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Cuba's Resilience Through Economic Crisis Prepared It For COVID-19 Health Crisis

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In times of crisis, who we are is revealed. That is true of people and of nations. What COVID-19 has exposed — not created — is a deeply flawed and inequitable society. The truths of how race and class intersect to shorten the existence of some in our society are now laid bare for all to see. The collapse of structures that were barely holding on have revealed how inadequate they were to begin with. The failure of many states to prevent, protect against and help contain an illness that was known about for months shows how concerns over loss of capital took priority over our lives. And it is this capitalist approach to administering government that is perpetuating the same harms and ensuring a continuous crisis for communities most devastated by the pandemic of our lifetime.

Take my home city, New York, for example. The majority of deaths in New York have been people of color, immigrant communities, frontline personnel and low-wage workers. We have deemed certain workers “essential,” and yet we can't agree to give them a living wage. These workers who make, serve and deliver our food were intentionally excluded by Congress from healthcare, workplace and paid sick leave protections. Medical personnel — many of whom have hundreds of thousands of dollars in student loans and who live paycheck to paycheck — have been put on the frontlines without adequate protection or resources, turning hospitals into morgues.

And yet there is another way to address widespread pandemics that focuses on the health, well-being and safety of *all* citizens, without being consumed by disaster exploitation or consumer fears. As a human rights lawyer, I can't help but look to how other countries that incorporate a human rights framework and approach to governance are handling the crisis. As it turns out, I have had a chance to witness just that up close, since I've been in Havana, Cuba, since early March, when the virus began to be taken seriously throughout the world.

Cuba's 60-Year Crisis Preparation

I have been to Cuba many times, leading delegations of lawyers and law students primarily with the National Lawyers Guild, the nation's oldest and only human rights bar association, to engage in comparative legal courses and conferences. That is why I recently came down, until the virus exploded and the borders closed.

Despite the economic, financial and commercial blockade that the United States has maintained against Cuba for nearly 60 years, it is remarkable to see how this small island nation continues to defend itself and its citizens in the face of crisis after crisis. I recall stories of the “special period,” when the Cuban economy nearly collapsed after the withdrawal of Soviet support. Perhaps, in some ironic and twisted way, that is precisely what has helped Cuba prepare for a pandemic. Cuba has lived a perpetual economic crisis since the blockade was imposed, far worse in many ways than the one the U.S. is entering now. Being prepared for (and even accustomed to) crisis means that the country is able to galvanise itself into action quickly, taking stock of the most essential aspects of its society's needs and implementing measures to address them as they can. That comprehensive coordination is on display nightly in the evening news with the roundtable of cabinet officials that report out to the citizenry on the dozens of measures each department is taking to respond to the crisis.

The transparency and sense of mutual accountability that permeates the multitude of press conferences given by Cuban health and government officials throughout the day is reflective of a more profound value in Cuban society: This is a country that deeply understands what collective struggle means and how it is critical to the survival of all. Being in dialogue with each other about the actions everyone needs to take to ensure mutual safety and well-being is a daily conversation in Cuba. People share everything with each other: information, food, housing and transportation. Sharing is built into the very fabric of society and the essence of being Cuban. As the saying goes, Cubans don't share what is left over, they share what they have.

On March 21, when the government announced over 200 measures being taken to respond to COVID-19 — including closing schools, border closings and requiring people to begin wearing face masks in public — it didn't take long to begin to see within a matter of days nearly every Cuban walking in the street with a homemade face mask. Around the same time, daily commercials aired on television explaining to the public how they could make them and keep their masks sanitised, so they didn't contaminate others in their households or on the streets. People took out their forgotten pair of pants, kitchen towels or old curtains and turned them into masks, for themselves and anyone else who needed one. Overnight, everyone it seemed, had a mask, and if you didn't have one, someone was bound to give you an extra. Notably, it was around this time that the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) was still that face masks were not necessary in the United States. That position didn't change until two weeks later on April 3, after thousands of people had already died.

Collective Crisis Can Only Be Met With Collective Struggle

Social distancing, while necessary, is not easy in low-income communities or countries where multiple people (or multiple families) often have to live together in cramped conditions. While undoubtedly social, Cuba is not a country where distancing comes easy; both because entire families live together under one roof and because the island's culture is so intricately tied with social bonding, not separation. Cuba's economy is built on solidarity and people's very livelihood is contingent upon intricate cooperation. Most of the face masks that were made overnight were instantly shared with family and neighbours. These extensive social networks and solidarity that form the fabric of Cuban lives is actually what enables social distancing here, because people fundamentally understand that the needs of the collective — especially in times of crisis — must be placed above the needs of one. So, while the same balcony conversations between neighbors continue to take place, you may see their children hanging out for a bit in front of the apartment, but with their face masks on and at least six feet between them. And yet, while I doubt Cuba will ever become subdued, even to an invisible invasion, it is quite eerie to hear Havana so quiet these days. It is the one place in the world that I could never imagine tamed.

Undoubtedly, sheltering in place and remaining at home is challenging for everyone, and certainly some more than others. However, when there is a shared sense of purpose and responsibility for each other, the sacrifice is put into perspective. The days before measures were taken to restrict the amount of people in the streets or taking public transportation, it was already not unheard of to see Cubans reminding people on the street not to touch their face, or to have bottles of diluted Clorox solution at the entry of office and residential buildings, facilities, restaurants and even public transportation. While catching a taxi one day, an elderly man watched me skeptically as I touched my hair and immediately scolded me that hair was part of the forbidden places near the face that needed to be hands-free.

As I connect daily with my loved ones back in the U.S., in Puerto Rico or Colombia, what I see and hear are different realities. Undoubtedly in most places, what is emerging is deep mutual aid and solidarity networks and people are reaching out in ways perhaps we never have (or have had to), and checking in and making sure others are safe and healthy. The overwhelming majority of us are hunkering down, mindful of our human reaction chain, which is perhaps the first very real reminder that survival is a collective act. We are trying desperately to put the needs and lives of others not necessarily above our own, but on par with our own.

As obvious as it may seem to be to us now that there is no other way to survive, our societies have not always operated this way. The rugged individualism that has often been touted as a virtue of the United States is leaking through in dangerous ways. People in Michigan, Virginia and Minnesota have gathered on the streets in groups and in front of their state capitals to “protest” their governors’ orders to remain at home. They are gathering in groups, armed with heavy weapons and without face masks. Trump has called on them to “liberate” their states, undermining the public safety and health recommendations of his own administration and health experts. The behaviour being modeled by the White House and sold as “Americanism” is never more glaringly apparent than when juxtaposing how Cuba behaves and understands survival in an increasingly globalised world, where none of us is an isolated agent and our collective existence requires collaboration, cooperation and solidarity. That is how Cubans have survived the longest running and most extensive economic blockade (rejected by nearly every country) by the world’s richest country for so long.

Health Care Is A Human Right In Cuba

This is a global health pandemic, and health care is something Cuba intricately understands. The right to health is a fundamental human right and is also guaranteed by the Cuban Constitution. Despite being a poor country, health care is universal and free to every citizen, including optional or purely aesthetic procedures. The island’s medical missions abroad are famous, with countries the world over requesting doctors to come to poor and rural areas where finding medical personnel willing to be stationed is often difficult. I have visited remote areas of Nicaragua and Venezuela where Cuban doctors were the only doctors in those towns tending to residents there and were the town heroes. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, at least 18 countries have asked for medical brigades of Cuban doctors to be sent, including Italy and Spain. Even in New York, Cuban-trained U.S. doctors work at places like Wyckoff Heights Medical Center in Brooklyn or in the South Bronx, working daily to prevent more loss of life.

Medical personnel are finally being revered, even while working in health care systems that are spectacularly failing them and their patients. Just like in New York, here every night at 9:00 pm sharp, Cubans across the country open their windows, come out to their balconies and patios and begin applauding loudly for the life-saving work of medical personnel both here and abroad. It is an uplifting celebration that reminds us both why we are in our homes and also that there is still, always, hope. While here people gather to cheer, a couple of islands away in Puerto Rico, the rich tradition of *cacerolazos* (banging on pots and pans) continues every night at 8:00 pm to denounce the criminally negligent manner in which the local government there has been handling the outbreak. While in colonial Puerto Rico, people continue the protests started in the summer of 2019 in response to abandonment and corruption, an hour later, their sister island and closest ally shows the world what a responsible and coordinated approach to crisis can look like.

The right to health is not just guaranteed to Cubans, but health policy forms an integral part of the island's foreign policy as it shares *not what is left over, but what it has* with the rest of the world. Cuba currently has a drug called Interferon Alfa-2B that is being used to treat COVID-19 and has been sent already to places like China and Italy, with 72 countries in total requesting it. Interferon Alfa-2B has shown positive results already in China and is listed by the Chinese Pharmaceutical Association as one of the top drugs to treat respiratory difficulties associated with COVID-19. As we speak, the country is working on a vaccine for the virus — a vaccine that residents of the United States, the epicenter of the virus — most likely won't be able to access due to sanctions, despite Obama-era changes that allow the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to work with the island on scientific collaborations.

Even the UN Commissioner on Human Rights recently called on sanctions to be lifted against countries like Cuba that are fighting COVID-19, otherwise the already dire global outlook on the human toll of the virus may be prolonged and worsened as countries living under sanctions face the possibility of collapsed health care systems.

Early detection of cases has also played a critical part of Cuba's strategy, including employing the island's famous medical students as surveyors, going from house to house checking on people to see who has exhibited conditions of the virus. Every day we see them arrive and be greeted by residents who report with relief that they have not shown any symptoms. I can't help but think of the over 4,400 New Yorkers who were estimated to have died in their apartments or nursing homes because they never made it to a hospital, or perhaps they were afraid to go because they wouldn't have gotten tested anyway. Had medical students from the over 15 medical schools in New York City alone had protective gear and been able to visit at-risk communities, perhaps we wouldn't be seeing images of mass burials on Hart Island in the Bronx.

When I left the U.S., there weren't any cases of COVID-19 yet in New York. Despite this, there was no alcohol, hand sanitiser, aloe vera gel, toilet paper or pantry supplies at any pharmacies or stores. Massive hoarding began, along with fights in lines over who got the last jar of peanut butter. It's true that in Cuba there are often long lines for food or medicine, particularly when shipments of medical supplies being donated by Chinese citizens on a Colombian airline aren't allowed to arrive because of U.S. sanctions. Or when boats full of diesel or gas for Cubans to use in cooking or for collective transportation to get them to work that are brought in by other nations are stopped at the port because they receive a call from the U.S. government threatening sanctions under the illegal and immoral blockade. It inevitably makes for longer lines and more suffering — which, as it happens, is the goal of the blockade. The U.S. State Department has acknowledged that since the beginning, the blockade's goal is to “deny money and supplies to Cuba, to decrease monetary and real wages, to bring about hunger, desperation and overthrow of government.” That's what makes it all the more ironic that when Cuba calls attention to the blockade's intended effect in restricting the purchase of needed medical supplies, the State Department counters that it's the Cuban government's mismanagement of its economy that is the reason Cubans are suffering. Cuba's economy is intentionally obstructed and designed by U.S. policy to promote the suffering of its citizens.

Cuba's Example On Leading With Human Rights

What rings truer than ever for me in observing what a human rights-centered approach to crisis management can be, is that we are just in time to envision, demand and enact the world that we deserve, with a government that responds to health disasters as though they were just that and not as a national security response or a pretext to masquerade white

supremacy as health policy. The demands for universal and affordable health care, safe workplace protections for all workers, a living wage, a worker-centered economy and dignified housing where we can shelter in place safely have begun to resonate beyond the centers of political campaigns and into the households of the 33 million Americans who filed for unemployment or who lost a loved one while waiting to be tested for COVID-19. The systems that are collapsing under the weight of human demand show us that they were never built to sustain the actual needs of all, rather just a few. Two-thirds of Cuba's national budget goes to fund three areas: education, health care and social security. If the half of the federal stimulus package that went to corporate subsidies and bailouts for large restaurant chains instead helped sustain low-income workers, immigrant workers and medical personnel, we would be halfway there.

I come back to human rights principles and demands, as I often do when injustices abound and government's negligence or abuse runs rampant over our lives. I dread to think about the havoc this crisis can wreak in Puerto Rico, where residents are still recovering from the devastating loss of life of Hurricanes Maria and Irma in 2017, and the series of earthquakes that left thousands in the streets just a few months ago. Or to think of the immigrant communities in Washington Heights, Hunts Point or Jackson Heights in New York, who have already been intentionally excluded from federal health care, worker protections and economic assistance. When disaster capitalism runs rampant over the most vulnerable communities who are struggling to stay in survival mode, what does a crisis response look like that centers the health and well-being of the worker who is disposable while their work is deemed essential?

For me, Cuba, yet again, serves as a point of reference for what is possible — critical even — for our collective survival. It ultimately will not be a stimulus package or “reopening” only of cities and states that will ensure our well-being. It will come once we center the needs of those most marginalized and vulnerable among us, and ask what it will take to save *them* that we will all live more dignified lives. And that is the greatest lesson Cuba has reminded me of: We can't give workers and citizens what is left over after we have given all the corporate bailouts we have; we must give them what we have.

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