsons et al., 2021).

Numerous constitutional scholars have examined the question of unincorporated status. Some debate the impacts of the Insular Cases: arguing that, despite their racialised logic, the doctrine provides flexibility (Rennie, 2017), while others state the political ambiguity they create is discriminatory and unjust (Bolner and Tischauser, 2023; Toruella, 2013). Authors also highlight how unincorporated status limits participation in presidential elections (Borgonia, 2021). Non-voting delegates, who are overwhelmingly ethnic minorities, often advocate for their communities, but their restricted powers contravene democratic principles (Mamet, 2021; Harvard Law Review, 2017).

The study of NSGTs has traditionally been dominated by quantitative studies that distinguish these Pacific and Caribbean islands in terms of economic and developmental outcomes relative to their sovereign counterparts. While scholars in this area have used different metrics and with slightly different aims and hypotheses, many broadly conclude that territories dependent upon the metropole have superior economies (Oberst and McElroy, 2007; Armstrong and Read, 2000) and better outcomes than their sovereign counterparts in life expectancy, affluence levels, and health indicators (Wangmar and Mörkenstam, 2025; McElroy and Parry, 2012), with limited acknowledgement of environmental risks associated with these arrangements (Armstrong and Read, 2021).

Scholars assert these jurisdictions use their political status to develop beneficial industries like offshore finance, tourism, and manufacturing services that have boosted their economies (McElroy and Parry, 2012; McElroy and Pearce, 2006), concluding that this makes independence unpopular (Ferdinand et al., 2020). While they note the costs and benefits of non-sovereignty, scholars state it is preferable for small island territories due to this financial and material support, the delegation of major responsibilities, and security guarantees (Clegg et al., 2016).

While some of these studies exclude Puerto Rico due to its larger population, authors like Rezvani (2014) have made similar assertions about its relationship with the U.S. He argues that its continued affiliation with the U.S. has transformed the territory and brought relative prosperity and stability. He also highlights that many sovereign states experience poverty, insecurity, and repressive governance. However, his conclusions rest heavily on institutional analysis of the island's development prior to Hurricanes María and Irma.

While it is not suggested that NSGT scholarship is entirely misplaced, indeed, sovereignty has brought instability and inequality in some contexts, the broad use of examples across regions often lacks the detail necessary to situate these outcomes within specific political structures. Claims that territories have the 'best of both worlds' (Clegg et al., 2016) rest on a subjective value judgement that disregard the lived experience of inhabitants, particularly in relation to contemporary environmental and climate challenges that disproportionately affect small islands (Serrano and Falefuafua Tapu, 2022; Petzold and Magnan, 2019).

A 'pragmatic' understanding of sovereignty may appear to confirm NSGT scholars' scepticism: ethnic tensions and weak governance in Fiji or Papua New Guinea (Fraenkel, 2017; Strathern, 1993), rising poverty and unequal service provision in Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands (Russell, 2011), nuclear testing in Palau (Maclellan, 2005), or the isolation experienced by Cuba due to its resistance to U.S. dominance (Allahr, 2013). These examples illustrate that sovereignty is no panacea. Yet they do not invalidate the principle of self-determination. Rather, they reinforce the need to reconceptualise sovereignty not as a guarantee of prosperity but as a tool that enables people to address issues locally, make strategic choices, and reshape external partnerships on their own terms. As the empirical chapters show, stakeholders in Guåhan and Puerto Rico articulated self-determination precisely in these terms: the right to collective decision-making and control over land and resources in ways that serve their communities.

Prinsen (2017, p.144) asserts that territories renegotiate their relationships with metropoles using five mechanisms, creating an "islandian sovereignty" developed mostly on their terms. These mechanisms include voting against independence in referendums, bending the metropole's rules, and securing representation in international spaces.

Broadly, while the NSGT literature acknowledges dissatisfaction in the territories (Ferdinand et al., 2020), it frames this primarily in terms of identity and cultural preservation concerns (Wangmar and Mörkenstam, 2025; Constant, 2023). While the significance of cultural identity in Guåhan and Puerto Rico is not denied here, exclusively focusing on such explanations risks downplaying material concerns about the territorial relationship with the metropoles.

Other case studies have drawn attention to the historical and structural processes that shape NSGTs, illustrating how environmentalism and culture are intertwined with political mobilisations. Serrano (2022) highlights the value of comparing Guåhan and Puerto Rico through their histories of militarisation, pointing to overlapping patterns of environmental and social impacts from military installations, colonial governance, and extractive projects.

LaRiccia (2025) compares Palau and Puerto Rico in the context of historic petroleum 'superport' projects, noting that while national identity drove Puerto Rican mobilisations and indigenous heritage shaped Palauan resistance, the territories shared overlapping experiences of structural

marginalisation and contestation of external development agendas. Critically, he also notes that limited research has examined how U.S. colonies place environmental issues within larger colonial critiques, identifying a gap this research aims to fill. Perez (2001, p. 109) underscores how the CHamoru movement in Guåhan drew inspiration from Puerto Rico's Federal Relations Act of 1950 and the Covenant agreement with the CNMI, to demand greater rights and recognition. Schwebel (2018) interviewed political figures involved in climate change mitigation in sovereign and non-sovereign Pacific territories. He found that Guamanian stakeholders generally viewed the island's relationship with the U.S. positively, despite falling behind sovereign counterparts in planning. By focusing primarily on political voices, who are constrained by their positions and often speak diplomatically, this approach risks omitting certain practical realities on the ground.

These case studies add a valuable environmental focus to the study of NSGTs that is ostensibly missing from the more quantitatively oriented literature (Ferdinand et al., 2020). The observations about distinct cultural identity and its use as a strategy to demand equal rights (Veenendaal and Corbett, 2015) understates the revolutionary role culture plays in mobilising populations. Androus and Greymourning (2016) echo this critique in their study on Corsica and Hawai'i, claiming the literature fails to sufficiently account for the profound harms faced by indigenous populations caused by loss of language and culture.

Arguably, there is a need for approaches that go beyond institutional or economic metrics alone. As Nixon (2011) highlights, environmentalist and post-colonialist scholars have ignored each other's work, framing localised environmental campaigns solely as postcolonial phenomena rather than recognising their engagement with global environmental dynamics. The siloed nature of the literature has consequences. Limited space has been given to local voices, despite their centrality to understanding how self-determination is conceived. As de Sousa Santos (2016, p. 371) argues, this neglect results in *"a massive waste of social experience."*

Synthesis of Findings: Persistent Challenges to the 'Better Off' Narrative

"An important aspect of diplomacy is to signal to the other party some kind of vision of how things could be different" (Neumann, 2015 p. 84).

I. Puerto Rico: Aquí Vive Gente

Rezvani (2014, p.5) characterises Puerto Rico as a relatively prosperous example of "hybrid" postcolonial governance, arguing continued metropole ties offer relative affluence and limited interference, with others noting the development has created a favourable business climate (Bram et al., 2008). This diagnosis preceded hurricanes Irma and María (2017), which exposed the

fragility of Puerto Rico's institutions and the profound inequality and poverty affecting almost half its population (Filantropía, 2025). The category 4 and 5 storms revealed that prosperity and autonomy were poorly distributed: over 4,000 people perished, infrastructure collapsed, hundreds of thousands migrated, and communities faced prolonged power outages and exclusion from basic services (Marlier et al., 2022; Kishore et al., 2018; Kwasinski et al., 2019).

As one interviewee explained, the disaster *"lifted a veil"*, revealing that *"colonialism was part of the territory's environmental and social disaster, and continues to be so."* Communities felt abandoned and disposable (Cortés, 2018). This reflects a broader sentiment: that self-determination emerged not as an abstract principle but as a practical necessity in the absence of state action; a shift resonating with Corbett's (2021) theorisation of self-determination. María forced communities into forms of *autogestión* that were not sanctioned by official politics but that nonetheless provided dignity and survival.

María catalysed broader critiques of the territorial relationship with the U.S. Some stakeholders highlighted that, in its aftermath, there was a notable increase in support for independence, with political alliances between pro-independence parties and Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana, an anti-colonial party. The aftermath reflected the limits of material protection afforded by U.S. citizenship for inhabitants within the territory, as federal support was widely critiqued for being insufficient (Brown et al., 2018; Stewart et al., 2023), other than facilitating the exodus of many working-age Puerto Ricans to the mainland. This reflects Henning's (2021) argument that citizenship in Puerto Rico functions as an "empty gift", strategically extended to neutralise political resistance while maintaining metropolitan control. The crisis made clear that the costs of non-sovereignty are borne unevenly, with marginalised communities disproportionately exposed to displacement, contamination, and systemic neglect. As Corbett (2021) reminds us, self-determination should not be understood as a singular event but as an unfolding process; and María was a rupture that compelled many to reassess who holds decision-making power, and whose interests are prioritised.

Two years before the hurricanes, the local government announced it was unable to pay its debt (Roy and Cheatham, 2025; Clegg, 2015). Due to its political status, the island was unable to file for federal bankruptcy (Organ, 2018). The debt crisis eventually culminated in the enactment of the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), often locally referred to as 'Ley junta' which established a board appointed entirely by the U.S. government created to manage the island's debt. PROMESA obligated the local government to instill austerity measures, which included funding cuts to education, health care, public pensions, and lowering the minimum wage for new workers aged under 25 to $4.25 (Rivera, 2018; Bustos, 2020). As noted by Diego, a professor in environmental sociology, PROMESA dictates development priorities, budget distributions, and the environmental planning and assessment processes for Puerto Rico. This arguably reversed the gains in political autonomy made in 1953 with the drafting of the local Constitution (Garett, 2017; Clegg et al., 2016).

As noted in the works of Atile-Osorio (2014) and Concepción (1995, pp. 113–114) infrastructure projects in Puerto Rico have long been imposed with limited public consultation, which historically was aided by 'Operation Bootstrap', the American policy that transformed Puerto Rico's economy into a manufacturing hub (Santana, 1998; Quiñones Pérez and Seda-Irizarry, 2022). These dynamics persist today. Interviewees shared experiences of projects being imposed with limited consultation and environmental burdens falling on already marginalised communities. Legal protections are inconsistently applied, and both government and corporations are widely seen as complicit, particularly given their ties to U.S. business interests.

Gentrification, Identity, and Public Spaces

Displacement and gentrification were central concerns for interviewees, who repeatedly linked them to socioenvironmental justice and the erosion of Puerto Rican identity. After Hurricane María, the housing market was reshaped by an influx of investors and developers, taking advantage of tax incentives like 'Act 60 of 2019' (Torres, 2025; Sampas, 2015). Real estate developments such as the ecotourism project 'Esencia' in Cabo Rojo and 'Sol y Playa' were frequently cited as emblematic of this process. These processes include the privatisation of coastal land despite coastal erosion risks, population displacement, and the transformation of culturally and environmentally significant zones like wetlands into luxurious commodities.

Flores, a community lawyer active in opposition politics, explained that Sol y Playa was mired in corruption, benefitting local officials. Another instance was described by Daniel, a geographer, who explained that an American investor named Joel Katz had attempted to displace an Afro-descendent community due to its proximity to the airport. Little attention is given to experts, despite extensive data collection and studies showing the risks and harms these projects can cause. Sébastian, a professor specialising in water and urban planning, described his work with the local branch of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. They developed an alternative development guide aimed at influencing future priorities; however, he remarked, *"the developer is the one who decides,"* and that no government member read the guide.

Participants also described how these developments displaced residents and restricted access to public goods.

These movements have elicited the popular slogan "*Las Playas Son del Pueblo"*[2] and "*Aquí Vive Gente"*[3]; a claim to both cultural identity and environmental justice. The impacts of gentrification were not considered limited to physical space. Participants emphasised the social fragmentation that accompanied demographic change, noting that once tightly knit neighbourhoods were hollowed out by the conversion of homes into short-term rentals. Alicia, a teacher and food

[2] 'The beaches are for the people'.
[3] 'People already live here'

sovereignty activist from Vieques,[4] noted how the dissolving social fabric and greater poverty on the island has given way to a narcotrafficking subculture and intensified violence, particularly impacting young people. Milena, a student and protestor, also reflected on these consequences:

"More North Americans have begun to live in the area, leading to a decline in community organisation. This leads to the creation of more Airbnb's; impacting the level of cohesion and activism."

Participants also linked gentrification and displacement to broader economic dependency and the failure of both local and federal governments to protect community interests. One interviewee noted that laws are promoting an accelerated population substitution to deprotect the environment, fragment mobilisation, and appropriate the land for wealthy foreigners, underscoring the intentionality of the crisis.

Cultural identity was viewed as intertwined with environmental and social justice; a nod to the NSGT literature's framing of cultural resistance as central to territory dissatisfaction with the metropole relationship. Several interviewees noted how musicians and artists, particularly Bad Bunny, amplified struggles against and gentrification and displacement. His vocal support for broader social justice movements resonates deeply with younger generations (Díaz and Rivera-Rideau, 2024), strengthening national unity and the cultural legitimacy of environmental activism. Less internationally known artists such as Residente, who similarly used his platform to spotlight Puerto Rico's political and environmental issues, was banned from singing on the island for seven years.

Transparency and Service Provision

A recurring theme in participant narratives was the privatisation of essential services. The energy sector was repeatedly identified as a symbol of this process. Hurricane María revealed the fractures caused by the longstanding energy crisis in Puerto Rico. It weakened poorly maintained infrastructure and left rural communities without access to the grid a year later, becoming the second longest recorded power outage globally (De Onís, 2021 p.6). Naomi Klein (2018) labelled the energy system as one of the most vulnerable to climate change shocks, as the island generates 98% of its electricity from fossil fuels which are imported, resulting in prices that are almost double the U.S. average.

Local organisations responded with sustainable alternatives, such as Casa Pueblo in the neighbourhood of Adjuntas, which is connected to a micro-grid network of solar energy and shared batteries. Interviewees argued that government energy reforms sidelined community-led initiatives that had sought to promote decentralised, renewable energy. For many, the shift towards privatisation was a deliberate exclusion of grassroots visions for more sustainable and

[4] A small island off the east coast occupied by the U.S. navy until 2003.

just energy futures. Stakeholders also described resistance to the AES coal plant in Guayama, linking local contamination to broader struggles against U.S. policy and corporate influence (Hill, 2020; IAHCR, 2018). Companies have avoided remediation, reflecting weak enforcement and the continued prioritisation of growth agendas over community well-being (EarthJustice, 2024).

Similar dynamics were described in relation to rivers and water access. Droughts are a significant issue, with temporary water cuts impacting an estimated 2.5 million people (IACHR, 2015). Daniel recounted his work with communities resisting the development projects along the Río Piedras who mobilised to protect the waterways. These are vital for keeping the earth fertile and preventing flooding (Torres-Abreu and Del Viso, 2025; Torres-Abreu et al., 2020), yet federal and government authorities advanced canalisation schemes "*with the mentality of the 1980s, cementing everything in the river."* Such projects, participants argued, sideline ecological knowledge and community priorities.

These concerns were compounded by limited transparency and accountability. Monica, a renowned lawyer, explained how her clients had to take the government to court to access even the most basic project documents relating to proposed construction projects in ecologically and culturally protected areas. She described this as *a "real failure of accountability, transparency, and democracy."* Participants stressed that these barriers left communities unable to effectively challenge decisions that directly affect their environments. Together, these experiences were framed as part of a broader pattern of exclusion.

Participants emphasised a need for alternative development grounded in dignity and sustainability and better aligned with the territory's environmental and demographic features. They similarly opposed the application of externally conceived notions of environmentalism from the EPA, as Monica noted the institution's complicity in promoting the use of coal ash waste in construction.

While frustration was directed towards the local government, there was recognition of the implications of political status: "We *do not have control over a series of decisions – they are made at the U.S. level and political parties here also have their hands tied and an excuse not to act."* Alicia agreed, stating that the governor has limited decision-making power, indicating that barriers to achieving socioenvironmental justice go beyond a lack of political will:

"Even if she looks like a governor, she's not really in charge. Above her is the Fiscal Oversight Board, which is federal. And above them, the President, and Congress. She's said it herself: she's not the one in charge here."

Trade Restrictions and Limitations on Sustainable Prosperity

Food sovereignty also emerged as a powerful theme in participant narratives. Interviewees emphasised that the island's reliance on imported goods not only inflated prices but also undermined health, sustainability, and self-determination. Victoria, an architect and community worker in San Juan, explained that Puerto Ricans pay two or three times more than products are worth because of trade restrictions, describing this arrangement as a form of "*economic slavery."* Central to this critique was the Merchant Marine Act of 1920 (henceforth the Jones Act), which requires all goods entering Puerto Rico to pass through U.S. ports, increasing costs and limiting the island's ability to trade with its Caribbean neighbours and compete with regional free-trade agreements (Bosworth and Collins, 2006 p. 578).

The demand for food sovereignty extended beyond economic pragmatism. It was framed as integral to community and ecological wellbeing. Victoria explained local food production is central to being able to live with dignity and protect the island from exploitation. Stakeholders also countered Corbett's (2021) assertion that small-scale economies are romanticised thought-experiments, as in these communities they have solid a rationale for local populations. For the communities engaged here, food sovereignty is not abstract; it is a practical necessity shaped by everyday struggles with import dependency, inequality, and healing contaminated land.

Political Discourse and Propaganda

Alongside institutional failures, interviewees emphasised the pervasiveness of ideological narratives that frame independence as dangerous. Much of this is grounded in the fear of becoming a failed state and losing federal funding and other material benefits listed in the NSGT literature. This was also viewed as restricting the local government's engagement in international spaces. Many local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), academic researchers, and community projects are also dependent on federal funding, which creates a *"terrible situation"* of dependency. Potential fear of reprisal can thus create additional obstacles to explicitly drawing connections between environmental issues and colonial status, which one stakeholder reflected can cause people to shy away from colonial terminology. Several participants also noted that environmental activism and energy sovereignty are often portrayed as anti-progress, a discourse that delegitimises community efforts for sustainable alternatives. These narratives, according to Flores, are shared via local media throughout the day, and exemplify a collusion between political parties and corporate actors, with another participant highlighting:

"We are taught to fear sovereignty - through political propaganda… There is very strong propaganda in the media, which is either pro-statehood or pro-colony."

This attempt to downplay discontent with political agendas and promote a pro-statehood and pro-U.S. narrative, reflects a continuation of historical legacies of suppressing anti-U.S. mobilisation (Poitevin, 2000). These mechanisms have transformed from violence towards

independence activists (Reinares, 1995) to what interviewees described as more subtle forms of control. The use of police brutality was also frequently mentioned during interviews. Two female activists spoke of instances of being hit and needing medical attention, whereas Flores detailed how her public opposition to institutional corruption in development projects led to false charges of tax evasion, a legal case lasting over four years, and a $2,000 fine, which compromised her position in political elections.

The tensions caused by the intersections of political status and environmental justice was a recurring theme. Some participants argued that linking environmental struggles too directly with independence risked further political division, while others insisted that Puerto Rico must acknowledge its colonial relationship with the U.S. to achieve meaningful socioenvironmental justice. Flores, for instance, identified independence as a precondition for restructuring government and securing environmental justice, but noted this is not the majority position.

II. Guåhan: Taya' mina'lak sin hinemhum[5]: The David vs Goliath Battle for Self-Determination

"We can't control global warming, but we could control what happens on our island if we were able to exercise our political sovereignty." (Caroline)

Guåhan presents an interesting case for examining socioenvironmental justice in NSGTs. Its long history of colonisation has produced layered environmental harms, beginning with the extensive bombings during the Second World War (Santos Perez, 2022). In the following decades, the island became a site for the use of toxic substances, including Agent Orange and other Vietnam War-era pesticides (Yale Law School, 2020; Davis, 2007). Recent studies have also found that contamination has impacted the island's freshwater aquifer with synthetic persistent chemicals such as PFAS[6] and PFOS[7] (Borja-Qyichocho-Calvo and Kuper, 2023, p. 240). PCBs[8] have also been found in fish around Islan Dåno' (Cocos Island) (Pait et al., 2019; Hartwell et al., 2017).

Military build-up has disrupted conservation efforts against invasive species (Marler and Moore, 2011) and placed pressures on the management landfills (UN General Assembly, 2024 p. 81). Eliza, a senior member of the Independence Taskforce, recounted how her family's land was used as a wartime dump and later designated a superfund site by the EPA.[9] When her family's land was excavated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 2008, the soil was found to contain lead,

[5] CHamoru proverb: "There is no brightness without darkness" (Pereda, n.d.)

[6] Perfluoralkyl and Polyfluoroalykl Substances.

[7] Perfluorooctane Sulfonate.

[8] Polychlorinated biphenyls (UN Environment Programme, n.d.).

[9] This mandate requires officials to conduct a clean-up due to hazardous waste (Killian, 2022).

arsenic, and PCBs, but the clean-up was abandoned when regional funds were exhausted. Since then, three of her relatives have died from cancer.

In the post-war period, the island quickly became crucial in the U.S.' plans to counter Chinese influence, leading to continued military buildup and increasing local economic dependency (Perkins, 1962). The successful CHamoru lobby for U.S. citizenship and the end of naval political rule, culminated with the Organic Act 1950. This was seen as an initial step towards self-rule and decolonisation (Perez, 2001; Montón-Subías and Dixon, 2021). What emerged from the post-Cold War period years later was a stagnation period which persists today. Limited concrete action has been taken towards resolving these concerns.

The strategic value of the island to the U.S. has only increased with rising geopolitical tensions, creating security concerns for the island (Kuper et al., 2025). Perspectives resonated with an observation made by Stewart Firth that *"Generally, the greater the strategic value of an island territory, the less likely that territory has been to proceed to sovereign status."* (cited in Wesley-Smith, 2007), as one stakeholder described the island's position as being a *"chess piece in a proverbial chess game."* While some acknowledged that U.S. affiliation attracts infrastructure development and supports the local economy, many stressed the constraints it imposes, particularly in the realms of environmental governance, cultural survival, and political voice. Militarisation was consistently identified as the key factor shaping outcomes. As succinctly put by Nelson, a local Government employee, *"it's undeniable the U.S. military has had lasting negative impacts on the environment."*

Military Buildup

Militarisation was the dominant frame through which socioenvironmental justice was conceptualised. Interviewees emphasised that environmental harms, threats to self-determination, and the dilution of CHamoru culture were inseparable from the expansion of military presence on the island. Interviewees presented the military not as a guarantor of protection but as a source of ecological harm and a security burden. 2017 marked a turning point in the discourse on Guåhan's relationship with the U.S following the development of the "Guam Killer" ballistic missiles by China (Constant, 2023; Ali et al., 2018), which became more critical. Conceptualisations of the security burden carried by Guåhan were sharply expressed. As Edward, an indigenous studies educator explained, the military *"[are] trying to capitalise on the rhetoric of Guåhan serving its rightful part, that 'freedom isn't free'."* This normalises Guåhan's role as a military outpost rather than a home for its people.

These geopolitical dynamics intersect with socioenvironmental concerns. The Department of Defense controls 25% of the land (Fong and Roy, 2024), much of it with ancestral and conservational significance. Conservation rhetoric was also described as disingenuous. Ina, an indigenous non-profit leader, and Liam, a food sovereignty advocate, both noted that while the

military engages in visible 'clean-up' projects or promotes replanting initiatives for wildlife, it simultaneously clears acres of ancient limestone forest and disrupts fragile ecosystems by expanding live firing ranges.

Spaces for Political Discourse

Others noted how the space for dissent has narrowed. Earlier stages of military build-up allowed public testimony, prompting activists to recite poetry and call for decolonisation. Current processes, such as the Environmental Impact Statements for missile defence system buildup, only accept comments on precise technical issues, which Edward stated, *"put stipulations on what kind of comments are acceptable and can be acted on."* Such restrictions on public participation and activism are perhaps more subdued than in Puerto Rico. However, these decisions convey an intention to mute dissent. Furthermore, despite some political efforts, particularly on the part of Senator Sabina Perez, who stakeholders noted has (unsuccessfully) lobbied to prevent harmful detonations of non-exploded ordinances, one interviewee noted:

"It would take a bold politician to spend their career criticising the military and fighting for environmental protections, because you're going to get a lot of pushback. Not just from the military, but from the private businesses who rely heavily on military investment."

These dynamics reflect not only a normalisation of environmental degradation, but the entrenchment of indoctrination. The symbolic framing of the U.S. as a liberator (Dalisay, 2014) perpetuates acceptance of environmental sacrifices as necessary for national security. Fears of reinvasion and the inability to survive without federal funding and support due to older generations' memories of the violent Japanese occupation (Natividad and Kirk, 2010; Souki, 2002), with the sentiment that people should *"be grateful for what they have and not advocate for different or for better."* Guåhan still has highest per capita military enrolment rates in the U.S. (Calvo, 2018) making shifts in perspective challenging. Laila, a CHamoru culture non-profit leader, noted how primary school children are targeted with military cadet marches, reflecting the institutionalisation of pro-military narratives.

Several interviewees contrasted Guåhan's situation, where Ina estimates only 10-15% of public lands remains in CHamoru hands, with the freely associated Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. There, land alienation clauses entrenched in the Constitution provide stronger protections for Indigenous ownership and give local authorities greater bargaining power. Eliza highlighted the CNMI's sovereignty means military testing or bombing requires negotiation with local authorities, whereas Guåhan has little leverage. These comparisons demonstrate how territorial status affects the capacity to safeguard environmental and cultural resources.

Economic Hardship and Dependency

Participants depicted economic hardship and demographic shifts as interlinked to the island's political struggles. Housing pressures were linked to the military build-up, as personnel receive high stipends and salaries that outpace local wages. Guåhan's minimum wage is $9.25; lower than 34 other U.S. states and territories, including Hawai'i and the US Virgin Islands (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2025; Department of Labor, 2024). Several interviews revealed that housing costs are increasingly unaffordable for local families, forcing them to leave the island. Furthermore, Guåhan is not protected from the cabotage laws under the Jones Act by virtue of its trade route connections with Hawai'I (Grennes, 2017). Similarly to Puerto Rico, this results in higher food prices for lower quality food, although stakeholders highlighted higher quality produce is available on military bases. Few local food alternatives are available, as traditional self-subsistence and traditional farming was largely disrupted by successive colonial powers (Guåhan Sustainable Culture, 2024; Moore, n.d.).

These pressures reinforce Guåhan's economic dependence on the U.S., with the island importing an estimated 90% of its food (Harvard University, 2020). While some interviewees acknowledged that military presence has made Guåhan one of the most highly developed islands in the region, they reflected this has come at the cost of sustainable trade and dependency due to restrictions imposed by the Jones Act. For many, this reliance was seen as a trap. As Caroline, an indigenous activist explained, this strategy is slowly harming people through unhealthy imported foods, echoing sentiments of Nixon's (2011) more invisible "slow violence" against the marginalised.

While these issues are deeply connected to the military presence, their impacts are felt across all aspects of daily life. Stakeholders were broadly aware of critiques of environmentalism being overly middle-class (Forsyth, 2003). As Jason, a biologist, noted, conservation can appear *"frivolous."* Advocates have sought to bridge these gaps by linking ecological and decolonial concerns to the economic pressures facing communities, which is an ongoing challenge.

Indigenous Voice in Politics

Participants also expressed alarm at CHamorus becoming a minority. Migration began with influxes of American settlers in 1898 and has recently included worker influxes from Asia (Underwood, 1985). For many, this dilution is not simply demographic, but cultural and political. Nelson noted how the Americanisation of property ideologies has displaced Indigenous cultural values of protection for the collective, restricting the local government's ability to implement septic tank construction policies to protect the freshwater aquifer

Participants also noted on how the outflux of indigenous people alters representation in local politics, with implications for socioenvironmental justice, which is critical for

socioenvironmental justice as Laila stressed: *"Environmental stewardship is embedded in our cultural values."* Perez (2001, p. 108) noted many non-Indigenous people oppose CHaomru nationalism for being exclusionary, while migrants oppose proposals to form a Commonwealth (like the CNMI), fearing loss of access to the U.S. economy. Some participants echoed this, noting economic migrants are more forgiving of the military's impact on the environment. Others noted American democratic ideologies of 'one man one vote' ignores decolonial and reparative aims of self-determination to *"restore a right that was taken away from a very distinct group of people"* (Eliza).

These dynamics contribute to stalling on plebiscites over the island's political status. Attempts to hold a non-binding vote for 'Native Inhabitants'[10] have been challenged by Arnold Davis, a Caucasian American Air Force veteran, who some interviewees explained has expressed racist rhetoric against CHamoru people. U.S. federal courts upheld Davis' latest legal challenge,[11] holding the definition of Native Inhabitants violates the Fifteenth Amendment by being a proxy for race (Barnett, n.d.; Harvard Law Review, 2019). Interviewees viewed the plebiscite as intricately tied to socioenvironmental justice and an act of self-determination for CHamorus to control their land and resources. As one participant stated:

"Independence is the solution. It's the only way we can stop environmental degradation and the inability to control what is happening not just on the bases, but on our island."

Meanwhile, the ruling was described as forcing Guåhan to work with *"the tools of the coloniser"* and an imperial framework which excludes indigenous people.[12] Although activists have access to international indigenous networks and have petitioned to human rights bodies, resolution remains uncertain. Several interviewees highlighted the shared heritage across the Marianas; imagining futures in which Guåhan could rejoin regional networks on its own terms.

These dynamics underscore how metropolitan agendas and indigenous population dilution limit opportunities to re-instill traditional environmental stewardship. For many advocates, cultural survival and environmental stewardship were inseparable. They emphasised that caring for the land, air, and sea was not only an ecological responsibility but cultural continuity and an ancestral duty. The power dynamics engrained in the relationship between Guåhan and the U.S. creates what interviewees described as a David versus Goliath reality, and underscore the idealism of Corbett and Veenendaal's (2015) proposals for sovereignty without full independence.

Although differences emerged over priorities and views on the military ranged from the need for demilitarisation to continued but renegotiated engagement, stakeholders consistently stressed the

[10] Defined as those who became U.S. citizens under the 1950 Organic Act (Commission on Decolonization, n.d.)

[11] Guam v Davis (2019).

[12] Other than federally recognised Native American tribes.

need to preserve the island for future generations and to secure a genuine seat at the proverbial table in decisions affecting its fate. Across the spectrum, a common concern was that the relationship with the U.S. constrains Guåhan's ability to pursue socioenvironmental justice on its own terms and to adapt to the changing world, while also narrowing the space to imagine alternative constitutional arrangements.

Synthesis of Core Arguments

The comparison between Puerto Rico and Guåhan highlights two distinct modes of metropole-territory relations. In Puerto Rico, the relationship is primarily mediated through privatisation, corporate influence, and federal economic oversight. Laws such as PROMESA entrench dependency and facilitate external investment, often exacerbating inequality and displacement. By contrast, U.S. presence in Guåhan is overtly militarised. The island is treated like an outpost in the Asia-Pacific, with geopolitical and environmental consequences that shape land use, governance, and cultural life around military priorities. Additionally, in Puerto Rico, environmental degradation was most often located within neoliberal development agendas and collusion between local governments and external corporate actors. In Guåhan, it was tied to U.S. security.

Although these dynamics differ in form, some of their outcomes converge: displacement, inequality, dependency, and the marginalisation of community visions for alternative development. Stakeholders in both territories engage in precisely the kind of signalling described by Neumann: they act as educators, organisers, and implementers, working to improve immediate conditions while articulating alternative futures. In doing so, they contest the territorial relationship with the U.S. and pursue visions that local governments cannot or will not advance due to legal and political constraints.

1. An Economically Beneficial Relationship?

The findings point to a paradox. Participants in Guåhan and Puerto Rico emphasised the hidden costs of dependency and the fragility of these relationships under external shocks. The NSGT scholarship omits a fine(r)-grained analysis of local dynamics. Contextualised perspectives better capture lived experiences and challenge claims that non-sovereignty is preferable, which is paternalistic and subjective.

- One of the principal arguments supporting continued political affiliation are economic benefits, demonstrated by superior GDPs, resource transfers, social welfare, tax incentives, and free trade which boosts socio-economic progress (Baldacchino, 2010; McElroy and Parry, 2012; Rezvani, 2014; Armstrong and Read, 2000).

- Findings from Puerto Rico and Guåhan challenge this by demonstrating how such benefits are unequally distributed and accompanied by significant socioenvironmental costs. The untenable living costs and forced displacement occurring in both territories reflects a wealth disparity that in both contexts can be linked to territorial affiliation with the U.S. These inequalities are central to socioenvironmental justice as they impact people's resilience to disasters[13] (Hallegatte and Walsh, 2021; Litchveld, 2018) and pollution (Balmes et al., 2025). In Puerto Rico, the federally imposed austerity measures restrict local government capacities to invest in housing and social services (Mojica, 2025), while in Guåhan, the virtually unchallengeable military presence creates a significant difference in living standards between civilians and personnel. In both contexts, American cabotage laws (the Jones Act) restrict alternative sustainable food trade practices, which has environmental and health consequences for populations.

- Participants frequently invoked Hawai'i as a cautionary tale of integration, where military expansion and tourism have displaced local people, appropriated their land and resources and excluded traditional land stewardship and mitigation strategies to disasters (Farrant et al., 2024). The popular song "Lo que pasó a Hawaii" by Bad Bunny, cited in multiple interviews, captured these concerns and resonated across territories as a cross-cultural reference point for dispossession. For many, the parallels suggest Puerto Rico and Guåhan are already experiencing similar processes of exclusion and cultural loss.

- The findings demonstrate how current frameworks isolate economic development to a narrow concept that overlooks the tangible harms experienced by local populations in Guåhan and Puerto Rico. Additionally, the economic 'benefits' are actively contributing to the harms disproportionately impacting local people. Importantly, participants recognised that many sovereign states face instability, environmental degradation, and economic subordination to large powers. This adds nuance to the discussion and acknowledges that sovereignty is not a silver bullet to these issues. However, this does not diminish participant claims but rather reinforces the argument that self-determination is a right to pursue alternative development strategies and address economic harms, which are currently restricted by federal policies. As one participant observed, sovereignty would allow territories to forge strategic partnerships on their own terms, aligning with local customs and priorities.

This study underscores the limitations of the NSGT literature's reliance on economic cost-benefit analyses. Neither territory has been free to implement its own model of development since colonisation, and participants consistently framed political autonomy as essential for achieving dignified living and socioenvironmental justice.

[13] The term 'natural disaster' is avoided here because these events result from the intersection of natural hazards and human-driven vulnerabilities such as poor risk management and inadequate protection for populations.

2. True "Islandian Sovereignty" or Pragmatic use of Alternative Diplomacy?

Prinsen (2017) argues that non-sovereign territories exercise "islandian sovereignty" by negotiating constitutional frameworks. Elsewhere, he suggests (2020, p. 71) that U.S. overseas territories like Guåhan and the Northern Marianas have significant local autonomy, suggesting these relationships are sufficiently flexible to serve local interests.

The findings from Guåhan and Puerto Rican challenge this claim. In both cases, the level of environmental degradation is difficult to summarise succinctly and satisfactorily.

- In Guåhan, stakeholders pointed to contamination from military buildup and operations, which has polluted soil, drinking water, and coastal ecosystems with limited jurisdictional scope for prevention or refusal. In Puerto Rico, the legacy of the Navy's occupation in Vieques and tourism-related infrastructure and corporate industrial activities, particularly energy production by American firms such as AES, were described as ongoing sources of harm to coastlines, biodiverse forests, and wetlands. The limited local governmental efforts to address soil contamination by coal ash, for example, remain unimplemented and responsible corporations act with impunity.

- Although the sources of this pollution are not identical, what unites both territories is the difficulty in overcoming them. Stakeholders also flagged that constraints are not simply distributive but procedural. There are limited avenues for meaningful consent, accountability, or contestation, and existing avenues for restorative justice are curtailed by U.S. agencies. In Guåhan, for instance, indigenous-only land trust protections face persistent federal legal challenges for being 'racially discriminatory' (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020). In Puerto Rico, federal policies to extend the life of coal plants risk exacerbating contamination issues. Interviewees also described the EPA's narrow definitions of environmental justice prevailing, resulting in limited compliance.

Prinsen's second claim, that international and regional representation provides meaningful space for NSGTs, also casts doubt.

- Stakeholders engage actively in such spaces: in Guåhan through indigenous networks and the Pacific Islands Forum, and in Puerto Rico through interventions at the IACHR and

collaborations with regional universities and non-profits. Participants in both contexts also engage in various cross-territorial spaces such as the Fanhita Conference.[14]

- These fora were valued by participants for solidarity and knowledge-sharing, but they were consistently described as insufficient for effecting substantive change. Taken together, these findings suggest that what Prinsen identifies as "islandian sovereignty" more accurately embodies pragmatic manoeuvring. While international fora and local initiatives create openings for dialogue, the evidence suggests that these spaces do not shift the balance of power. Without metropolitan political will to strengthen environmental regulation, reduce military expansion, or dismantle restrictive fiscal regimes, the scope for stakeholders to achieve justice through "bending the rules" on their remains negligible.

3. "People Don't Really Want Sovereignty"

NSGT literature often argues that non-sovereignty is generally preferred, citing plebiscite results to support this claim (Prinsen, 2017, p.146; Clegg et al., 2016) or local political discourse (Wangmar and Mörkenstam, 2025; Schwebel, 2018).

- Stakeholders in both contexts emphasised that meaningful control over natural resources, environmental policy, and climate strategies is central to self-determination, yet these complexities remain invisible in plebiscite outcomes.
- Interview data indicates that while there may be popular support for continued metropole affiliation, this view is less well supported amongst those in politically active spaces informed by ecological and decolonial thought.

- Interviewees highlighted the role of discourse and propaganda in shaping how political and environmental issues are framed. In Guåhan, the military presents itself as protector and environmental steward, downplaying geopolitical risks, trivialising ecological harms, and greenwashing through performative conservation. In Puerto Rico, narratives of prosperity are mobilised through media to legitimise development projects that displace communities and degrade wetlands and other important ecosystems.

- Fearmongering is used to cast independence and environmentalism as destabilising or anti-development, while U.S. affiliation is depicted as the provider of stability and progress. As a result, alternative visions for the islands are discredited, portrayed as inviting reinvasion (Guåhan) or facilitating economic collapse and communist

[14] Organised by the Commission on Decolonization in Guåhan, this brings together representatives from the overseas territories and other recently decolonised nations throughout the Caribbean, Pacific, and Asia such as the Federated States of Micronesia and Timor Leste.

totalitarianism as in Cuba or Venezuela (Puerto Rico). This framing stifles genuine dialogue on socio-environmental issues and perpetuates stagnation.

- Thus, plebiscite results tell an incomplete story. In Puerto Rico, the (pre-hurricane) June 2017 plebiscite saw an overwhelming vote for statehood, yet by November 2024 support had shifted, with over 29% voting for independence (BallotPedia, 2024; Medina, 2024). Despite these developments, bills introduced in Congress have stalled, leaving the territory in political limbo.

- In Guåhan, the last efforts to hold a Native-only vote on self-determination, designed to restore rights historically denied to CHamoru people, have faced successive federal legal challenges and remain unresolved. As outlined in Chapter II, before this, the last plebiscites held on the island were in the 1980s (Prinsen, 2017; Tolentino, n.d.).

This research therefore cautions against accepting plebiscite figures at face value. While it does not deny that public opinion is divided and that independence is not the dominant choice, it reveals how narratives of fear and dependency, combined with legal and constitutional restrictions, can constrain political imagination around possibilities for change. To claim that territories simply 'prefer' non-sovereignty on the basis of voting data alone is overly simplistic. The findings also suggest that engagement with theories of justice, decolonial movements, and environmental preservation fosters greater resistance and distrust towards the territory-metropole relationship among stakeholders.

4. External Shocks

The final NSGT literature claim that will be examined here is that ties to the metropole offer security guarantees, including disaster relief, social welfare, and subsidised defence (Baldacchino, 2010; Clegg et al., 2016; Rizvani, 2014).

- This research find that 2017 marked a turning point in how local populations understood their relationship with the U.S. (Serrano, 2022; Constant, 2023, p. 110). In Guåhan, exposure to geopolitical threats from North Korea and China heightened concerns about safety, while in Puerto Rico the devastation of Hurricanes María and Irma exposed a lack of disaster preparedness, compounded by austerity, inequality, and poor governmental responses. These events have generated instabilities.

- More recently, President Donald Trump's rollback of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) initiatives (Ostranger et al., 2025; The White House, 2025) has intensified insecurity among stakeholders. In Guåhan, a University grant proposal on the Blue Economy was rejected due to references to indigeneity and sustainability, while uncertainty surrounds the release of a $3 million U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

grant for regional food production. In Puerto Rico, groups reliant on USDA funding for food sovereignty programmes have been forced to scale back services, and an emerging NGO sector crisis looms as competition for a shrinking pool of funds intensifies

- At the same time, the EPA, though criticised for being federally imposed, remains the principal enforcement body. Its dismantling under Trump's public sector cuts (The White House, 2025; U.S. Office of Management and Budget, 2025) creates further vulnerabilities to impunity and environmental degradation.

- Political decisions made by the metropole are imposed on territorial populations who cannot vote in presidential elections and have non-voting representation in Congress, further constraining island responses to socioenvironmental challenges. Under Trump, this has been particularly acute.

- Stakeholders cited the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, the dismissal of Biden's commitment to a UN Visiting Mission on militarisation in Guåhan, and support for extending coal plants in Puerto Rico despite harmful pollution and contamination. These shifts show how affiliation with the metropole exposes territories to abrupt ideological turns, such as deregulation and defunding of environmental programmes (Pullins and Knijenburg, 2025; Fiorino, 2025; Jotzo, 2018).

- Many organisations remain dependent on federal funds. As participants observed, reliance on the *"ebb and flow"* of federal support facilitates ongoing instability in the face of these external shocks. In this context, affiliation with the metropole is viewed as undermining rather than guaranteeing stability. It intensifies geopolitical risks, weakens environmental protections, and destabilises community-led initiatives to pursue alternative visions and social transformation.

- In Puerto Rico, this risk is particularly severe, as local government priorities are misaligned with those of community advocates, compounding the constraints imposed by U.S. federal authority. In Guåhan, while the government is also constrained and at times 'pragmatic' in its relationship with the U.S. military, there is more notable alignment with decolonial and environmental agendas.

Conclusions

Despite contextual differences, stakeholders in both cases locate social, environmental, and economic harm within wider systems of dependency, identify self-determination as essential to charting sustainable futures, and stress that current metropole relations obstruct rather than guarantee security. Activists in both territories reflected on the breadth of community initiatives and plans that continue to be mobilized despite the challenging political environment – ranging from greater food sovereignty, land clean-ups conducted by the American corporations and institutions responsible for them, and better standards of living for local populations.

A comparison of Guåhan and Puerto Rico reveals divergences and commonalities. Guåhan's movement is more explicitly grounded in indigenous identity, framing environmental justice as indigenous survival and restorative justice. Puerto Rico's activism, by contrast, is more diffuse, anchored in national unity and resistance to economic privatisation. Yet, both converge in emphasising autonomy, rejecting notions that their territorial status necessarily privileges them over sovereign neighbours

Respecting these visions calls for a reframing of the literature. Rather than determining whether non-sovereign territories are better off, the task should be to recognise their right to define their own trajectories and pursue models adapted to their demographical, political, and ecological conditions. Acknowledging that sovereign states also face poverty and instability does not diminish the validity of these aspirations. To dismiss them as utopian or impractical because things could be worse as they are elsewhere in the Pacific or Caribbean, is pessimistic and risks reproducing paternalistic assumptions. A more productive debate, therefore, begins from the recognition that locally articulated pathways to *'Buen Vivir'* are legitimate and deserving of support.

Taken together, these cases expose the limitations of the "better off" framing. To claim that Puerto Rico and Guåhan benefit materially from their status is to overlook the costs imposed by privatised and militarised forms of dependency. Moreover, it frames environmental and cultural concerns as secondary to economic performance, reducing self-determination to a matter of statistical comparison rather than recognising it as a right. Based on conversations across both territories, self-determination is not about building a perfect state but about securing the capacity to decide how resources are managed, communities are protected, external shocks are responded to, and futures are imagined.

The findings suggest that future scholarship must move beyond numerical assessments of political preferences or economic performance and engage with the lived experiences and aspirations of communities. As Connell and Aldrich (2020) note, independence movements may lack numerical strength, but their persistence underscores the deep roots of resistance. The tenacity of socioenvironmental movements in Guåhan and Puerto Rico also demonstrates that self-determination remains a vital demand. While increasing political support in international and regional spaces may remain controversial and challenging in an age of aggressive American foreign policy, the strain on community projects caused by funding cuts calls for greater intervention by donor states and devolved institutions, international bodies, foundations, and philanthropic organisations.

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