

Increasing Socio-economic Resilience of Utuado Farmers through Agritourism

Executive Summary

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Project Background

Utuado, Puerto Rico, is a region that has witnessed many natural hazards, most notably Hurricane Maria that struck the island in 2017 and irrevocably altered its landscape to this day (Holladay et al., 2019; Ortiz, 2020; Benach et al., 2019). In combination with layers of pre-existing vulnerability, such as socio-economic vulnerability and food insecurity, this has made for a disaster situation (Klein, 2018; Benach et al., 2019; Garriga-López, 2019). However, this disaster has also opened up a window for citizens to rise up and self-organize for the revitalization of their shared communities and spaces; in the agricultural sector, this has manifested as a drive towards a stronger regional economy and the building of food sovereignty through agritourism (Holladay et al., 2019). Through a collaboration with key local farmers to identify local farm assets through the reconstruction of solution strategies (Forrest & Wiek, 2014) and the designing of an educational program for the adaptation and scaling of identified sustainability solutions to other regional farms (Fraser & Galinsky, 2010), this project intends to bring about the following outcomes: (1) building of community resilience and livelihood opportunity; (2) increasing of awareness and knowledge of agritourism best practices; (3) dissemination of knowledge on practices to increase farm- and visitor-readiness; (4) and strengthening and interconnection of regional economy players.

Project Methods

My project consisted of three major parts, as supported by the referenced frameworks:

Part I. Identification regional sustainability solutions.

1. Developing surveys for preliminary data collection on key actions, tools, and resources for farm success (Astier, et al., 2012);
2. Creating a list of criteria for the identification of sustainable farms and enterprises (Wiek & Basile, 2020; Wiek, 2020); and
3. Conducting background research on identified regional sustainable farms and enterprises.

Part II. Reconstruction of pathways to success of regional sustainable farms and enterprises.

1. Developing and conducting interviews for a more detailed follow-up of a few exemplary farms;
2. Reconstructing transition pathways based on interviews (Forrest & Wiek, 2014); and

3. Creating a list of criteria for the successful transition or development of a farm or enterprise (Forrest & Wiek, 2014).

Part III. Development of an education and training program to support other farmers in learning from this experience.

1. Identifying pertinent theory of change, focal risk factors, as well as program scope and stakeholders (Fraser & Galinsky, 2010); and
2. Developing a program addressing main elements and indicators, pilot program and measures, and training and implementation based on reconstructed pathways (Fraser & Galinsky, 2010).

Project Outcomes

Outcomes of the project thus far include:

- In Part I of the project, I worked in close collaboration with our project partner from PRTC, Nilda Luhning Gonzalez, to identify, contact, and collect information from exemplary farms and enterprises throughout Puerto Rico. Ms. Gonzalez reviewed the Criteria for Farm Sustainability, and in doing so revealed that the list of criteria could be a powerful tool with which to gain a more holistic understanding of important information on enterprises that has not been previously considered. An example of this is whether or not an enterprise employs individuals with disabilities. This kind of information can help create connections and add support for sustainable enterprises as by professionals like Ms. Gonzalez in their networking roles.
- In Part II of the project involving the reconstruction of transition pathways, Dr. Katja Brundiers provided valuable feedback on the utility of this tool for increasing the understanding of regional economy players, their interconnections, and functions among communities and farmers. Part II of the project will also be expanded upon once IRB approval is received and surveys and interviews can be delivered.
- In Part III of the project involving the training program, Dr. Lisa Chase, professor at the University of Vermont and director of the Vermont Tourism Research Center who has extensive experience delivering agritourism workshops, commended the training program for its farmer-to-farmer learning approach, its place-based nature, and its strong sustainability framing. She also provided recommendations with regards to the mode of delivery of the program, and caution with regards to the potential impacts of tourism when left unchecked.

Next Steps

While this project has provided a start on the development of an informed farmer educational and training program, there is much room for progress. Whether through my own continued



project involvement past MSUS program graduation for a period of 3 months, or through future MSUS student continuation on the project, both unavailable required project components as well as areas worthy of expansion provide for many opportunities to continue to develop this project. These opportunities for development include:

1. The operationalization and delivery of developed surveys and interviews upon receiving IRB approval (which had been initiated early in the semester, but experienced heavy delays in part due to the impact of COVID-19 on the UPR IRB team);
2. The expansion of the pool of exemplary enterprises for which to reconstruct transition pathways;
3. The deepening of the training program through reconstructed pathways of exemplary enterprises; and
4. The piloting of the developed training program upon completion to better inform the later program implementation phase.