

CUBA'S MODEL OF DEVELOPMENT: LESSONS FOR GLOBAL EDUCATION

Stephen McCloskey

In this Viewpoint article, **Stephen McCloskey** argues for a more balanced perspective on Cuba in development discourse and the wider English-language media. For too long Cuba has been subjected to clichés and stereotypes concerning its socialist model of development which have prevented a wider and meaningful discussion on its social achievements at home and humanitarianism overseas. He argues that Cuba's real achievements in health, education, climate change and international aid provide potentially rich opportunities for learning and partnership for international development agencies and global educators. With the neo-liberal model of growth that prevails in much of Western Europe in a state of crisis, it is time for development practitioners to look at alternative models based on clear development principles.

Introduction

Few countries have been subjected to as much stereotyping and caricature as Cuba has been in Western Europe and the United States (US) over the past 52 years. The public's perception of Cuba has largely been shaped by a regularly lax mainstream media content to run superficial stories informed by easily congestible stereotypes. Regular features of English-language media reportage are old standbys like the 1950s' American cars on Cuban roads or decaying buildings on Havana's Malecón, the broad esplanade running along the coastline, symbolizing a society trapped in the past. Articles of this nature regularly gloss over or ignore entirely Cuba's hugely impressive social achievements in creating unprecedented advances in the context of the developing world in health and education. Cuba also has an astonishing record in its contribution to international solidarity and aid around the world by dispatching doctors and nurses to the most acute points of humanitarian need no matter how treacherous the environment or how high the cost. Cuba's cultural contributions are also rich and varied in fields such as dance, music, film and art. Its achievements in sport relative to the size of its population and national wealth are outstanding and have yielded consistently impressive performances in international competition over the past five decades.

What makes these achievements all the more laudable is the fact that they have been delivered in the context of economic blockade approaching its

50th anniversary imposed by the US, Cuba's near neighbour, and the dominant economy in the hemisphere. Cuban society has not just survived but evolved over the past half-century despite Washington's interventions and ongoing efforts to derail the revolution. This article will consider some examples of media stereotyping of the Cuban revolution and outline many of the island's achievements that deserve a wider airing. It will go on to argue that global education should draw upon the Cuban model in their practice as a means of discussing alternative models of development. It is suggested that this debate is particularly needed in the present context of social unrest evident in many liberal democracies, like that recently witnessed in Britain, which has accompanied the global financial crisis. The article concludes that it is time for a mature debate on Cuba in the context of global education that eschews the Cold War attitudes to the island and considers the lessons we can learn from its many achievements.

Cuban Clichés

During the recent Communist Party Congress in April 2011, Cuban President Raúl Castro announced new economic reforms to help the island address the effects of the global slowdown on growth and lighten the state's burden of expenditure. The 300 measures ratified at the Congress included plans for 170,000 new licences for small businesses like hairdressers, restaurants and taxi services that will operate in a non-state sector to help stimulate growth and reduce dependence on state support. The reaction to these measures highlighted the normally jaundiced view of Cuba that peppers the mainstream press. Rory Carroll, a persistent critic in the *Guardian*, suggested that Cuba's 'creaking economy' was headed 'on a gradual path to Vietnam-style capitalism in all but name' (19 April 2011). In the *Associated Press* President Barack Obama criticized the pace of change in Cuba suggesting that 'the communist-run island has not been aggressive enough in opening its economy or its political system' (12 September 2011). For the *Financial Times* the economic proposals were part of efforts by Raúl Castro 'to dismantle one of the last surviving Soviet-style systems and punch holes in the ideology and taboos that support it' (19 April 2011).

Thus Cuba is either caving to the inevitability of the free market and making concessions to capitalism or dragging its feet and adhering to tried and failed centrally planned economics. A minority view from Jonathan Glennie in the *Guardian* offers a different narrative to Cuba's economic measures suggesting that it has pursued 'egalitarian policies' which placed a heavy burden on the state. He suggests that in Cuba 'the extremes of opulence and misery are

banished in favour of a generalised level of wealth, best described as "enough to get by" (5 August 2011). Glennie adds that if Cuba continues to move forward without 'undermining its most impressive achievements' it will 'merit the attention of development theorists and practitioners seeking proven means to eradicate poverty' (Ibid).

Alas, most commentators on Cuba fail to look beyond the clichéd conception of the island as a troubled Caribbean paradise with sinister socialist overtones and a moribund leadership. Typical of this sort of treatment is a travel piece written by Cordelia O'Neill for the *Irish News* (9 October 2010) in which she describes the island's 'intoxicating salsa rhythm' to which 'tall palm trees seemingly swing in time'. She goes on to suggest that 'reminders of the tough regime under which Cubans live are plentiful' but provides scant analysis of Cuba's socio-economic context in the developing world. In a similar piece for the *Irish Times* (9 October 2010) Frank McDonald meditates on the possibilities of life in Cuba post-Fidel (Castro) which he describes as a bit like 'Waiting for Godot'. A favourite pastime of Cuba's critics has been speculating on the revolution's demise when Fidel Castro stepped down as president. In fact, the former Cuban leader had left public office in February 2008, long before McDonald's article appeared in October 2010, without any significant impact on public support for the revolution or Cuba's governance.

The article mostly derides Cuba's tourist industry which views foreign visitors as 'walking wallets'. McDonald acknowledges some restoration work completed in parts of Havana '[b]ut walk inland just a few blocks and you're confronted by crumbling buildings on pot-holed streets stinking of bad sewers, and scrawny dogs scouring the rubbish from overflowing wheelie-bins'. The article mentions the US blockade of Cuba briefly in the last paragraph and suggests that the longevity of Cuba's revolution is due to the climate: 'because it never gets cold; "socialism in the sunshine" made it possible for Castro to survive as long as he has". This kind of slack and sour reportage is not untypical of how Western correspondents cover Cuba and contributes to a very narrow, shallow and often inaccurate view of the island.

This is not to suggest that the Cuban revolution is beyond reproach or criticism. Mistakes have been made over the past 52 years and this was accepted at the very highest level of the Cuban government by President Raúl Castro at the recent Congress. He pointed to an inefficient economy with inadequate salaries and social inequalities arising from unequal access to hard currencies. He rejected past 'dogmas' and 'failed schemes' and targeted what he

described as ‘excessive, idealistic and egalitarian paternalism’ (*Cuba Sí*, summer 2011: 10). Castro also strongly criticised the political and managerial elites whose ‘violations’ and ‘mistakes’ had not been confronted and resulted in a stifling of initiative and excessive centralisation. He even rounded on the state’s media for its ‘triumphalism, stridency and formalism’ that resulted in the broadcasting of content that was ‘boring, improvised and superficial material’ (Ibid). This very candid assessment of weaknesses in Cuban society and economic planning and the measures agreed at Congress came on the back of a three month nation-wide consultation process involving nearly 9 million citizens. The government has listened to concerns that reforms should be phased in gradually to monitor their impact as it strives to carry out a delicate balancing act of maintaining free access to education, health care and social services while reducing state expenditure in other areas. It is the social achievements of the revolution that are discussed in the next section.

Cuba’s Development Model

From the outset of the Cuban revolution in 1959 education has been a priority for its leaders. In 1961 Cuba launched a year long literacy campaign to address the high levels of illiteracy that were part of the social neglect characteristic of the pre-revolutionary period under US-sponsored dictator Fulgencio Batista. The literacy campaign was a great success and in 2011 the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) revealed that the ‘Cuban Literacy Program’ was implemented in 12 other Latin American states with plans to expand this model to other regions (*Cuba Sí*, summer 2011:6). UNESCO also praised Cuba’s expenditure on education which according to the United Nations *Human Development Report 2010* was 13.8 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) compared to 5.2 per cent in Brazil and 4.9 per cent in Argentina in the same period; countries with much bigger economies in the American Hemisphere. Cuba’s commitment to education as an essential human right available to all citizens means that it is available free at the point of delivery. Education in Cuba is not a privilege, particularly at third level, available only to those who can afford to pay for it as is the case in Ireland and Britain.

Cuba has a similarly socialised approach to healthcare with just under 10 per cent of GDP spent on health (UN, 2010) compared to 6.1 per cent in Ireland, 6.9 per cent in Britain and 7.1 per cent in the United States. As a result Cuba can boast of a ‘developed world’ life expectancy rate of 79 years which is just behind that of the US (79.6) Britain (79.8) and Ireland (80.3). But the success of Cuba’s health system is more than just a matter of statistics

and free access; it is built upon an effective public model that Barry and Lynch suggest is ‘a protective and supportive system for Cuban citizens, run by the state, but in a decentralised and integrated system’ (2008: 156). The preventative component of the Cuban health system is key and is constructed around an effective primary care programme which not only prevents illness but promotes healthy lifestyles. As Barry and Lynch argue:

“[h]ealth is viewed as enabling people to achieve their full capacity, irrespective of age or ability, and with full cognisance of the wider determinants of health, such as housing, education, nutrition and exercise” (2008: 157).

However, the benefits of Cuba’s system are felt well beyond its own borders. In 1999 Cuba established a Latin American School of Medicine which trains doctors and medical personnel from other parts of the Americas, including the United States, and Africa. Almost 10,000 students from 29 countries are enrolled in the school with students committing themselves to return to their countries and work in communities lacking adequate healthcare (Medical Co-operation with Cuba, 2011). Cuba itself now has as many doctors servicing its 11 million citizens as there are in Britain meeting the needs of 60 million people. Michael Tynan, Emeritus Professor of Paediatric Cardiology at King’s College, London has been engaging in medical exchanges with Cuba since 1987 and found that ‘Cuba’s commitment to public health has been the heartbeat of their socialist programme – both domestically and internationally – since their struggle against Batista in the 1950s’. He adds that ‘[c]onsidering the intensification of the blockade, Cuba’s achievements in the field of healthcare – particularly in the areas of infant mortality, life expectancy and internationalism – are nothing short of miraculous’ (*Cuba Sí*, summer 2011: 30).

Cuba’s internationalism includes the Henry Reeve Brigade, a specialist medical team of 1,200 personnel set up in 2005 to respond to humanitarian emergencies and disasters anywhere in the world. In 2005, it was the first team on the ground following the Pakistani earthquake in Kashmir and six months later the last to leave. More recently, Cuba’s medical personnel were the first on the scene in the Haitian earthquake in 2010 because they already had a 350-strong team on the ground which immediately went to work in ‘providing primary care and obstetrical services as well as operating to restore the sight of Haitians blinded by eye diseases’ (*Aljazeera*, 16 February 2010). This team was later strengthened by Cuba after the earthquake struck and treated 30,000

cholera patients between October and December 2010 (*Independent*, 26 December 2010).

It was notable that, while the efforts of Western development agencies in Haiti were highly praised, the work of the Cuban medics was largely ignored by the media. *Aljazeera* was one of the few news organisations to highlight Cuba's efforts in Haiti noting that 'their pivotal work in the health sector has received scant media coverage' (16 February 2010). The London *Independent* also acknowledged the media's sidelining of Cuba's medical work in Haiti with a piece titled 'Cuban medics put the world to shame'. It placed Cuba's work in Haiti in an international context noting that '[a] third of Cuba's 75,000 doctors, along with 10,000 other health workers, are currently working in 77 poor countries, including El Salvador, Mali and East Timor' (Ibid). In addition to the work of the Henry Reeve Brigade, Cuba's medical efforts have included an international programme called 'Operation Miracle', which 'began with ophthalmologists treating cataract sufferers in impoverished Venezuelan villages in exchange for oil. This initiative has restored the eyesight of 1.8 million people in 35 countries, including that of Mario Teran, the Bolivian sergeant who killed Che Guevara in 1967' (Ibid).

What is characteristic of the Cuban model of development is the island's internationalism and concept of solidarity which included the deployment of combat-troops, at the request of the Angolan government, to repulse a major invasion from the apartheid regime in South Africa in October 1975. In an intervention that ultimately amounted to 50,000 troops from 1975-91, Cuba helped play a decisive role in 'forcing South Africa to the negotiating table' (*Morning Star*, 4 November 2005). Nelson Mandela praised Cuba's support for the anti-apartheid cause:

"The Cuban people hold a special place in the hearts of the people of Africa. The Cuban internationalists have made a contribution to African independence, freedom and justice unparalleled for its principled and selfless character. We in Africa are used to being victims of countries wanting to carve up our territory or subvert our sovereignty. It is unparalleled in African history to have another people rise to the defense of one of us. The defeat of the apartheid army was an inspiration to the struggling people in South Africa!" (Quoted in *Morning Star*, 4 November 2005).

Cuba's intervention came well before the anti-apartheid movement became a global campaign and Western nations became reluctant supporters. This kind of internationalism has been a source of inspiration to activists and communities around the world. The Cuban Institute for Friendship with the Peoples (Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos – ICAP) is responsible for developing international solidarity links between Cuba and the world. In 2010, ICAP celebrated its 50th anniversary and announced that it now enjoys relations with 2,000 solidarity organizations in 152 countries (*Granma International*, 29 December 2010) which is a staggering achievement for a small island nation on the periphery of the US.

But why is Cuba's model of development relevant to global education practitioners in Western Europe? And how can Cuba inform the development practice of agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that work overseas? These questions are addressed in the next section.

Cuba and Global Education

While Cuba has its detractors in western government discourse and policy, it has nonetheless persuaded many organizations and individuals at a grassroots level that 'another world is possible' to the neo-liberal, market-driven development model which has spectacularly unraveled since being hit by the global financial crisis of 2008. Indeed, Cuba has been at the hub of efforts within Latin America to swing the tide against the market-driven hegemony of the US which created the conditions for the 'shock economic' treatment of the 1970s and 1980s which created debt and economic destabilisation throughout the continent (Klein, 2008). For example, we have seen the emergence of the Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America or ALBA (Alternativa Bolivariana para las Américas) which is a proposed alternative to the US-sponsored Free Trade Area of the Americas. ALBA differs from the latter in advocating 'a socially-oriented trade block rather than one strictly based on the logic of deregulated profit maximization' (Arreaza, 30 January 2004). With new alliances and institutions, socialist and social democratic governments in Latin America are charting a different path to development based on local needs and agendas. Socially progressive institutions like ALBA could usefully inform global education practice, particularly in stimulating debate on how we can manage the global economy on the basis of social need while ensuring the sustainable stewardship of the natural environment.

Global education is practiced largely in Western Europe and derives its theoretical origins from Paulo Freire and his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972)

which was nothing less than a manifesto for changing unjust social relations and ‘breaking the cycle of poverty’. Bryan (2011: 1) has considered some of the ‘paradoxes and contradictions’ that characterise contemporary global education practice ‘in an era of neo-liberal shaped globalisation’. She asks why

“the development education sector endorses, tacitly or otherwise, the very ideologies and political-economic arrangements that are responsible for producing or exacerbating conditions of poverty and injustice, while simultaneously encouraging people to take action against this poverty and injustice” (2011: 1).

An example of what she sees as a ‘declawing’ of the global education sector is its ‘detached stance on crucial policy issues’ and reluctance to engage in debate on development issues at a local level. The sector has been wrestling with the problem of how to deliver transformative education within an education and policy environment that appears circumscribed by the values and agendas of neo-liberalism. This dilemma was succinctly captured by Selby and Kagawa when they asked if global education and related sectors are in danger of ‘striking a Faustian bargain so as to achieve some purchase and influence over educational directions, a bargain that brings short-term gains at the expense of transformative goals?’ (2011: 15).

Freire regarded education as an empowering, transformative instrument of social change that enabled individuals to move beyond learning to action toward justice and equality at local and global levels. Given its longstanding commitment to social policies that have been genuinely transformative at home and overseas, the Cuban model of development offers rich learning opportunities that global educators can introduce to their practice. Since the end of the Cold War we have been encouraged to think about economic development through one dominant narrative; the neo-liberal model of deregulation, privatisation and state retrenchment. This model is clearly failing us and in crisis given the level of upheaval in the European Union (*Guardian*, 29 September 2011) and the United States (*New York Times*, 5 August 2011). With international financial institutions unable to plot a course out of the financial mire and uncertainty as to how long the current crisis will last, there has rarely been a more apposite time for global education to present viable alternatives that have worked.

Just as there is no silver bullet to resolve the current financial crisis nor is there is one development template that can or should be imposed on other

nations. The role of global education is to explore the alternative models that are available to us and discuss how we can learn from their strengths and successes. For example, how is it possible that Cuba with a per capita Gross National Income (GNI) of \$5,747 can sustain a subsidized health and education programme for 11 million people? Ireland with a per capita GDP figure of \$38,768 (in 2010) is by contrast labouring to educate its young people. A Pisa/OECD study into educational standards revealed in December 2010 that Ireland has slipped from 5th place in 2000 to 17th place – the sharpest decline among 39 countries surveyed. Moreover, almost one-quarter of Irish 15-year-olds are ‘below the level of literacy needed to participate effectively in society’ (*Irish Times*, 27 December 2010). These contrasting statistics are worth probing in some depth and the debate has acquired a real urgency given the crisis that has unfolded in Ireland following the collapse of its banking sector (*Irish Times*, 28 November 2010).

From a development co-operation and overseas aid perspective, Cuba’s longstanding commitment to international development through health and education initiatives makes it an obvious partner to Western development agencies. Cuba has been a provider of development services throughout the 50 years of revolution and that experience could be shared with NGOs in the development sector across the world. There have been independent initiatives by doctors in the west to create links with the Cuban health system like that of Dr David Hickey at Beaumont Hospital in Dublin (Boyle and McCloskey, 2011) who has facilitated exchanges between Cuban and Irish medics. However, there have been too few formal relationships initiated by development agencies and national governments who could really benefit from such exchanges.

The need to explore new models of development

The political managers of the current economic crisis insist that financial austerity, combined with a massive recapitalisation of the banks that created the financial contagion in the first place, will arrest the alarming contraction in national and global economies. According to the National Audit Office, the total amount spent to bail out Britain’s banks since 2009 is £456.33bn, which comprises £123.93bn in the form of cash transfers from the government to the banks and a further £332.40bn offered in guarantees should circumstances demand further ballast against the recession (*Guardian*, 12 September 2011). But these statistics tell only part of the story of how the recession and the neo-liberal economic regime are impacting on societies like Britain that have been

wedded since the 1980s to deregulation and the dismantling of state support to core public services like transport, utilities, health and education.

The riots that erupted in London in August 2011 and subsequently spread to several other English cities suggest that there is a deep-rooted malaise within English society that Prime Minister David Cameron seems reluctant to accept. He labelled the riots as ‘criminality pure and simple’ (*BBC News*, 11 August 2011) and appeared unwilling to countenance other factors that may have contributed to the unrest. For example, the riots were triggered by a protest organised in response to the killing of a black youth by a police officer in a society where ‘[b]lack people are 26 times more likely than whites to face stop and search’ (*The Observer*, 17 October 2010). Also, the area in Tottenham where the riots started has the highest unemployment rate in London and has suffered unduly from the erosion of services like youth work provision (*Guardian*, 10 August 2011). Moreover, the city of London has become one of the most socially polarised in the world with the very wealthiest citizens worth 273 times more than the poorest (*Guardian*, 21 April 2010).

While it is premature to come to facile conclusions about the summer riots in England, they raise real concerns about the degree of detachment that many citizens now feel from their political representatives and system of government. In a letter to the *Guardian* responding to the riots Neil Alldred suggested that they were ‘symptomatic of the breakdown of the social contract’. He noted ‘the increasing gap between elites and ordinary people’ in England following scandals involving senior police officers, members of parliament and media executives. He added that ‘those elites now need to work hard to make a social contract attractive once again to individual men and women. If they don’t make efforts towards greater social justice, the future is not very difficult to discern’ (*Guardian*, 9 August 2011). In a similar vein, Seumas Milne suggests that [i]t’s already become clear that divided Britain is in no state to absorb the austerity now being administered because three decades of neoliberal capitalism have already shattered so many social bonds of work and community’ (*Guardian*, 10 August 2011).

There have been serious, in-depth studies of poverty and inequality in Britain by Dorling (2010) and Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) that have probed the causes and effects of social marginalisation. These works consider the impact of materialism and polarisation on social wellbeing particularly our mental health, educational performance, physical health, social and community relations, and level of social mobility. They find that inequality and elitism is

bad for everyone including the elites and that equality, not wealth, is a much stronger determinant of the 'relaxed social contract and emotional satisfaction we all need' (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009: 3). These works seem to suggest that models of development that prioritise social justice and economic equality over wealth creation and elitism, like that in Cuba, are more likely to result in poverty eradication. Cuba's model of development is one that should command much closer scrutiny in the development sector as NGOs and civil society groups consider how to rebuild societies in Western Europe that have become socially divided and economically depressed on the back of an untrammelled adherence to neo-liberalism.

Conclusion

Cuba has consistently wrong-footed those critics in Western governments and international finance bodies that have incorrectly predicted the demise of the revolution at several stages of its development. There is no doubt that Cuba has been tested many times over the past fifty years with perhaps the greatest challenge being the collapse of the Eastern bloc in the late 1980s and the 'loss of more than 50 percent of Cuba's oil imports, much of its food and 85 percent of its trade economy' (Quinn, 2006). Cuba's collapse was widely anticipated at the end of the Cold War but it was a serious miscalculation by western powers to bracket Cuba with the satellite states of the old Soviet bloc. Cuba always plotted its own socialist course and, as Hamilton suggested:

“redefined itself in the world by actively emphasising its independence from both the US and the Soviet Union, and placing itself as the revolutionary vanguard of Latin America and the 'Third World' more generally, a position most clearly reflected in its leading role within the Non-Aligned Movement” (2009: 88).

Cuba has also created a revolution in which the majority of its people are stakeholders and supporters. As Antoni Kapcia, professor in Latin American studies at the University of Nottingham, suggested in the context of the recent Communist Party Congress:

“a condition of understanding the nature of a Cuban party congress is to accept the perhaps uncomfortable notion that debate has been characteristic of Cuba since 1959 and fundamental to the processes of involvement and decision-making” (2011).

Another feature of the revolution has been the innovation with which its leaders and people have responded to crises like the loss of favourable trading terms with the Soviet Union. In the 1990s Cuba made the transition from being a highly mechanized, industrial agricultural system to one using organic methods of farming and urban gardens. As the rest of the world has debated and fudged the issue of climate change Cuba has successfully reduced its oil consumption and moved to sustainable methods of food production, a story well documented in the film *The Power of Community: How Cuba survived peak oil* (2006).

But Cuba's greatest achievement over the past half century has been to sustain its socialised approach to health and education and refuse to compromise on this keystone of the revolution despite the economic duress caused by the US blockade. For 20 consecutive years the United Nations General Assembly has voted in favour of lifting the US blockade of Cuba with the most recent vote in October 2011 showing 186 countries calling on Washington to end the blockade and just Israel voting on the side of the US (*Washington Post*, 25 October 2011). Cuba estimates that the blockade has cost its economy \$751 billion (Ibid) at the dollar's current value given that the US not only refuses to trade with Cuba but denies trading rights to countries that also do business with the island. Amnesty International has urged the Obama administration 'to take without delay the necessary steps towards lifting the economic, financial and trade embargo against Cuba' (2009).

Despite the blockade Cuba has sustained its domestic social programme and maintained its commitment to humanitarianism overseas. It is a model of development that global educators should study closely and incorporate into their learning programmes to facilitate discussion on alternatives to the prevailing model of growth that is in such difficulty. This is not to suggest that other countries could or should attempt to apply the Cuban template to their own societies. Every country needs to find its own path to development rather than have a model foisted upon it; a methodology disastrously applied by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in Latin America from the 1980s onward.

What is suggested here, however, is that development NGOs and global education practitioners should examine Cuba's many successes in prioritising social needs above economic growth. Cuba's humanitarianism is an inspiring case study that is often lost among the clichés and stereotypes applied to the island by English-language media outlets. In moving beyond the Cold

War rhetoric and attitudes, there are rich learning opportunities for development theorists, educators and practitioners which have been ignored for too long. A recent bi-lateral co-operation agreement between the UK and Cuba signed in July 2011 (*Cuba Sí*, summer 2011: 7) is a step in the right direction and follows similar initiatives in Ireland, France and Spain. We need this thawing in diplomatic relations to be extended to the European Union as a whole to facilitate greater linkages and co-operation at a political level that reflect the robust and dynamic solidarity links that already exist at a grassroots level across the world.

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Stephen McCloskey is the Director of the Centre for Global Education and Chair of Cuba Support Group, Belfast