

# Jeannette Lebrón Ramos: Puerto Rican Information professionals need to strongly advocate for libraries in their community spaces

 [openinterview.org/2023/09/24/jeannette-lebron-ramos-puerto-rican-information-professionals-need-to-strongly-advocate-for-libraries-in-their-community-spaces/](https://openinterview.org/2023/09/24/jeannette-lebron-ramos-puerto-rican-information-professionals-need-to-strongly-advocate-for-libraries-in-their-community-spaces/)

Open Interview

September 24, 2023

***Jeannette Lebrón Ramos** talks with **Santosh C. Hulagabali** on the issues and challenges concerning the public and academic libraries of Puerto Rico, a Caribbean island and an unincorporated territory of the United States with official Commonwealth status. She currently serves as a virtual reference librarian at the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) which is the oldest and main public university system in the U.S. Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. Previously she served as head of the reference collection at the UPR Law Library.*



*She's the Chair of IFLA Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Division (IFLA LAC). She was President of Association of Caribbean University, Research, and Institutional Libraries (ACURIL) in 2021-22 and ACURIL Puerto Rico Chapter during 2012-2021. She successfully coordinated IFLA's International Advocacy Seminar in 2023, in San Juan, Puerto Rico. She is actively associated with many international library associations including ACURIL in various capacities and has delivered talks at various libraries in Argentina, Aruba, the Bahamas, Colombia, Costa Rica, Curaçao, El Salvador, Haiti, Mexico, the United States, the Dominican Republic, the Netherlands and Suriname.*

*In this interview for Open Interview, Jeannette Lebrón Ramos shares her thoughts about the issues and challenges the public and academic libraries are facing in Puerto Rico and ways to address them. She also throws light on language dynamics in research and librarianship, geographic advantages and disadvantages of the island city which is prone to frequent atmospheric phenomena and also being an unincorporated territory of the United States; role of government, library associations, information professionals, etc. in the best interest of library system in Puerto Rico.*

**• Puerto Rico's library professionals are concerned about the need for greater investment in library systems and infrastructure to serve the public needs of the island. The news reports, last year, had also highlighted this. So, as a citizen and an active academic library professional of the region, how do you see this and what are your perspectives on improving the status of public libraries in Puerto Rico?**

As a citizen and professional librarian in Puerto Rico, I share the growing concern of our library community regarding the need to pay more attention to and invest in library systems and infrastructure in our communities. However, it is crucial to point out that the discussion and attention to the current situation of public libraries in Puerto Rico are as scarce as the number of functional public libraries in the country.

Santos Muñiz's [article](#) provides an accurate description of this issue and presents highly relevant data that must be considered when implementing measures to improve the situation of our public libraries. In line with Santos Muniz, our libraries face significant obstacles, including lack of funding, limited access to digital resources, and deterioration of the infrastructure due to constant natural disasters affecting the island. From my perspective, public libraries in Puerto Rico are not a priority in the plans of the relevant government agencies.

After the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria, communities and library organizations made considerable efforts to assist libraries, archives, and museums in their recovery. But there is still much to be done. Information professionals have a great responsibility in advocating for our libraries, and in Puerto Rico, this is a topic that needs to be addressed fiercely to change the current paradigm of these community spaces.

Improving the current state of our public libraries so they can meet the needs of local communities, will help to provide spaces for gathering and communication, ensure resources, and offer access to information and technology requires a solid commitment and significant efforts from government authorities, the librarian community, and society. The results of these efforts, given the limited information available on the current situation of public libraries in Puerto Rico, will depend on conducting a comprehensive assessment of the situation and needs in these libraries. Based on this, it is essential to establish a short or long-term strategic plan that allows for effectively addressing the various identified issues.

In this process, it is imperative to seek and manage adequate funding through various sources, including the government, the private sector, and the submission of proposals to obtain donations from organizations that support these information entities. This funding should focus on several key areas, such as improving physical and technological infrastructure, expanding information resources, increasing internet access, and training and capacity-building for staff responsible for serving the community.

Additionally, it should be considered directing some of these resources towards the implementation of renewable energy, such as the installation of solar panels or other sustainable systems, to reduce dependence on electricity from fossil fuels. With the implementation of renewable energy sources, libraries could potentially transform into centers for supporting sustainable communities, especially in emergency situations such as natural disasters or other events where the community needs a safe gathering place or access to essential services.

---

**• Puerto Rico has some non-profit or voluntary libraries serving the user community. It is indeed a good sign and useful for the user community of the region, but are they emerging due to the limited number of public libraries among 78 municipalities of the region?**

The profiles of various non-profit, volunteer, and community libraries in Puerto Rico reflect a variety of motivations for their establishment. Among the fundamental reasons are the revitalization of public spaces, support for educational programs in their respective communities, assistance with research and the development of local projects, the provision of spaces to foster social and civic interaction, support for disadvantaged communities, as well as the desire to provide access to educational, cultural, and informational resources in specific areas. These libraries also emerge from the deep commitment and passion of individuals and local communities to promote education, reading, and access to information, among other noble goals.

However, one relevant reason for the emergence of these libraries is the lack of fully functional public libraries in their respective communities and municipalities. Therefore, these types of libraries arise to address unmet needs in their localities, filling a crucial gap in access to resources, technologies, library services, and spaces for cultural activities, among other things.

---

**• A couple of years' back, there was a tough time for Puerto Rico libraries due to hurricanes– and the region is vulnerable to such disturbances. How were the libraries affected then, how things came to normalcy and how are Puerto Rico libraries prepared for the future?**

Puerto Rico is an island in the Caribbean Sea, located in an area prone to frequent atmospheric phenomena such as storms and hurricanes. When one of these impactful events affects us, our libraries suffer significant damage. However, Hurricane Maria, which struck our island in September 2017, left behind damage that is difficult to describe.

This powerful hurricane left the entire island of Puerto Rico without clean water and electricity for several months and had a devastating impact on the infrastructure of many of our libraries, damaging roofs, floors, furniture, and valuable resources. Roof leaks flooded numerous libraries, irreparably damaging many collections despite efforts to mitigate the damage. The humidity and lack of air conditioning led to the proliferation of mold in the wet collections. This is just a brief description of the devastation that Hurricane Maria inflicted on our libraries.

Immediately after the hurricane, a mitigation process began in many libraries with the valuable assistance of librarians, students, and volunteers. They worked tirelessly to remove accumulated water, relocate collections to safe areas, assess the damage, and manage the

necessary assistance. As a result of the lack of prior preparation in our libraries to face natural disasters like Hurricane Maria, librarian Hilda Teresa Ayala compiled a guide that collects essential documents and recommendations for the conservation and preservation of the educational and documentary heritage of the country in case of future natural disasters.

Recovery and the return to normalcy have been a prolonged process, and many of our libraries still bear the marks of the structural damage caused by this unforgettable hurricane. Looking to the future and aware of the possibility of facing similar events, we rely on the implementation of contingency plans adapted to the current situation of our library infrastructure. We also recognize the importance of applying proper procedures for the conservation and preservation of documents, including digitization, as a fundamental part of our preparedness and recovery strategy.

---

**• Puerto Rico has many LIS associations. And you were President and Vice President of ACURIL. How are these associations working for the improvement of the library system in Puerto Rico? What are your observations and suggestions, if any?**

Puerto Rico is home to a diverse range of organizations and professional associations dedicated to the field of libraries. Among them, the Puerto Rican Librarians Society (Sociedad de Bibliotecarios de Puerto Rico or SBPR), the Association of Caribbean University, Research, and Institutional Libraries, Puerto Rico Chapter (ACURILPR), the Association of Graduates of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science (ASEGRABCI), and the Association of School Librarians of Puerto Rico (ABESPRI) stand out. Additionally, there are other associations with a Caribbean and American reach, such as the Association of Caribbean University, Research, and Institutional Libraries (ACURIL) and Reforma, Puerto Rico Chapter. These organizations play a fundamental role in providing access to information and developing information literacy skills both within their memberships and in other communities.

Currently, these organizations work actively to advocate for, promote, and strengthen libraries in Puerto Rico and the surrounding regions. Their efforts focus on facilitating communication and exchange of resources and ideas, contributing to the training and ongoing education of information professionals, improving the effectiveness of libraries, archives, and museums, fostering the development of leadership skills, supporting the growth of new professionals, creating networks with professionals from various areas of the field, exploring new technologies and innovations, advocating for the ethical principles of our profession, supporting state and federal legislation that benefits our professional community and the society we serve, as well as strengthening fraternal and professional ties among members in Puerto Rico and other regions.

The pandemic has made us realize even more the importance of leadership and effective functioning of library organizations in Puerto Rico. They quickly adapted to the changing needs of the community, offering essential digital resources, online services, training, and emotional support, all while advocating for access to information and connectivity in an ever-evolving digital and remote environment.

From my position as the former president of ACURIL and the current president of IFLA LAC, I recognize the vital importance of these information professional organizations, which advocate for and act in the best interests of our professional and user communities. Supporting and encouraging their work is essential to ensuring the continuity of their contributions to intellectual enrichment, learning, culture, access to information, and the preservation of documentary heritage, among other fundamental aspects for our society.

---

**• You are the Chair of IFLA LAC (2023-25). How beneficial is this platform in the best interest of the libraries and library professionals of your region? Any challenges– you want to focus on, any breakthroughs achieved, and any plans you have for Puerto Rico (through/ from IFLA)?**

The IFLA LAC is an international entity dedicated to promoting, supporting, and advocating for the advancement of libraries and library services in Latin America and the Caribbean region. Our fundamental mission is to enhance library services, promote global library cooperation, address the specific challenges of this geographical area, and foster the exchange of knowledge and best practices among library professionals, as well as to drive collaboration in international library projects.

Like any organization dedicated to libraries, we face significant challenges that impact our communities. However, we believe that these challenges motivate us to work even harder to counteract any negative effects that may affect our libraries in Latin America and the Caribbean region. These challenges include limitations in economic and informational resources, unequal access to the internet and technology, disparities in access to printed and electronic information, and natural phenomena. It is also essential to address the preservation of heritage resources and improve governmental support, among other relevant issues.

In the face of these challenges, the work of IFLA LAC focuses on developing inclusive action plans that respond to the needs of the library field, throughout its region, in line with IFLA's overall strategy. We work in collaboration with other relevant committees and groups and focus on the promotion and dissemination of the profession. As main themes, we are focused on the promotion and development of activities related to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the region, so that the library professionals

remain updated on the latest trends and challenges in their field. Furthermore, we collaborate and work closely with other library organizations and networks in Latin America and the Caribbean to strengthen the capacity and impact of libraries in the region.

As the new Chair of IFLA LAC, I am deeply committed to achieving the goals of our organization. To this end, we will work tirelessly to promote, defend, and raise the visibility of libraries and information centers in our region, breaking down all kinds of barriers to achieve significant achievements and benefits for our community of information professionals.

---

**• The Caribbean Island being an unincorporated territory of the United States with official Commonwealth status, what are the geographical advantages and disadvantages— keeping in view of the welfare of the Island’s libraries?**

The geographical location of Puerto Rico can be seen as both an advantage and a disadvantage for our libraries. In terms of advantages, our island stands out for its wide diversity of cultural and linguistic resources, which greatly enrich our collections and promote cultural diversity in library services. Our relationship with the United States provides our libraries with the advantage of close collaboration with libraries from recognized national institutions in different states. This, in turn, offers us the opportunity to access and exchange information resources that cover a wide range of disciplines, helping us meet the informational needs of our user community.

Another advantage is the possibility of leveraging federal funding programs for the development of our libraries and library services, which helps improve infrastructure and enhance the resources available in Puerto Rico’s libraries.

In terms of disadvantages, it is inevitable to mention our vulnerability to atmospheric phenomena and natural disasters due to the island’s geographical location. These events cause significant damage to our libraries when they affect us. Considering our status as a Caribbean Island, it is also important to mention the challenges we sometimes face due to the high costs of transporting library resources. Additionally, it is pertinent to highlight that while our participation in certain federal funding programs of the United States is seen as a positive aspect, this participation may be limited to specific programs and particular benefits.

---

**• Spanish being the predominant language in Puerto Rico (Note: in the Caribbean only PR, Cuba and the Dominican Republic speak Spanish), what is the status of scholarly journals and publications of LIS research works? How or to what extent is LIS literature in English is being utilized by the Caribbean LIS community? In short, our readers must be keen to know the language dynamics of LIS literature in the Caribbean countries?**

The predominant language in Puerto Rico is Spanish, although English also has extensive use as a second language. In the Caribbean context, the Dominican Republic and Cuba stand out as two islands that share Spanish as their primary language. In contrast, other islands in the Caribbean region have official languages that include English, French, and a variety of local languages and dialects. This linguistic richness reflects the cultural diversity of the region, and this diversity is also reflected in literature and in academic and professional communication in the field of Information Sciences in the Caribbean.

However, despite the Caribbean community in the field of information using a wide variety of languages in its literature, it is commonly recognized that English holds a significant place, especially in academic and research contexts and in international collaborations. Several factors can influence the choice of English as the predominant language, including the availability of resources, academic programs, and regional, national, or international collaborations, among others.

In Puerto Rico, it is common to use English in much of the literature in Information Sciences. However, in the magazine "Acceso", (annual publication of the Puerto Rican Society of Librarians), research, articles, and news related to librarianship on the island and other countries in the region are accepted and published in both English and Spanish. So, author may prefer publishing in any one of these languages.

From a broader perspective, it is essential for our readers to be interested in understanding the linguistic dynamics of literature in this field, not only as a historical aspect but also as an essential element for the development of their research and the creation of professional networks both in the Caribbean region and beyond its borders.

---

**• The University of Puerto Rico is the oldest university and the main public university system in the U.S. Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. You being the part of this University– what level of impetus has been given to the academic libraries in the higher education system by the parent bodies and government agencies (in terms of support for library related infrastructure, development plans, encouragement for library initiatives, adding more information resources, funding, etc.)**

The University of Puerto Rico has been supporting the libraries of each of its campuses by allocating funds for infrastructure improvements and the acquisition of technological and informational resources. However, the current fiscal crisis in our country has placed the University in a very difficult operational situation due to budget cuts and austerity measures imposed by the Financial Oversight and Management Board established by the United States Congress. This has had a direct impact on the University and our libraries. Over the years, we have witnessed a significant reduction in the budget allocated for our infrastructure, information resources, and staff, which negatively affects the scope of library services offered and the educational experience of students and the academic community.

Despite the challenges currently faced by the libraries of the University of Puerto Rico, efforts have been made to obtain external funding through proposals that make a significant contribution to the development of specific projects that enhance their offerings and services.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Note** • *All the answers/ opinions expressed in this document are of the interviewee. • The source transcript in Spanish has been translated into English using AI tools, Google Translate and got vetted by the interviewee. • Some facts, shared by the interviewee in the transcript, are supported by sources listed at the end of this post/ document.*

---

**Courtesy** • *Research and editing: Santosh C. Hulagabali • Photograph- Jeannette Lebrón Ramos' LinkedIn Profile • Introductory words: [Jeannette Lebrón Ramos' website](#).*

---

**Cite** • [Hulagabali, Santosh C.](#) (2023 September, 24). [Blog post]. Retrieved from: Jeannette Lebrón Ramos: Puerto Rican Information professionals need to strongly advocate for libraries in their community spaces. Retrieved from: <https://openinterview.org/2023/09/24/jeannette-lebron-ramos-puerto-rican-information-professionals-need-to-strongly-advocate-for-libraries-in-their-community-spaces/>

---

*[Santosh C Hulagabali](#), PhD is an Editor of Open Interview. He heads [Central Library and Publication Division of Central University of Haryana](#). He is passionate about anything that is creative, challenging and positively impacts self and others. Email: [santosh@cuh.ac.in](mailto:santosh@cuh.ac.in)*



---

## Referral links •

- ACUIRIL (2023). About ACURI. <http://acuril.org/>
- ASEGRABCI. Sobre nosotros (2023). <https://asegrabci.org/quienes-somos/sobre-nosotros/>
- Ayala, H. (2017). Colecciones en tiempos de emergencia: Cómo actuar?: Introducción. <https://libguides.uprm.edu/rescatecoleccionesPR>
- Fundación Nacional para la Cultura Popular. (2022, March 20). Las Bibliotecas Sin Fronteras marcan la diferencia. <https://prpop.org/2022/03/bibliotecas-sin-fronteras-hace-la-diferencia/>
- M. (2022, julio 6). A la vuelta de la esquina aumento en las tarifas de carga marítima. Metro PR. <https://www.metro.pr/noticias/2022/07/06/a-la-vuelta-de-la-esquina-aumento-en-las-tarifas-de-carga-maritima/>



- IFLA (2023). Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Division.  
<https://www.ifla.org/units/latin-america-and-the-caribbean-regional-division/>
- (2023). Sobre nosotros. <https://reformapr.wordpress.com/sobre-nosotros/>
- Santos Muniz, M. (2022, July 13). Puerto Rican librarians call for greater investment in library sciences and infrastructure to serve public needs.  
<https://prismreports.org/2022/07/13/puerto-rican-librarians-investments-library-infrastructure/>
- Sociedad de Bibliotecarios de Puerto Rico. (2023). Quienes somos.  
<https://sociedadbibliotecariospr.wordpress.com/>