

“High-income countries have much to learn from Cuba.”

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The Lancet, published in London, is one of the world's premier medical journals. We present a letter to the Lancet from Claudia Chaufan, Professor at the School of Health Policy/Global Health at York University in Toronto. She is responding to a Lancet editorial on Cuba's new Constitution, approved in April, and on its implications for Cuban health care. Professor Chaufan's letter appears first, followed by the editorial:

“The editors rightly acknowledged that the former WHO Director-General “called on the world to model their health systems on Cuba's” given its “commitment to its people's health”, yet the seemingly neutral tone of the Editorial conceals a problematic agenda with implications for health justice. The editors rightly acknowledged that the former WHO Director-General “called on the world to model their health systems on Cuba's” given its “commitment to its people's health”, yet the seemingly neutral tone of the Editorial conceals a problematic agenda with implications for health justice.

For instance, the Editors allude to a Communist ideology as if so-called liberal democracies had no ideology; refer to the “grip on power” of the Cuban leadership as if Cuban citizens could not have had any agency in this so-called grip; and report that “many [...] believe that the legislators [drafting new laws] are unlikely to have independence from the single party's influence”, yet make no mention of who those many might be. During multiple trips to Cuba, I have met many, including legislators, who would reject this claim.

I wonder whether the Editors would ever comment on Canada, a very wealthy country, as holding to its capitalist ideology, which informs public policy, because of the grip on power of its corporate class, even as one in four children lives in poverty, homelessness is rampant, and about 1 million people use food banks monthly.

I also wonder why the Editors did not mention that Cuba's exceptional health indices have been achieved despite more than 60 years of immoral and illegal US-imposed blockade. This information would help readers understand what might partly account for what the Editors describe as the deterioration of Cuba's medical facilities. In my opinion, this silence speaks more than a thousand words.

The Editorial conveys a highly distorted view of Cuban history, society, and policy that could lead readers to conclude that Cuba's health achievements are “miracles”, rather than the predictable outcomes of policies designed to achieve health equity. The 2019 constitutional expansion of health rights in Cuba is also the predictable outcome of a political system whose democratic nature puts many high-income countries to shame.

Cuban citizens have withstood tremendous aggression to defend their values and sovereignty. The Editors should report on Cuba's achievements by drawing on evidence rather than on ideological preferences disguised as factual statements. Readers should be helped to understand what it takes to achieve health justice. High-income countries have much to learn from Cuba.

I declare no competing interests.”

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Castro Cuba: new constitution expands health rights

The Lancet, editorial, April 13, 2019

2019 marks the 60th anniversary of the 26th of July Movement, which established Fidel Castro as the leader of the new Cuban Government. Decades later, Cuba is holding fast to its Communist ideology, even after revolutionary icon Fidel Castro's death in 2016 and his brother Raúl stepping down in 2018. Although the grip on power of the so-called historic generation is loosening, the new generation has “demonstrated capacity to uphold the banners of...Revolution and Socialism”, as Raúl Castro noted in 2013. But the country's stolid society has seen some impetus for change. The economy is cautiously leaning towards private industry and society has become gradually more inclusive. As such, the language of Cuba's 1976 constitution is now antiquated. Driven by Raúl Castro, keen to institutionalise the revolutionary precepts in the absence of strong figureheads, Cuba is now undergoing a major overhaul of its constitution. The new constitution was heavily amended, after more than 80 000 consultation meetings, and was voted in by referendum on Feb 25, with 90% of valid votes cast in favour. Set to be proclaimed by the National Assembly on April 10 as we go to press, this constitution further enshrines the people's commitment to universal health care and expands social, political, and economic rights in Cuba.

Gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, ethnic origin, disability, and territorial origin have been added to the list of protected categories in the constitution. Women's reproductive and sexual rights are now secured and women are to be protected from gender-based violence in all its forms by legal mechanisms. Language to legalise gay marriage had been added to the first draft of the constitution, supported by the country's current President Miguel Díaz-Canel and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights advocate and Raúl Castro's daughter Mariela Castro. Interestingly, Cuba has taken a health-based approach to achieving normalisation of sexual diversity, as Mariela Castro noted in 2006: “our view is that any kind of prejudice or discrimination is damaging to health”. Although a core of young urbanites supported the draft language, it was met with widespread popular rejection, most notably with an unprecedented campaign by evangelical churches in Cuba. Nevertheless, the previous constitution's language, which prescribed that marriage was exclusively “between man and woman”, has now been removed; the issue of same-sex legalisation should now be addressed in the family code.

Cuba's commitment to its people's health and the excellence of its health education are well recognised and were lauded by former WHO Director-General Margaret Chan who called on the world to model their health systems on Cuba's in 2014. The right to health has been extended in this new constitution, in which the state now recognises its responsibility for the protection of older people, the rights to dignified housing, and the rights to public health, water, and food. Very welcome was the inclusion of amendments to “promote the conservation of the environment and the fight against climate change, which threatens the survival of the human species”.

Many other changes to the constitution have also been approved, such as the restoration of a presumption of innocence in the justice system. At face value, this reform would fundamentally affect Cuba's society, but closer analysis shows the country's mores already reflect these changes. Many also believe that the legislators, who will still need to draft a considerable amount of new laws to fit this constitution, are unlikely to have independence

from the single party's influence and that the enforcement of the more controversial rights enshrined in the constitution will be limited by the courts' poor legitimacy.

Importantly, Cuba's Soviet-style economy, based in part on skilled labour exports, including a programme that leases about 50 000 health-care professionals to 67 countries, bringing about US\$11 billion each year, remains fragile. With Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's rejection of the programme, the economic collapse of Venezuela, Cuba's strategic ally, which exchanges subsidised oil shipments for doctors and medicines, and the continued pressure imposed by US sanctions, Cuba faces increasing austerity. In this economy, public health services and facilities are deteriorating and medicines and food shortages are common.

Unfortunately, until it is backed up by capital, this reform will remain mostly aspirational. However, that this new constitution has received widespread popular support demonstrates that, in line with its revolutionary forefathers, post-Castro Cuba's new generation holds on to its socialist core and strives to be a bastion for free and equal access for health in a world that presses on with capitalism.

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