

INTERNATIONAL GATHERING for SOCIAL and SOLIDARITY ECONOMY: CONNECTING EXPERIENCES In PUERTO RICO

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Social and Solidarity Economy is alive and well in Puerto Rico

BACKGROUND

For many years Puerto Rico (PR) has fostered a strong cooperative movement, primarily in the credit union arena, and developed an active non-profit organization sector. In September 2017, however, “Maria changed everything”, as island residents constantly recount. The devastating storm showed clearly that “the emperor had no clothes” with regard to extreme vulnerabilities to climate change, food insecurity (imports of 85%), economic recovery and an orphan’s status with relation to the mother country whose ludicrous relief response added insult to injury.

Realizing they could not wait for government action, Puerto Ricans reacted to events in a survival mode by creating numerous groups of community support including food kitchens, emergency search groups and shelters. These widespread actions helped raise consciousness about the strength and need for grassroots community action. Many of

these operations became ongoing activities still functioning today, nearly two years later and are the basis of an incipient SSE economy. This is not unexpected given a worldwide history (SSE) practices rising from crises.

Puerto Rico, having been battered by Maria and a strangling debt noose, faces existential crises of both immediate and long-term natures. Wither Puerto Rico? How can the island become more resilient economically and climatically while maintaining its own unique Boricua culture? Many people who have chosen to stay on the island, especially the young, believe answers reside in achieving more sustainable self-sufficiency. Social and solidary economy precepts are alive, well and growing as can be seen in many spheres, perhaps most prominently in the back to the land movement to produce more healthy food locally.

CONFERENCE OBJECTIVES

The conference was organized in just 6 months by an ad hoc group of 10 people representing key Puerto Rican institutions and one US based social enterprise. It responded to a strong need to provide more cohesion to currently functioning strands of SSE. Numerous Puerto Rican cooperatives, NGOs, local social enterprises, and U.S. foundations and individuals sponsored the gathering.

According to the organizers, its objectives were:

- 1) Make visible SSE experiences in Puerto Rico in order to recognize and connect us as a movement and thus generate consensus on our principles in Puerto Rico.
- 2) Learn and exchange international SSE experiences that help us to transcend the conception of it as a marginal sector of the world economy.
- 3) Propose SSE as a model of economic transformation in the country so that we can take collaborative, reciprocal and cooperative actions in a solidarity network of work and mutual aid.

OVERALL RESULTS

According to participant evaluations obtained thus far, not only was the gathering highly successful in achieving its objectives, it actually exceeded many attendees expectations in terms of results. People really appreciated the fact that it was held in a solidarity enterprise, Nuestra Escuela, rather than a more typical hotel venue. The most common dissatisfaction expressed was that the “solidarity lunches could have been more solid dietically”.

Over 240 people from 130 organizations, 25 of who were non-island SSE experts from 7 regional countries, attended in a truly multigenerational environment. A variety of key

topics were addressed including agro ecology, sustainable tourism, and the construction of a stronger cooperative movement, gender and finance issues as well as others. Not surprisingly the issue of strongest interest was agro ecology where nearly 50 attendees participated in related sessions. More than 30 workshops took place, permitting active engagement of all in their particular areas of interest. A full agenda along with a list of sponsors can be found at www.economiasolidariapr.com.

A very high level of shared enthusiasm was generated across the sessions. Excitement was palpable as: 1) Puerto Rican leaders, who had heard of each other, met in person for the first time, 2) participants learned of new efforts in Puerto Rico 3) international success stories inspired new ideas and 4) dynamic exchanges of information in built confidence that SSE practices go well beyond marginality in Puerto Rico.

On a national basis, conference participants were able to construct a general statement of social solidarity economy principles as well as decide to create the first ever Puerto Rican Social Solidarity Network to which more than 70 people have become members. These developments bode well for the intensification and healthy consolidation of future activities.

Students from the Institute of Cooperatives at the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras gathered information to begin mapping SSE activities son the island in order to create an accurate profile of the movement.

SPECIFIC OUTCOMES – INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

The arrival of the Oggun, a small, inexpensive, easy to fix tractor suitable for small and organic farmers, made the biggest splash. The 25% of attendees interested in agro ecology were thrilled with the potential to increase farm productivity and circumvent odious contracts with multinational corporate providers. A deal was finalized whereby students of Nuestra Escuela would oversee assembly and, subsequently, manufacture of the vehicle. To make all this operational, Recuperacion Agraria agreed to purchase 30

tractors initially, thereby insuring adequate exposure and testing in all parts of the countryside. Beyond Puerto Rico, connections also were made for possible establishment of tractor production centers in Honduras, Mexico and the San Francisco Bay Area.



Arrival of the Oggun at Nuestra Escuela, conference site

Although Puerto Rico presently has several highly functioning business incubators and accelerators, none of them focus directly on social impact or implementation of UN Social Development Goals. In this context presentation of three such models (Agora Partners; Institute of Design and Technology, Puebla Mexico, and the Andalusia School of Social Economy) was well received by relevant Puerto Rican institutions. Plans are already underway for facility visitations and technical exchanges.

The U.S Cooperative Movement connected strongly with Puerto Rican counterparts. NCBA/CLUSA reconfirmed bonds with the Puerto Rican Liga de Cooperativas and discussed potential projects with the Puerto Rico office of the US Dept. of Agriculture. Two large US cooperatives made clear their willingness to work with Puerto Rican colleagues in their respective fields – Organic Valley, the largest organic dairy producer in the US, and Cooperative Home Care Associates, the largest worker coop in the US.

The Andalusia School of Social Economy invited 4 Puerto Rican young people to attend the upcoming “Iberoamerican Meeting of SSE Youth Leaders” taking place in Seville and Malaga, Spain, October 9-12, 2019.

The community of Certified B corporations U.S/ Empresas B in Latin America was not known in Puerto Rico prior to the conference. At the gathering this network drew a lot of attention and was met with a great deal of enthusiasm. It seems quite likely that as a result of the gathering the first certifications of local business will take place within the coming months.

Discussions are underway among attendees concerning the possible formation of a U.S. coalition to support social solidarity economy in Puerto Rico.

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