

What rural, coastal Puerto Ricans can teach us about thriving in times of crisis

May 31 2017, by Carlos G. García-Quijano And Hilda Lloréns



Public art depicts the cultural importance of fishing for a coastal town in Puerto Rico. Credit: Hilda Lloréns, Author provided

Puerto Ricans are searching for solutions to the island's worst economic and social crisis in a long time.

An unprecedented debt level is creating widespread uncertainty about employment and the state's ability to [provide basic services](#). This crisis is not going away [anytime soon](#), but solutions may be closer than we think.

As cultural anthropologists, we have spent more than a decade studying how people's everyday lives relate to [larger social and economic processes](#) and have documented the [negative effects](#) of inequality. In doing so, we have also witnessed people in Puerto Rico who "refuse to play by the rules" of capitalism. Some [scholars](#) have even argued that [Caribbean peoples are experts](#) at living with and resisting the [negative effects](#) of modern capitalism because it was there that one form of capitalism was [first tested](#). Beginning in the 18th century, Caribbean sugar plantations were [early models for factory labor management and capitalist trade](#) with the European metropolis.

People on the rural coasts of Puerto Rico are forging good lives without necessarily accumulating material wealth and climbing the socioeconomic ladder. Examining the lives of those who have been "left behind" by the mainstream economy may provide examples of how to live well in troubled times.

Diversity in times of instability

Working in a salaried full-time job with a single employer can be a good strategy for survival in times of abundance and stability. However, it comes at the expense of reduced flexibility and resiliency under [conditions of scarcity and uncertainty](#). People who are poor and live in rural areas, such as many coastal Puerto Ricans, have long relied on [diverse livelihoods](#) and [income streams](#) to adapt to prolonged scarcity and uncertainty.

Puerto Ricans occasionally combine formal and informal labor with taking advantage of benefits offered by the state. Take Juana, a single mother and lifelong resident of Arroyo, Puerto Rico whom we interviewed for a [2016 study](#). Because our interviews are usually carried out under agreement of confidentiality, we use pseudonyms instead of interviewee names.

Until retiring, Juana worked on and off as a temporary clerk in a local hospital. When she was out of work, she babysat children of working mothers in her community. Now, Juana often barter produce from her small fruit and vegetable garden with neighbors for their labor: for example, a mechanic who fixes her car. One of her nephews, whom she babysat as a kid, is a spearfisher who provides a few fish or a lobster for Juana's fridge. Juana said:

"I do not want or need for anything. I often have more than I know what to do with."

Central to these arrangements is investment in community relationships by [gift-giving, bartering and sharing expertise](#).

In our work, we have documented repeated instances in which people [gave away valuable goods](#), like fresh fish or shellfish, instead of holding on to them or selling them to accrue wealth. [A recent study](#) found that more than 90 percent of fishers around Puerto Rico's southeast coast routinely separate part of their catch for giving to family, friends or neighbors in need. They choose to invest in community [relationships and solidarity](#).

This [kind of reciprocity](#) occurs in communities where people recognize that their well-being depends on that of others, rather than on un dependable labor markets.

Leaning on community

In Puerto Rico, as in other places such as New England, fishers tend to have relatively low incomes but [high cultural significance](#) in their communities. Fishers hold an iconic image as independent workers who engage in an adventurous and arduous lifestyle to provide for their communities.

A fisher from Salinas, Puerto Rico explained that he wanted to provide an honorable occupation for his grandson and grandnephew.

"Who will employ these kids if I do not? I hardly ever pay to fix my boat, my engine, or my nets. People fix them for me, because I bring them food. Many times I give fish away for free or on credit, and I also provide employment for community members."

These communities often have centers that organize initiatives for residents such as community gardening, solar power, home improvement workshops and summer camps for about 100 children. In 2016, Carmen, the current president of a community board in Salinas, Puerto Rico, told us about their [summer camp](#):

"We charge a monthly five dollar fee per child. We recruit volunteers to offer workshops for the children. We get free breakfast and lunch through the Department of Education. Otherwise, we fund the camp with our own money and donations from local businesses. Members of the community board of directors and parents help staff the camp."

When we asked why she felt that hosting the children's summer camp is important, Carmen answered: "We are a 'poor' community, but when we pool our time and resources we are able to offer the children a good summer camp and teach them good values."

Lessons from the margins

The idea with [these examples](#) is not to glamorize poverty or lack of access to income. Instead, our work points out that people have exercised their agency in such situations by learning to outmaneuver "the game" by changing the rules and goals so that they stand a better chance to win.

People living in the hinterlands of the modernizing world have long realized the undependable nature of working in industries such as pharmaceutical, energy and corporate tourism, where jobs come and go with economic cycles. Local workers are often the last hired, the first fired and have the [lowest-paying, more hazardous jobs](#).

Perhaps it is time to look to people who have been deemed outcasts or "backwards" – Caribbean rural fishers and farmers, [mid-Atlantic fishers and pine tar harvesters](#), [Appalachian farmers and coal workers](#) – to understand how they have created rich lives in the margins of the mainstream economy. Perhaps we can apply their strategies for our own survival in these turbulent times.

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