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# Island of how-to-do-it

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# Island of how-to-do-it

*Prepared by the Foreign Operations Administration*

An American officer of the Technical Cooperation Mission in New Delhi, discussing a study tour with an Indian specialist in housing or community development, says, "And after two weeks in Washington, I suggest that you go to Puerto Rico and see what they are doing there."

A young engineer in Ecuador or El Salvador may receive advice from a senior, "I think you'd get more out of going to Puerto Rico than to TVA or Grand Coulee in the States. The kind of little TVA's they have there are more what we are interested in."

An administrator in the Gold Coast hears, "Puerto Rico, as you know, has gone from dependency status to that of Commonwealth. It would be worthwhile to study Puerto Rican developments."

Health authorities in Thailand hear, "It would be valuable to study what Puerto Rico is doing in rural health."

Things have been happening in Puerto Rico. In the years from 1940 to 1952, the gross product of Puerto Rico went up 301 per cent, wages and salaries went up 358 per cent, value of agricultural production went up 172 per cent. The death rate went down 51 per cent, life expectancy went up 33 per cent. Public education enrolment increased 61 per cent.

The first question obviously is, "How did Puerto Rico do it?" In the answer to that question is found also the reason why Puerto Rico has become an island laboratory and training ground for technical cooperation programs the world over. From May, 1950, through July, 1956, more than 3,000 trainees, visitors and observers had studied Puerto Rican examples. The Foreign Operations Administration on June 25, 1954 announced the signing of a three-year contract with the Commonwealth for expansion of training programs and the training of thousands of others. The United Nations sends trainees to Puerto Rico, as does the Organization of American States; private foundations provide fellowships for study there; governments of Latin America send their own people on study missions. From July 1, 1954 to June 30, 1955, 891 trainees, visitors and observers came from almost every nation of the world except the Soviet Union and its allies.

## *"Operation Bootstrap"*

Puerto Rico's qualifications for its unique role in world-wide technical cooperation were recognized long ago —by the Puerto Ricans themselves. In the first place, Puerto Rico for more than a decade has had a well thought-out, overall economic development program to make a full-scale attack on the problems of underdevelopment.





PUTTING FINISHING TOUCHES on a new self-help housing unit in Puerto Rico.

In the second place, conditions of climate but also of disease, poverty, malnutrition, high population density, and economic transition are more nearly like those of the countries from which trainees come. Devices and methods of more highly developed countries had been, in a sense, brought down to recognizable size in the Puerto Rican approach—largely that of sheer self-help.

Finally, of particular advantage to Latin America, is the fact that Puerto Rico is bilingual, English and Spanish. Lack of knowledge of English is no barrier and at the same time knowledge of English can be improved.

The idea of technical cooperation programs had hardly been stated by President Truman in January 1949, before Governor Luis Muñoz Marín, knowing what Puerto Rico had accomplished through

“Operation Bootstrap,” offered the facilities of the island for whatever use might be made of them. Before the year was over, a group from the Department of State went to Puerto Rico to look into possibilities. The group was so favorably impressed that 16 grants were offered initially—to 15 Latin American engineers and one doctor. These arrived in Puerto Rico in May 1950.

Puerto Rico itself, with a \$50,000 appropriation, financed the training program during the first year. It has continued to appropriate additional funds. Beginning in 1951, the Federal Government of the United States allocated funds to the program.

Governor Muñoz Marín has described Puerto Rico, before its development got under way, in these terms:

“Imagine that the population



OFFICIALS MEET IN PUERTO RICO.

(l. to r.) Hon. Samuel R. Quiñones, President of Senate; Hon. Felisa de Gautier, Mayor of San Juan; Dr. G. G. Pandit, head, Indian Council for Medical Research; Her Excellency Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Minister of Health of India; Hon. Arturo Morales Carrión, Under Secretary of State.

of the whole world, more than two billion human beings, should move to the United States. Then the United States would have 650 inhabitants per square mile, the same as Puerto Rico. Imagine that most industrial plants had ceased to operate, that there were no coal mines, no oil wells, no water power. If all this came about, the United States would be in the same position as Puerto Rico was before we decided to do something about it.”

The beginning of Puerto Rico’s program of economic development occurred in May 1942, when the Puerto Rico Planning Board was created to coordinate programs and policies of Government agencies, to guide Government investment in capital facilities and to regulate the use of urban land. In the same year the Puerto Rico Industrial De-

velopment Company was set up to stimulate manufacturing enterprises. Glass, paper board, clay and shoe factories were established. Laws were modified to attract investment from outside sources.

Efforts were made to stimulate tourist trade; electric power and water supply systems received attention; the Government entered on a vast program of public housing to eliminate slums in both rural and urban areas. New hospitals were built, new health clinics set up, school systems were improved. The University of Puerto Rico established courses suited to particular needs of the island. The university’s Agricultural Experiment Station concentrated even further on improvement of the island’s agriculture.

What emerged in the development process was a principle vital to technical cooperation—the principle of self-help. Governor Muñoz Marín, from his own experience, has told of this discovery. When the development program was beginning, Puerto Rico was in the grip of shocking poverty, with apparently few resources to deal with it.

“At this point, well aware of the great economic needs of our people, and knowing our simple people well”, said Governor Muñoz Marín, “I set out to talk with them. I learned many things from them.”

“I learned that there is a wisdom among the people in the towns and in the countryside which education may lead, but cannot improve, in its magnificent human essence. I taught many of them something, but they taught me more. I learned that the people are wise—wiser than we think. I learned that to them freedom is something deep in the heart, in the conscience,



in everyday life, in personal dignity, in the furrow, the plow and the tools."

This has been the basis of the Puerto Rican approach—to talk with the people, find out the needs that are closest to their daily lives, help them direct their own efforts to solving these problems, show them how, not merely to use their labors efficiently, but to build a community of thought, how to follow a democratic, cooperative pattern.

#### *Unique housing program*

Most publicized and perhaps most unique expression of this community development process is Puerto Rico's "aided self-help housing." In this case, great engineering skill and inventive talent were applied to working out the kind of house that members of a community—12 to 15 families—could build for themselves at low cost.

The Government lends forms, a cement mixer, and the services of a foreman. The Government also furnishes the materials, costing the equivalent of \$300. The owner is required to pay for the materials but his payments extend over a 10-year period. He and his neighbors build his house and theirs, under proper supervision, and do the plastering, painting, internal partitioning and construction of porches. The self-help idea, however, is something that inspires the man and his family. They are soon planting flowers and vegetable gardens and look forward to expansion of the house itself. They attend classes in furniture making, sewing and good housekeeping practices. The net result is that for thousands of persons, the standard of living has not only been raised, but revolutionized.



ENGINEERS DISCUSS IRRIGATION projects. (l. to r.) Héctor Dueñas Huerta of Ecuador; Javier Cuevas Benítez of Puerto Rico; Armando Gallegos Guevara of Perú.

But if "aided self-help housing" has become the most publicized of the Puerto Rican approaches, other fields of study are equally fruitful for the trainee.

Development officials from many countries are enthusiastic about the industrialization program—how the Puerto Rico Economic Development Administration succeeded in establishing more than 450 new industries on the island, adding thousands of new jobs; how it both attracted outside capital and encouraged local capital to invest in industries, how it analyzed problems, created incentives, promoted development.

In education, Puerto Rico's emphasis on vocational education and its vocational rural schools, providing a combination of academic and vocational training for rural children, offers many ideas for educa-

tors from other underdeveloped areas. A notable feature is that these schools serve as educational and cultural centers for both parents and children. They have a strong orientation to the needs of the particular community and its resources. A social worker is usually attached to each such school, fortifying further the community approach.

#### *Education and public health*

The Community Education Program is a new approach to adult education. Its goal is the education of the community for concrete action in solving local community problems. Though still relatively new (the Community Education Division was established in May 1949, under Law No. 372), this basically self-help program has already resulted in numerous local projects carried out by local citizens. These are such as the drainage of a swamp, the building of a bridge, the building of a local school and the elimination of illiteracy in a village. One original approach to the problem of increasing food production is that of planting beans on the shoulders of public roads, in soil that otherwise would not be cultivated.

In the health field, the School of Tropical Medicine has excellent and specialized facilities, but programs of extension of health services to rural communities also are of special note. The public health centers combine all health and public assistance services as nearly as possible under one roof, a practical solution where the majority of the population travels on foot. The centers are staffed with doctors, nurses, nutritionists, sanitary inspectors, social workers, and even include milk centers under the maternal and child-welfare program.

In-service training has strong emphasis, not only in the health field but in other fields as well.

Agricultural extension and home economics programs have made much progress. The Inter-American Institute of Agricultural Sciences at Turrialba, Costa Rica, has an agreement with the University of Puerto Rico for the training of groups in these subjects.

A special three months' tropical forestry training course was held from March to May 1955, with 26 technicians from eight Latin American countries, India, Ceylon, Vietnam, the Philippines, Surinam, and British Guiana in attendance. A three months' training course in cooperatives was carried out jointly by the Food and Agriculture Organization, Caribbean Commission and Cooperative Institute of the University of Puerto Rico. This was attended by 26 members of cooperatives from the British, French and Netherlands dependencies in the Caribbean.

#### *Training labor leaders*

The Labor Relations Institute of the University of Puerto Rico has had a special program for labor leaders from Latin America since 1952. At first the university itself financed the course; later the United States Department of Labor took over sponsorship. After study in Puerto Rico, participants go to the United States to observe labor activities under guidance of the Department. Three courses of more than three months each were held in 1955.

The Government of Puerto Rico opens its own departments for study—its Office of Personnel, Office of the Controller, Social Programs Administration, its Bureau of the Bud-



get, its Communications Authority and others.

The opportunities for training are so extensive that they read almost like the courses in a university catalogue—in fact, a catalogue has been issued.

Testimonials are numerous. An official of the Banco Nacional of Costa Rica, after studying on a fellowship in Puerto Rico, said in his report:

"I consider that the study carried out in this country, notwithstanding its brevity, is of greater practical utility than that which could be done in other countries of greater economic potential. The reason is obvious: Puerto Rico is being converted into a great economic-social laboratory in which a new culture is developing, a product of the fusion of American technique and Hispanic traditions."

#### *Model for other countries*

A Brazilian engineer said, after visiting the island: "In view of the accomplishment made in the various fields of activities, I have suggested that the Brazilian Government utilize Puerto Rico as a sort of model or experimental field where technicians and economists of other underdeveloped countries, seeking solutions to similar problems, could come and study their own countries. The similarity in culture and in language would make easier the adaptation of technicians of South and Central America, in contrast with the North American continent, where problems are different and accomplishments of such magnitude

that very often they dishearten the students who go there."

A Philippine officer, studying rural resettlement, made the simple, direct comment, "What I learn here, we can apply at home." A visitor from India said Puerto Rico's success or failure "is of first importance to millions living in underdeveloped areas throughout the world."

#### *Continuing improvement*

Not all trainees are satisfied nor get all they think they should. But complaints are studied and evaluated and steps taken to correct any deficiencies in the training facilities. That is the psychology of Puerto Rican development and it is applied even to the lessons Puerto Rico has to teach.

More and more effort is devoted to systematizing the training process. The Office of Technical Cooperation of the Puerto Rico Department of State provides aid and counsel to trainees coming to the island. Preliminary and final training programs are worked out. The Office of Technical Cooperation receives trainees at the airport, selects convenient places for them to live, offers general orientation programs on Puerto Rico, introduces the trainees at training agencies, follows their progress and aids them in solving their problems.

- Fulfilling the fundamental purpose of technical cooperation in strengthening democracy, a small island between continents has set up a beacon that beckons to the whole world.