

Translated from Spanish

CIVIL SOCIETY AND HEALTH SYSTEM IN CUBA

A case study commissioned by the Health Systems Knowledge Network

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Background to the Health Systems Knowledge Network

The Health Systems Knowledge Network was appointed by the WHO Commission on the Social Determinants of Health from September 2005 to March 2007. It was made up of 14 policy-makers, academics and members of civil society from all around the world, each with his or her own area of expertise. The network engaged with other components of the Commission (see http://www.who.int/social_determinants/map/en) and also commissioned a number of systematic reviews and case studies (see www.wits.ac.za/chp/).

The Centre for Health Policy led the consortium appointed as the organisational hub of the network. The other consortium partners were EQUINET, a Southern and Eastern African network devoted to promoting health equity (www.equinet africa.org), and the Health Policy Unit of the London School of Hygiene in the United Kingdom (www.lshtm.ac.uk/hpu). The Commission itself is a global strategic mechanism to improve equity in health and health care through action on the social of determinants of health at global, regional and country level.

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Purpose

The purpose of this work is to provide information on Cuba's experience in social participation in the construction of a national health system, its development and control.

Method

The method used is that of the "individual case" study, which covers the need to know everything concerning a case, identify its themes, and trace its complexity models (1)

The case is an integrated system that is described in detail to highlight its relationships and interpretations.

The choice of Cuba corresponds to the particular features of its health system, the only one of the Socialist type to have emerged from a revolution.

Documentary information was used, applying content analysis to identify and characterize relationships in the construction, refinement and control of the health system (2).

Context

In the political features of contemporary Cuba, the most significant fact is the triumph of the people's revolutionary movement led by Fidel Castro in 1959. Today, Cuba is an independent, sovereign, socialist state, developed by all, for the benefit of all, as a united democratic republic enjoying political freedom, social justice, individual and collective welfare and human solidarity (3).

In its economic life, the country has been subjected to constant aggression, including terror methods, and to an economic, trade and financial blockade that has already lasted for almost half a century; by adopting a model rooted in a centralized economy; by the existence of a policy that seeks social justice and equity; by heavy reliance on the outside world and a high concentration of imports, by great dependence on generating resources in a limited number of sectors; and

by a framework of a economic and trade ties that have had to adopt new decentralized forms of cooperation. The aggressions and blockade organized, led, and financed by the United States of America is aimed at destroying the Cuban Revolution. The direct damage done to the Cuban people by the blockade has been estimated at 86 108 million dollars, or more than 1800 million dollars per annum (4).

The economic context thus enunciated has had a negative impact on vital aspects such as education, health, nutrition, housing, transport, employment and recreation.

The entire revolutionary process has taken place in an atmosphere of justice and social equity, with the Government ensuring that it does not harm major population groups when an economic measure is taken. Cuban society has been internationally recognized as one with the least inequities in the distribution of wealth (5). Also it is the only country in the world with sustainable development, according to the biannual report recently issued by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) (6).

In recent political and economic developments there has been a manifest recrudescence of aggression against Cuba. A clear example of the publicly stated imperialist intentions in the middle of last year could be seen in a bulky document setting out what the United States administration will do during a supposed period of transition that it hopes will occur in the near future. To this end it has already nominated " a coordinator for the transition in Cuba".

In this case the aim, inter alia, would be to build a civil society based on the capitalist interpretation of the word to replace the present Cuban type of civil society which is failing to obey its orders to rise against the revolutionary government, of which it forms an active part.

The strained atmosphere generated by all this defines the specific situation which must frame our picture of Cuba's civil society and of how it fits into the national health system. This examination excludes a description of the lengthy and complex path followed to the present situation, in which it is possible to identify and discuss civil society issues in Cuba, which was not the case in previous decades, as well as what remains to be done.

Civil Society

In Cuba the way that work by civil society must be viewed in relation to the construction and social control of the health system must be taken in context. The country is not capitalist, has not given in to neo-liberalism, exercises its sovereignty, and is socialist.

Let us recall that "in the political discourse of the international right, *civil society* is a term associated with neo-liberal policies, the denial of economic and redistributive functions of the State, and the fight against socialism. The political rhetoric of the United States government and the most reactionary circles of the US against Cuba claimed (and still claims) that no civil society exists in our country because of the presence of a totalitarian state which allegedly impedes freedom of association and sets up as a key element in the fight to rout the Revolution, the creation of a Cuban civil society identified with a proliferation of organizations that are not only *non-governmental* but are above all anti-governmental. In the long term they will, as happened with Poland and the Solidarity trade union, put paid to Cuban socialism". (7).

In Cuba, the discussions that range round civil society arise from this counter-revolutionary view of things for, although it is a term that has been known since the seventeenth century, it is only since the nineteen-seventies that it has come to be discussed by us. Its meaning has been altered. The controversy has led many to accept that civil society is an area where ideological theses are produced and disseminated (8).

“Civil society is the legitimate scenario for a conflict of aspirations, desires, objectives, images, beliefs, identities, and projects, which express the diversity making up the social sphere. The skill of the group that holds power is not grounded in an effort to interfere with manifestations of this diversity but in co-opting everyone into its project for the general construction of the social tissue” (9).

Civil society in Cuba thereby becomes an area for consolidating the political hegemony of the socialist revolutionary project, which opposes the market and is identified with social justice and equality” (10).

“Cuban civil society represents a coherent human group that has established and developed formal and informal relationships linked by common interests, in contrast to the bourgeois concept of things which promotes the *Balkanization* of society and the exacerbation of individualism (11).

The organized expression of civil society in Cuba comes under Article 54 of the Constitution of the Republic which stipulates that “the rights to assembly, demonstration and association are exercised by workers, both manual and intellectual, peasants, women, students and other sectors of the working people, and they shall have the necessary means for this. They shall have all the facilities they need, in which its members shall have full freedom of speech and opinion based on the unlimited right of initiative and criticism”.

Some of the many organizations which exist today go back to pre-revolutionary times, such as the *Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios (FEU)* [Federation of University Students], the *Central* (previously *Confederación*) *de Trabajadores de Cuba (CTC)*, [Confederation of Cuban Workers], and the Masonic lodges, but others have come into existence since then, such as the *Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (FMC)* [Federation of Cuban Women], the *Comités de Defensa de la*

Revolución (CDR) [Revolutionary Defence Committees], the *Asociación Nacional de Agricultores Pequeños (ANAP)* [National Association of Small Farmers], scientific health bodies linked together in a national council divided according to professional specialties, the *Fundación Fernando Ortiz*, [Fernando Ortiz Foundation], the *Fundación del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano*, [New Latin American Cinema Foundation], the *Fundación Antonio Núñez Jiménez de la Naturaleza y el Hombre* [The Antonio Núñez Jiménez Foundation for Nature and Man], the *Fundación Nicolás Guillén*, [Nicolás Guillén Foundation], the *Fundación Alejo Carpentier*, [Alejo Carpentier Foundation], the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Centre, the John Paul II Centre for Bioethics, the Cuban Union of Writers and Artists (UNEAC), the Cuban Union of Journalists (UPEC), the Cuban Union of Lawyers, etcetera.

The National Health System

A health system is all those organizations, institutions and resources whose prime goal is the improvement of human health, so it embraces all activities that have the aim of promoting, restoring or maintaining health (12).

1961 saw the commencement in Cuba of a health system for the entire population, under the direction of the State, and organized, led and funded by the latter. Health became a right of the people and free health care was provided to the entire community (13).

This national system is undivided, integrated and decentralized, and coverage reaches the entire population. Intersectoral coordination between the government, different agencies of the economy, and social and popular organizations for formulating policies and carrying out actions to improve and maintain the population in good health, is expressed in economic and social development programmes for all the agencies of State and government.

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This system is based on the following guiding principles of health activities:

- ✓ The state and social character of medicine
- ✓ Access and free care by the different agencies
- ✓ The preventive approach
- ✓ Proper application of scientific and technical progress
- ✓ Community participation
- ✓ International collaboration

The foregoing explains the major achievements in the field of community health such as the eradication of certain diseases (including poliomyelitis, measles, and malaria), control of others (such as TB, tetanus and AIDS), the high degree of professional coverage in the services (1 physician per 159 pop.) or the infantile mortality rate of 5.3 per 1000 live births (2006 figures) etcetera. (14).

Two aspects of great relevance for the system are popular participation and international collaboration. The first forms part of the way civil society bodies fit into the health system. One example is the 524 351 blood donors (2005) who were largely called in to give blood by the Revolutionary Defence Committees and trades unions. (15).

Another example is the effective national epidemics control campaigns, where 40 years of experience have taught us their three governing principles:

1. the scientific groundwork that epidemic control must be based on;
2. the political will (of the government) supporting the actions, and
3. community participation (population, the masses) in the campaign against the epidemic.

The latter means participation by organized civil society (16).

International health collaboration is part of the solidarity programmes of the Revolutionary government. Examples: the 10 661 students receiving undergraduate bursaries for study in Cuba. In 2005, Cuban collaboration was conducted with 68 countries. More than 30 000 health workers are engaged on regular employment in them, to which must be added those who, for short periods, provide aid in disaster relief situations such as earthquakes and tropical storms. The figure for workers in the national health system is 447 023 (6.9% of the population of working age). Of them, 70.2% are women (15). Our internationalist workers are volunteers, and civil society bodies play an important part in mobilizing them.

Society and System

Civil society and the health system can enjoy confrontational, indifferent or passive relations, or be in cooperation or harmonious integration. That will depend on the political shape of the society lying behind them. In the case of Cuba, we maintain that they are ties of harmonious integration and cooperation. The examples we give hereunder are partial evidence of the latter.

In 1962, one of the organized forms of civil society, the Federation of Cuban Women called on a group of specialists (physicians, educators, communicators, etc.) together with others to begin the work that led to the programmes in sex education, family planning and reproductive health, which included activities in the community, aimed at eliminating stereotypes and taboos and increasing the amount of information and guidance on these health aspects with an approach that was as scientific as possible.

From the outset, provision was made for a Cuban sex education programme, to be implemented not only by the Federation of Cuban Women and the Ministry of Public Health, but by the Ministry of Education and organizations for the young as well.

In 1972, the *Grupo Nacional de Trabajo de Educación Sexual (GNTEs)* [The National Working Group for Sex Education] was established, with a multidisciplinary and intersectoral approach. This group, consisting of professionals from the Ministries of Public Health, and Education, the Federation of Cuban Women and young people's organizations, had the task of creating and establishing policy and the national sex education programme, for development throughout the country, at a time when they were having to train those who would work in sex counselling, research, education and therapy.

The national group went on to establish its equivalent structures at provincial and local level. These had the social task of coordinating, implementing and developing Cuba's sex education programme, which, as a range of options for enriching the human being, covers sex education from the very first moments of life and involves the whole of society in its implementation.

This account shows how a civil society group gave rise to an initiative which ended up by changing into a national health programme, in which state and other social agencies come together, each working in its own sphere on a community health problem.

Another activity agreed on between social bodies and State agencies aimed at preserving the health of the community can be seen in the work of the Revolutionary Defence Committees and health authorities, guided and coordinated by the Civil Defence in case of natural disasters. This is a regular situation given the tropical storms that lash Cuba, where notable experience has been built up, very successfully, in the preservation of life and control of morbidity resulting from disease, accident or injury.

Another different expression of the ties between civil society and the health system comes about directly, not through organizations such as those mentioned, in

public audits or meetings of electoral constituency delegates, (councillors, elected officials or mayors). They consist of neighbourhood or municipal groups with elected representatives who must periodically report on their terms of reference and receive new mandates from their electors. Very frequently, these assemblies discuss and propose answers to health problems, getting involved in the solutions where appropriate. The most frequent subjects are: environmental sanitation and primary health care. This is a form of highly interactive direct democracy, where the public has open access to a municipal authority. It is a real manifestation of integration between civil society and the health system.

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