



RE↑MAG↑NA Puerto Rico

DIASPORA
ENGAGEMENT REPORT

DECEMBER 2018



Purpose of Visit

Engaging with the community has been an essential aspect of Relmagina Puerto Rico's (Relmagina) process since the very beginning of the project. After its creation on November 2017, Relmagina set out to develop recommendations for the resilient reconstruction of Puerto Rico, and on March 24th, 2018, during the recommendations' development process, we met with the diaspora in Orlando, Florida. During our visit in Florida, we gathered the diaspora's perspective regarding issues and concerns, as well as potential opportunities involving the diaspora.

Upon publishing the recommendations on June 20th, 2018, Relmagina, once again, engaged with the diaspora between September and October 2018 and captured some of the diaspora's roles, goals, and desires throughout Washington, D.C., Connecticut, Massachusetts, and by participating in the Puerto Rican Diaspora Summit. During these outreach activities, the team presented Relmagina's efforts, recommendations, strategies and principles, and sought to capture what the diaspora's role regarding Puerto Rico reconstruction efforts could be moving forward. Relmagina's goals during these visits included: connecting with initiatives from Puerto Rican diaspora organizations, determining priority recommendations (for the diaspora) and identifying partners and contacts to promote their implementation, and gathering lessons learned on how to improve future support and aid distribution in disaster recovery actions performed by the diaspora.

Who We Met With

Thus far Relmagina's diaspora outreach process consists of data learned from Puerto Ricans throughout various North East cities (including Hartford, CT; Holyoke, MA; and Boston, MA) and at the Puerto Rican Diaspora Summit in Washington, D.C. In Hartford, CT and Holyoke, MA, we presented the Relmagina Puerto Rico Report and engaged with the respective communities. While in Holyoke, MA, Relmagina visited and met with organizations, such as Nueva Esperanza Inc. and Enlace de Familias.

Enlace de Familias (Enlace) is a grassroots non-profit organization that, in the wake of Hurricane María, mobilized and turned its facilities into a welcome/guidance center for Puerto Rican evacuees. Enlace welcomed a total of 2,179 individuals through their doors, and, in partnering with other organizations, they offered orientations and provided individuals with supplies, legal aid, psychological aid, and initial transportation to FEMA's Transitional Sheltering Assistance (TSA) lodging. On the other hand, Nueva Esperanza, Inc. (Nueva) is an organization that serves as a community and cultural hub. After the hurricane, Nueva operated as a supply collection and distribution center. Currently, Nueva is coordinating with various municipalities to build/set up roofs and continue participating in the recovery and reconstruction efforts. Another project we learned about while in Holyoke was the Puerto Rico Care Package, an initiative that used a standardized list of supplies to send to people in need of food or other supplies in the island.

While in Boston, MA we met with the Massachusetts United for Puerto Rico Fund (MUPR) of The Boston Foundation. MUPR was created soon after Hurricane María, and it is a fund dedicated to the relief and recovery of Puerto Rico and to support Puerto Rican evacuees arriving in Boston. To date, MUPR has raised close to \$4 million and has already distributed more than \$2 million to community-based organizations, recovery projects and other organizations.

Throughout various visits to Washington, D.C., Relmagina has met with various stakeholders, including Congressman Bishop's and Senator Sanders' offices, Isaac Edwards, Stephen Walls, Annabel Guillén Casañas and Zoé Rodríguez from the Federal, Political and Economic Affairs Office of the Senate of Puerto Rico, and Ross Dietrich, Legislative Director at Congresswoman Jenniffer González-Colón's office. In October of this year, Relmagina also participated and led a workshop at the Puerto Rican Diaspora Summit. In presenting Relmagina to the diaspora, we have been able to present how the project's role is evolving, as well as what we hope to achieve throughout the project's next phase.





The Diaspora's Role and Perspective

During our visits to the diaspora, we soon realized that the diaspora's activity and support is diverse and very present. Much of the Puerto Rican diaspora in mainland US has long been active, especially because many still have family in the island.

Throughout its history, the Puerto Rican diaspora has adopted a variety of roles, including raising awareness and educating the general public about Puerto Rico, advocating and lobbying for Puerto Rican representation in Congress, and supporting the larger diaspora community. In the wake of Puerto Rico's economic crisis and, later, Hurricanes Irma and María, the diaspora's role has in some ways intensified and adapted to the circumstances. Immediately after the hurricanes, the diaspora continued to perform the aforementioned roles and it further activated to:

- Deliver immediate relief.
- Provide access to resources to individuals in the island and evacuees. This included connecting resources with the suitable people, as well as collecting, shipping and delivering food, medications, and other supplies.
- Fund, crowdfund, and identify funding.
- Promote practical and tangible ideas applicable in Puerto Rico.

Additionally, the diaspora served as a sort of informant, and new voices, including students, have begun advocating about Puerto Rico to Congress.

Moving Forward:

Concerns, Challenges, Lessons Learned and Opportunities

During our meetings with diaspora groups, the main goals were to capture concerns, challenges, lessons learned and potential opportunities and how these could be addressed. Some of the lessons learned and potential opportunities that resounded throughout all of the diaspora meetings we held included the following:



Coordination and collaboration among diaspora groups/organizations

As expressed by the diaspora “collaboration is exactly what worked, but also the same thing that did not work”. Different diaspora groups repeatedly communicated to us that the lack of communication and coordination among diaspora groups has led to missed opportunities and duplication of efforts and resources. Establishing an organizational structure that brings diaspora groups and organizations together would provide a space for open communication and collaboration, and it would help leverage and nurture existing organizations. For example, in Holyoke, MA, Nueva Esperanza, Inc. and Enlace de Familias each recognized their strengths and focused their role on what they knew how to do best in order to maximize efforts, people, and resources.



Communication between the Puerto Rican diaspora and people in the island

There is a deep need to create a direct connection between the diaspora and those based in Puerto Rico. The lack of communication between these two groups has led to a disconnection, particularly regarding the efforts that each are partaking on. In creating a channel of communication, the diaspora could be better informed about the efforts taking place in the island (i.e., types of projects, what stage they are in, timeframe of completion, etc.). Emphasizing this connection could promote the exchange of ideas, products, services and initiatives, and it would establish a sense of support system. Said channel could serve as a space where young people of the diaspora and in Puerto Rico can connect, as this was another main concern of the diaspora. Additionally, given that Puerto Rico’s current situation presents an opportunity to train Puerto Ricans and produce employment in the island, establishing this link between the diaspora and the island could result in collaboratively conducting capacity building efforts and in promoting local businesses.



Transparency of use of funds

One of the diaspora’s main concerns has continually been the lack of transparency regarding the funds that have arrived at the island (specifically donations and crowd-funded funds). The diaspora’s concerns focus on the allocation and use of the funds and the results of the projects/initiatives for which the funds are being used. For this reason, it is important to identify where donated funds are being applied or used, this would ultimately improve appropriate use of the funds and continuity of efforts.



Complex relocation process

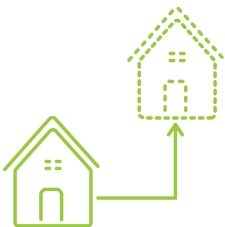
Regarding relocation of individuals and families, every case was unique especially since they all had different needs. Some of the main concerns include housing, education, career opportunities, and the language barrier:

Housing: In arriving to mainland US, families/individuals eligible for FEMA's TSA program were faced with complications, including the application process, transportation to lodging, lodging accessibility, and other relevant services. Some TSA program processes took at least 24 hours to complete. This resulted to be problematic because having a FEMA number did not mean individuals had already been processed, but it also meant they could not apply for homeless shelters either. Emergency shelters, which would have been individuals' second resort, were also facing logistical issues, particularly in Holyoke, MA. Also, TSA lodgings were often located in more remote areas, and, once individuals/families were assigned lodging, transportation became an issue. In the case of Holyoke, MA, staff and volunteers at Enlace took on the task of transporting evacuees to their respective lodgings and assessing their conditions in order to know what they might need. Now, a year after the hurricane, a major concern is that people get settled and routinized, but the termination of the program they are enrolled in is disrupting that routine. This has also had a particular impact on children enrolled in schools.

Education: Although the system has extensively supported the integration of students into their new schools, the emotional aspect still needs further attention, especially now, a year after the hurricane, that students are beginning to feel homesick.

Career Opportunities: Professionals who evacuated the island, particularly teachers and professionals in the medical field (i.e., doctors, nurses, surgeons), have had to undergo long processes to be certified to work in mainland US. This, coupled with the lack of available jobs in the island, has further burdened and economically impacted individuals.

Based on the lessons learned about the relocation process, a guidance tool or relocation plan needs to be created as to facilitate the process for future evacuees. This tool should include information about relevant processes, as well as an overview of the place, key services, organizations and a directory of people and entities to contact.





Political influence of Puerto Rico

Due to Puerto Rico's status and limited political representation, the Puerto Rican community needs a voice at the decision-making table. Being in the US mainland, the diaspora can have a greater influence in Congress. Through civic engagement, the diaspora can have a greater impact. Recognizing that there is power in the masses, fostering a stronger connection between Puerto Rico and the diaspora and between diaspora groups will result in the diaspora being better informed and organized in order to influence policy issues.



Action plan that includes a volunteer core and guidance on delivering aid

The lack of an action plan for how the diaspora should organize in the event of an emergency on the island, as was Hurricane María, resulted in reactivity and, sometimes, a disconnection between the diaspora's efforts and what people in the island needed. Developing an organized action plan, using what has been lived as precedent, would result in more effective and definitive efforts. This action plan should incorporate communicating with affected community(ies) to understand their distinct needs and respond appropriately. Also, this plan should include processes to follow in order to deliver aid, and, based on the fact that often times people wanted to help but did not know how to do so, said action plan should include a volunteer core.



Conclusion

As we pave the way towards a long-term vision for Puerto Rico, the main lesson learned is the profound need to facilitate communication and collaboration among the different diaspora groups. Even though some suggested Relmagina take on the lead, a diaspora-based organization should take on the lead role of formalizing a communication channel for all diaspora groups and organizations. Creating this organizational structure would provide a space for open communication and collaboration, and it will ultimately keep the diaspora better informed about efforts taking place throughout the diaspora and in the island, while further promoting the exchange of ideas, products, services and initiatives.