

PROMOTING HUMAN HEALTH AND FACING GLOBAL CHANGES: THE CUBAN EXPERIENCE¹

ISMAEL CLARK ARXER

The 20th century has witnessed the globalization and internationalization of economy and society, the increasing application of scientific knowledge with the discovery of new technologies, and the evolution of economic, financial and commercial processes at planetary scale. All of those processes, in their common interaction, have experienced an exponential acceleration in its growth. In spite of the fact that those processes are presented as promoting human development, the reality we face at the beginning of the 21st century is that they have brought new and increasingly harsh crisis situations that periodically affect all of humanity (Meadows D.H. *et al.*, 1972).

Mainly in the last decade, this has been happening under economic principles sustained by the general application of the so called 'market laws'. Instigated by the principles of the Washington Consensus, the organizations of the Bretton Woods system established standards for economic development that were applied all around the world in very different local situations, often with well known negative results (Williamson J., 1999).

Now, with over five hundred years of growing globalization and the rule of capitalistic principles over the world economy, human society, although capable of increasing awareness of nature, of the universe that surrounds us, and of its own internal organization, faces a situation in which very few solutions seem possible to cope with the challenges that loom on the horizon, including challenges to the mere survival of our own species on this planet (Wallerstein, 1997).

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We all know the results of colonialism and neo colonialism, which we continue to suffer even today. Until now, this process of indiscriminate appropriation of natural resources and control and manipulation of underdeveloped economies, far from disappearing, continues to go ahead by a variety of means, including war.

We live in a world that declares one thing and does another. Goals are established to balance the situation between the developed centre of the world and its underdeveloped surroundings, but in reality the policies and economic measures that are applied increase the concentration of wealth, the polarization of social groups, social exclusion, extreme poverty, and the squandering of the natural resources of the planet.

In this context, international institutions, governments, and the majority of the social forces in the world continue to be hypnotized by the mirage of the growth of the gross domestic product as the right measure and level to identify achievements in development. The concept that wealthier societies are those that achieve a higher human development is commonly and practically accepted with scarce dissent.

The presence of cyclic crises and the menace they represent for the survival of the human species call for alternative options to reverse those negative processes that make increasingly uncertain the long-term viability of human societies.

A closer look at the Cuban experience in the field of public health and human welfare in the last forty five years could help understand how to increase human development without necessarily looking first for some economic growth in order to increase afterwards that social development, but doing practically the opposite. In a significant manner, our conception is practically the opposite of those sustained by the supporters of total economic deregulation (Spiegel & Yassi, 2003).

In Cuba, since 1959, profound changes of political and social nature have promoted important human development goals, with special emphasis and well acknowledged results in the public health field (Gordon *et al.*, 2004), (WHC, 2002), sustained by systematic measures addressed to focus the principal efforts of all of Cuban society towards definite goals:

- 1) A high level of social equity (Galbraith, 2002). This has included legal, economic, and also educational measures for the elimination of any kind of discrimination due to race, gender, social origin, religion, etc., the overwhelming participation of women in social work, and the achievement of total employment. Moreover, it has also included the agrarian

and housing reforms, the equal distribution of economic results, and the organization of a vast system of social security.

2) The pre-eminent and sustained promotion of education, starting with the wiping out of illiteracy in one year, which at that moment reached practically 60% of the population, and also making all education public and totally free, up to the university level. Today the educational level of all of our population is at least of nine grades and there are almost nine hundred thousand university graduates, including more than seventy thousand doctors, in a population of little over eleven million persons. The ongoing process of bringing the university to the municipal level will soon, without doubt, multiply this achievement even more.

3) The articulation of a national health system, totally free of charge and universal, based on the systematic formation of human resources, that provides total coverage at the primary health care level, and which also has an effective secondary level, capable of reducing diseases and mortality, besides creating a third health care level of a high scientific and professional quality, provided with the best technological means in this field. This effort has also implied the establishing of an advanced infectious disease surveillance system, and the progressive transformation of the national health system into one of the cornerstones of all of the economic and social structure of our society.

4) The creation of a proficient national scientific capacity (Wagner *et al.*, 2001) based on a continuously sustained political will addressing the promotion and support of local scientific development, and articulated with the educational promotion of talents, and the creation of high level research institutions, functionally integrated with several other entities of the national economy, and all devoted to support both scientific research and the practical implementation of scientific results.

5) The promotion and practice of solidarity, with social relations depending on cooperation instead of competition, creating the conditions for promoting social ethics with a high sense of solidarity. This means, even today, identifying the human groups within society that either need more attention or are more vulnerable, in order to act adequately vis-à-vis each one of them, using all the social means at our reach (Alvarez & Máttar, 2004). At the same time, as a natural extension of this social ethics, it is of customary practice, and a state policy, to share what has been accomplished in Cuba with other less advanced societies.

A great deal of evidence can be supplied to show the interrelation, in the Cuban experience, of the abovementioned important factors. We shall mention only a couple of them:

– Over twenty thousand Cuban doctors, nurses and health personnel work as volunteers, providing direct health assistance to people in dozens of countries all over the world. Their work in health education, as well as in the task of prevention and in the provision of direct medical assistance, both at primary and secondary level, show in every case a positive direct impact in sensitive indicators, such as infant mortality rate.

– A new vaccine for *Haemophilus influenzae*, obtained from a synthetic antigen produced by a Cuban group of research has been developed recently in collaboration with a Canadian group, and has been added to the numerous vaccines and biotechnological products obtained in our country and presently used by other countries as well, among them: those aimed to prevent meningitis produced by meningococcus B, hepatitis type B, etc. Recently, the government of the United States of America gave authorization – very seldom given when Cuba is involved, as you probably know – to establish an agreement with an institution of that country devoted to testing and developing a therapeutic vaccine obtained by Cuban scientists for the treatment of a number of malignant cancer tumour processes.

– The national production of medical instruments and equipment, conceived basically to cover national needs at lower costs, has reached increasingly important export levels, and already includes electrocardiographs, defibrillators, vital functions monitors, equipments and means for immuno-enzymatic microanalysis, and modern neurophysiology and brain imaging devices.

These and other examples that could be mentioned are not intended to showcase an idealistic or apologetic vision of the Cuban experience. Though, all that has been achieved in Cuba in this field can be better assessed if we remember that our country continues to face an economic blockade that has lasted for over 45 years. This inhumane harassment has caused, until now, a calculated loss of not less than seventy nine thousand million dollars, not to mention the human suffering and calamities that our people have faced for so long due to its ever increasing, never decreasing, enforcement.

The purpose of these notes is to state our conviction, based on practice, that with relatively modest material resources it is possible to achieve substantial results whenever those resources are not limited by the application of senseless and inhuman economic models, but instead, the promotion of education and knowledge sharing, and the practice of social ethics based on solidarity are the guiding principles in the organization of society.

That seems to be, in our opinion, the only possible way for underdeveloped countries to face the challenges of the present processes of global change. At the same time, to work towards the elimination of the increasing divide in development is also in the best interest of rich countries, so it is imperative to request their contribution to those efforts in terms of ethics and moral standards.

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