

Puerto Rican Migration: Challenges and Opportunities

Good afternoon members of the Fiscal Control Board and distinguished participants:

Thank you for inviting me to participate in this panel today. My name is Isabel Rullán I am co-founder and managing director of the organization ConPRmetidos. Four years ago, I joined a group of millennial leaders who, like me, decided to not be bystanders and instead search and execute solutions to Puerto Rico's pressing challenges. Our mission is connecting people in order to foster commitment with the personal, social and economic development of the Puerto Rican communities wherever they are. We believe it is impossible to expect the government alone will have the answers to all of the difficulties our nation faces. If we want proper socio-economic recovery to occur, it is vital for responsible citizens to get involved. And by responsible citizens, I am not limiting it to any geographical boundaries. We need them all, committed Puerto Ricans in the island and abroad.

The Puerto Rican diaspora has been denominated as one of the most remarkable migrations of the modern era, with more Puerto Ricans living abroad than inside the island's territory.¹ According to the data provided by the United States Census Bureau and Puerto Rico's Institute of Statistics, between the years 2005 to 2014 the net out migration reached 393,000 people. This constitutes an average of 1% of our population per year. Moreover, the US Census Bureau estimates that the island will continue losing its population gradually until the year 2050. They believe that, by then, the population of the island will be only 3 million.²

In a study on "The Causes and Consequences of Puerto Rico's Declining Population," Jason Abel and Richard Deitz argue that, even though there is a correlation between a decrease in birth rates and population loss, migration is still the most contributing factor. Their study stresses that without significant economic growth and competitive job opportunities, migration and population loss will most likely continue.³ An analysis done by the Pew Research Center on the US Census Bureau data supports these arguments by revealing that the search for economic opportunities is the most common explanation given by the Puerto Ricans who move to the United States. In the study, 42% of the respondents gave work related explanations when asked about why they decided to migrate.⁴

¹ http://www.estadisticas.gobierno.pr/documentos/3B47210A-EF57-44EF-BBB4-28E53D923562/comunicado_Atlas_de_la_Diaspora_2010.pdf 2; retrieved on March 30, 2017

² <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2014/08/11/puerto-rico-population/>; retrieved on March 30, 2017

³ Abel, J. R., & Deitz, R. (2014). The causes and consequences of Puerto Rico's declining population.

⁴ <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2014/08/11/puerto-rican-population-declines-on-island-grows-on-u-s-mainland/>

In 2006 the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development published a study on the number of tertiary educated migrants residing in OECD countries. They classified their skilled diasporas into three groups. For example, the Irish diaspora is considered a small group because less than 200,000 people have a level of higher education. The Mexican diaspora is a large group because between 200,000 and 1,000,000 people have a level of higher education. India and the United Kingdom have super large diasporas because more than 1 million people have a level of higher education.⁵

A survey by the US Census Bureau revealed that 47% of the Puerto Ricans who migrated between the years of 2013 and 2014 have some sort of tertiary education. This means that if we were to categorize Puerto Rico's Diaspora numbers the same way the OECD does, Puerto Rico has a super large diaspora with more than 1 million skilled individuals. As a matter of fact, there are 5.3 million Puerto Ricans living abroad and many of them are experts in science, technology, agriculture, green energy, education, health, research, business, management, development and banking. Members of the diaspora also include leaders in decision-making positions that can become valuable assets to the strong and competitive economy we want to build.⁶

A 2012 joint survey by the International Organization for Migration and the Migration Policy Institute found there are 400 government institutions and partnerships in 56 countries that directly engage their diasporas through their programs for economic development.⁷ Their diasporas connect their countries of origin to global networks, tapping into key business practices that are essential to the development of a knowledge-based economy. In other words, when properly engaged, diasporas can be a valuable source of development opportunities like helping reform the public sector, innovating the education system and promoting a private sector based on knowledge. A strategically engaged diaspora can counterweight the migration of qualified and talented individuals, converting the migration flow into an economic asset for our country and the "brain drain" into a "brain circulation".

An example of this is the role that the Indian diaspora has played in developing an information technology sector in India that was led by Indian engineers and entrepreneurs from Silicon Valley⁸. Another example is GlobalScot, an international business network that harnesses the drive, ambition and talent of high profile, successful Scots (and those with an affinity with Scotland) to help businesses succeed locally and globally. Approximately 650 members from all over the world comprise the Global Scot network.

⁵ Kuznetsov, Yevgeny. 2013. How Can Talent Abroad Induce Development at Home? Towards a Pragmatic Diaspora Agenda. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute. 11-12

⁶ <http://www.estadisticas.gobierno.pr/iepr/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=6fUAO-4gbb0%3D&tabid=165>; retrieved on March 30, 2017

⁷ Rannveig, Agunias, and Kathleen Newland. *Developing a Road Map for Engaging Diasporas in Development: A Handbook for Policymakers and Practitioners in Home and Host Countries*. Washington, DC: International organization for Migration & Migration Policy Institute, 2012. Print.

⁸ Saxenian, AnnaLee. *The New Argonauts: Regional Advantage in a Global Economy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. Print.



This continues to facilitate visibility of Scottish businesses and gives hundreds of emerging companies in Scotland a head start to compete in a global marketplace.⁹

In terms of government planning, Singapore has International Advisory Council formed by their Diaspora and friends of Singapore that aids Singapore's Economic Development Board. Meanwhile, Argentina has connected their academic diaspora to support research projects in their local institutions. Puerto Rico, for example, could use its diaspora to support local academic institutions and instill a more global perspective in students by engaging Puerto Rican professors like Dr. Javier Ávila who won professor of the year in 2015.

After learning about these successful models and how they are contributing to their countries, we saw a great opportunity to do something similar in Puerto Rico. When we originally launched ConPRmetidos in Miami, New York and Washington D.C., we learned that Puerto Ricans with tremendous work experiences, who had developed successful careers and had professional networks, were eager to give back but did not know how they could get involved. This is why in 2015 ConPRmetidos launched the Puerto Rico Global Initiative as a way to connect the Puerto Rican diaspora to development efforts in the island. Part of our strategy included a matching digital platform that has over 1,500 members who registered after roadshow events we organized in main U.S. cities and Puerto Rico. We also participated in over 30 speaking engagements in the Island and abroad. Since then we have learned the best way to engage people is to connect them in person or by brokering tailored connections. This is why this year's strategy focuses on bringing Puerto Ricans and friends of Puerto Rico to the island and connecting them to key players in different industries.

We have done all this and other projects with the support of our families, our board members, Foundation for Puerto Rico, and small grants from the government and the private sector. However, the depth of the "brain drain" issue, its implications in the island's economy and the size of our diaspora make clear that, in order for a good expatriate network to work, it is crucial to have a solid infrastructure, institutional capabilities and secure sources of funding.

We recommend the government to allocate funds that can be used for the long-term development of an infrastructure that captures and disseminate resources from the diaspora to help maximize opportunities for joint diaspora-home projects. As part of a comprehensive economic development plan, the Government of Puerto Rico should create an advisory board comprised of industry experts from the diaspora who can help local leaders make more informed decisions and used their connections to properly insert the island into the global economy.

⁹ <https://www.globalscot.com/about>; retrieved on March 30, 2017

