

World could learn from Cuban internationalism

03/03/2020



The tiny Caribbean island of Cuba is well-known in the global South for offering humanitarian assistance to disaster-ravaged countries around the world. It is often referred to as Cuba's unique brand of "medical diplomacy," "medical internationalism" or even "white coat diplomacy."

Since the early 1960s, the Cuban government has allocated substantial humanitarian resources to virtually every region of the world. No natural calamity or health crisis is too small for Cuban professionals — from dealing with a nuclear fallout in Ukraine to a deadly Ebola outbreak in West Africa. Oftentimes, the Cubans are quick to respond with a helping hand within a matter of days to friends and foes alike (recall U.S. president George W. Bush rejecting Cuba's offer of humanitarian and medical support in the wake of hurricane Katrina in 2005).

It was not surprising, then, to see Havana respond swiftly to the crisis in the Bahamas following the destruction from hurricane Dorian. While Canada and other countries were slow to assist Bahamians, the Cubans did not waste a single moment before mobilizing.

Significantly, there were already 65 Cubans working in the Bahamas and they immediately joined the relief and recovery efforts. As Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez tweeted: "We express our solidarity and support to the government & people of the #Bahamas.... Our co-operation workers in that Caribbean sister nation are protected and will join the recovery efforts in that country."

Shortly thereafter, the Cuban government announced that it would be sending 60 additional

specialists, including doctors and teachers, to the devastated Caribbean nation.

It is true that Cuba in the post-Fidel era has been less generous with its assistance and sometimes more focused on cost-recovery. As Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel explained to Bahamian Prime Minister Hubert A. Minnis, "I express the willingness (of Cuba) to co-operate, within our means, in the mitigation of damages."

As of this writing, the Diaz-Canel government has not earmarked the highly capable Henry Reeve International Brigade of health professionals for the Bahamas. Members of this brigade distinguished themselves by literally putting their lives on the line during the 2014 Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia (which claimed over 11,000 lives).

All of this humanitarian and solidarity work raises a central question: why does Cuba do it?

It is very important to note from the outset that José Martí, the country's national hero in the struggle for Cuba's independence and oft-referred to "Apostle of the Cuban Revolution," wrote extensively about the need for the Cuban people to have a strong moral compass. Many Cubans today still religiously follow the example of Martí.

Of course, medical diplomacy is also an important foreign policy instrument for Cuba. In some ways, it has turned Cuba into a major player on the world stage and allowed it to punch well above its weight.

From the 1960s onward, "doctor diplomacy" has generated a fair amount of international goodwill, prestige and influence. And for a country that didn't have a lot of friends after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Cuba's commitment to solidarity has strengthened its diplomatic relations with a host of developing countries.

Economically speaking, Cuban medical internationalism has provided the country with much-needed material benefits, foreign exchange and diversified trade markets. To be sure, the "oil-for-doctors" agreement with Venezuela (now under severe stress) stands out as a notable example.

Havana's international solidarity initiatives have, moreover, helped to sustain the significant social accomplishments of the Cuban Revolution. They have also served to keep the Castros in power (and the Americans out) in Cuba.

Most significantly, its Herculean efforts on the disaster response front correspond nicely with Cuba's fundamental belief that health care is a basic human right for everyone — and not only Cubans. Underlying this core ideal is a desire to show the rest of the world that there is a different model or another way than a privatized or corporatized health-care delivery system.

Wealthy countries like Canada, then, could learn a great deal from Cuba when it comes to disaster relief. Indeed, there is no reason why the Canadian government couldn't embrace whole-heartedly the ideal of international solidarity. It has certainly worked well for the Cubans.

Peter McKenna is professor of political science at the University of Prince Edward Island in Charlottetown.
