



RIGHT TO LIVE WITHOUT A BLOCKADE

The impact of US sanctions on the Cuban population and women's lives

SUMMARY



OXFAM

OXFAM REPORT — MAY 2021

Right to Live without a Blockade reveals the impact of nearly six decades of sanctions imposed by successive US governments on the Cuban population. It focuses on the human dimensions, presenting testimonies that illustrate the consequences of the blockade on the daily lives of those in Cuba, women in particular. The report also includes historical data and information on the measures applied. In the context of a global pandemic, it is more urgent than ever to change this US policy toward Cuba. Oxfam calls for the normalization of US-Cuba relations.

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Cover photo: Yunisleydis Duvergel (aged 31), transportation organizer. She witnesses every day how gasoline scarcity makes transportation difficult for the Cuban population. “I think it is much harder for women, as they generally have the weight of domestic responsibilities; not being able to rely on transportation generates greater stress.” According to the Report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations in its resolution 74/7, entitled “Necessity of ending the economic, commercial and financial embargo imposed by the United States of America against Cuba” (2020), in 2019, the US fined 27 companies, 54 ships, and 3 individuals for transporting fuel to Cuba. None of those entities or individuals sanctioned were from or under the jurisdiction of the US, illustrating the extraterritorial nature of the US embargo against Cuba. Photo by Claudio Peláez Sorgo.

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PROLOGUES

WHY OXFAM IS CALLING FOR AN END TO THE US EMBARGO AGAINST CUBA

Oxfam began working in Cuba in 1993 at a time of economic crisis on the island. Since then, Oxfam has accompanied the Cuban people in communities across the country, supporting their initiatives to bolster food security and sovereignty, strengthen gender justice, build resilience to climate change, and reduce disaster-related risks. Our experiences and relationships on the ground provide us with a first hand understanding of the impact of US policies intended to block not just trade, but also cross-border engagement and social, cultural, and scientific exchanges with the island.

As an international development organization working to end the injustice of poverty, Oxfam considers current US policy toward Cuba a severe obstacle to development for the Cuban population. The web of US laws and regulations, referred to as an embargo but experienced by the island as a blockade, impedes its 11 million people from freely engaging with the US and beyond, and is a barrier to the full exercise of Cubans' rights.



ELENA GENTILI

Oxfam Country Director for Cuba

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elena Gentili'.

SUMMARY

As a rights-based organization committed to fighting inequality and promoting gender justice, Oxfam has been working in Cuba with local and national partners to empower women and close the gender gap. We have seen the impact of the blockade on women and how it adversely affects their family lives and livelihoods, thereby limiting progress toward a more just and inclusive society.

In our humanitarian work in Cuba, including the response to the health emergency arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, Oxfam has witnessed how the US embargo limits Cubans' capacity to recover from these setbacks and curtails access to needed inputs, medicines, technologies, and materials to rebuild. And in this increasingly digital age, the US blockade restricts people's ability to access digital platforms and resources, which have become even more crucial tools for international cooperation, communication, and knowledge exchange, as well as for family relations during the pandemic.

Today, the US embargo hinders Cuba's efforts to stop the spread of the pandemic. Over the last year, Oxfam has worked with its partners in Cuba to help supply needed materials, including personal protective equipment (PPE) and COVID-19 test kits, and to build public awareness about COVID-19 and its prevention, with a focus on the differentiated needs of women and vulnerable communities. In our global response to the pandemic, Oxfam is calling for a people's vaccine that is free and accessible as soon as possible to everyone, everywhere. Cuba has developed five vaccine candidates, which are in late-stage trials as of this writing. These vaccines, in addition to protecting its own population, could soon help many other countries, save lives, and help stem the pandemic's spread. Yet the island's access to equipment and materials to speed up mass vaccination is obstructed by the US embargo.

SUMMARY



ABBY MAXMAN

Executive Director of Oxfam America



LAUREN RAVON

Executive Director of Oxfam Canada



Oxfam joins many other voices around the world speaking out against the outdated and unjust blockade that the US continues to maintain against Cuba. Now, in the context of a global pandemic that has unleashed unprecedented health and economic crises across the world, we believe urgent action is needed to normalize US-Cuba relations and put an end to the US embargo.

This paper seeks to contribute toward that end. We set out to report on what Oxfam has seen in our work on the ground in Cuba—the real human impact of the US blockade. Our focus is on recent years because of the harsh measures enacted by the Trump administration—which are still in effect—following initial positive steps taken by the Obama administration, steps that were welcomed by large majorities in the US and across the island. Based on Oxfam’s experiences, our reflections on the daily realities of women and men in Cuba aim to move US leaders to change course on US policy to effectively normalize relations with Cuba and put a definitive end to the embargo.

Crises beget opportunities. We believe there is an historic opportunity for the US, led by the Biden administration, to set a new US policy of respectful and constructive engagement with Cuba. Oxfam calls for an end to the US embargo to rectify the injustices enacted against Cuban women and men who strive for their right to live without a blockade.

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RETURN TO A PATH OF DIALOGUE

The comprehensive US sanctions on travel and trade with Cuba were first imposed as part of a Cold War foreign policy that viewed Cuba through a narrow ideological lens. Today, the world has changed, and progressive thinkers on international relations reject such a polarized approach to foreign policy. Nevertheless, the debate in Washington about Cuba continues to focus on geopolitical issues and simplistic understandings of Cuban reality.

This Oxfam report is particularly valuable in that it moves the debate away from abstract discussions about Cuba and geopolitics, or Cuba as a political symbol, toward concrete understandings of Cuban realities and the daily lives of the Cuban people, contextualizing the ways in which the embargo has affected them by imposing suffering and limiting opportunities.

This discussion is especially important right now, when the harsher sanctions of the Trump administration and the impact of the COVID pandemic combined have battered the Cuban economy, contributing to shortages in daily life and difficult economic circumstances.

As the Biden administration and the US Congress, as well as others in the international community, consider a new approach to Cuba, they would do well to take to heart the message of this report, and its reminder that the US embargo continues to be a counterproductive policy that is compounding human suffering for the Cuban people, with a disproportionate impact on Cuban women.

Reversing the Trump executive orders, returning to a path of engagement, and normalizing relations will alleviate the suffering of the Cuban people and will be a more productive way for the US to relate to Cuba, find our commonalities, and discuss our differences.

WOLA has long advocated for normalization of US-Cuban relations and lifting the embargo. We have partnered with Oxfam in the past and are pleased to do so in support of this report.



GEOFF THALE

President, Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Geoff Thale".

SUMMARY

WHO DOES THE US XBLOCKADEX AGAINST CUBA AFFECT?



CUBANS LIVING
ON THE ISLAND

11 209 628



5 633 640

WOMEN



5 575 988

MEN

38% OF THE POPULATION OVER AGE 15
HAS FAMILY LIVING OUTSIDE OF CUBA. THESE US
SANCTIONS ALSO AFFECT FAMILY TIES WITH THE CUBAN
COMMUNITY LIVING ABROAD.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

US-Cuba relations have been constrained since 1959 by a series of restrictions unilaterally imposed by successive US government administrations. The “embargo,” as the United States calls it, or the “blockade,” as it is known in Cuba, imposes strict limits on the Caribbean nation, with extraterritorial reach that hamstring its relationships with third-party countries and detracts from the wellbeing of Cuban women and men. With over 25 years of work in the country, Oxfam aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the real damage that these sanctions cause, especially for people in the most vulnerable situations.

The main focus of this study is to examine the human dimension of the blockade. The text references historical data, current policies, and testimonies—especially from women—to describe **what the blockade means on a daily basis for those living in Cuba**. The evidence shared in this report and Oxfam’s experience in the country working with communities, cooperatives, local actors, partner organizations, and allies confirms that the US blockade deepens the economic crisis and hampers access to inputs, medical technologies, medical equipment, and other essential basic items.

A more just society is unattainable without full, unencumbered self-determination for women and girls. It is essential to recognize what policies and practices restrict their rights. The blockade reinforces the patriarchal system and runs roughshod over women’s different needs, potential, opportunities, and autonomy.

These US policies produce real damage and violate the rights of Cuban citizens and obstruct local economic, social, and environmental development. They hinder access to medicine for specific treatments, as well as to inputs for production of COVID-19 diagnostic tests and to equipment and materials to produce and apply Cuban vaccines.

The “embargo,” as the United States calls it, or the “blockade,” as it is known in Cuba, imposes strict limits on the Caribbean nation, with extraterritorial reach that hamstring its relationships with third-party countries and detracts from the wellbeing of Cuban women and men.

Oxfam opposes the US blockade against Cuba, a policy that runs contrary to the most urgent need today: saving human lives and protecting citizens' rights. It is time to globalize cooperation between countries and focus on collaborative solutions to the current health crisis, back emerging private initiatives in Cuba, and support institutions providing social services to families, including those that prevent and respond to multiple forms of gender-based violence and that help meet caregiving needs.

A commitment to greater empowerment of Cuban women is central to Oxfam's work, so they may develop their capabilities and exercise leadership to pursue their goals and fully exercise their rights free from the obstacles exacerbated by the blockade. Advancing women's rights is particularly relevant at this singular moment when a woman is Vice President of the United States for the first time in history.

The findings of this report support Oxfam's call for normalization of relations between the US and Cuba. Doing so would benefit the 11 million people living on the island and their relatives living abroad, as well as people in the US.

Photo courtesy of Proyecto Palomas



Without the blockade, the quality and yield of the seedlings would be even better and would support family income, the national economy, food security, nutrition education, and sustainable environmental management.

Dayanis Alonso
(31 years old)

Proyecto AP00COP



SUMMARY

TO PROMOTE A NEW “THAW” BETWEEN THE US AND CUBA:

OXFAM CALLS ON THE US GOVERNMENT

To take action to normalize relations with Cuba and to immediately suspend those measures of the blockade that impede the timely acquisition of materials and inputs needed to address the COVID-19 pandemic in Cuba—including for domestic production of vaccines and medical treatments.

In particular, we urge the Biden administration to:

- ➔ Return to the path laid out by the Presidential Policy Directive of October 2016 for “United States–Cuba Normalization” as a starting point to rebuild the relationship, and follow through on statements made in this regard during the presidential campaign;
- ➔ Remove Cuba from the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism and suspend the application of Title III of the Helms–Burton Act;
- ➔ Repeal the National Security Presidential Memorandum on strengthening the policy of the US toward Cuba, issued in 2017;
- ➔ Remove the restrictions on remittances and travel imposed by the Trump administration in order to help Cuban families, the emerging non-state sector, and the national economy; and
- ➔ Reestablish diplomatic services, enabling staffing levels needed in both embassies to facilitate consular services and a bilateral dialogue on topics of mutual interest.

Furthermore, Oxfam urges members of the US Congress to end the US embargo and related constraints on economic, social, and political relations with Cuba.

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OXFAM ENCOURAGES THE CUBAN GOVERNMENT

To continue implementing the transformations enshrined in the new Constitution, approved in 2019, in order to guarantee *human rights, social justice, and the enjoyment of freedom, solidarity, wellbeing, and individual and collective prosperity* as described therein.

The economic and monetary transformations underway in Cuba should consider the diversity of productive forces and address economic inequalities, as well as others that may emerge as a consequence of these changes. Oxfam underscores the need to implement, urgently and in an articulated manner, strategies and policies that ensure independence in the importation of goods and inputs by fostering local production and supporting municipal self-sufficiency and decentralization, agroecology practices and local consumption, as well as urban, suburban, and family farming.

The Cuban authorities should continue promoting and reorienting local potential toward new and more dynamic economic activities, such as non-agricultural cooperatives and SMEs (small and medium enterprises). This requires expanding and enhancing the legal framework for the private sector and cooperatives, while designing programs and incentives that recognize and reduce existing and potential inequalities, especially those that affect women in their multiple intersectionality.

Within the framework of the National Program for the Advancement of Women (March 2021), Oxfam advocates for greater empowerment for rural women and encourages the Cuban government to prioritize strengthening and expanding comprehensive care and social protection systems for all, promote shared responsibility, and highlight the need to reduce and redistribute caregiving work.



Photo courtesy of Proyecto Palomas



Photo: Carla Valdés

WITH REGARD TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY, OXFAM CALLS UPON UN MEMBER STATES AND INTERNATIONAL AID AGENCIES

To join together in a more proactive policy against the blockade. We encourage South-South cooperation and spaces for dialogue and understanding, especially in the context of multilateral organizations and integration mechanisms in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Oxfam urges the European Union (EU) to reinforce its dialogue with the new US administration to lift the blockade against Cuba as part of the EU's new program cycle and renewed emphasis on the importance of its beyond-the-border objectives involving foreign policy, climate change, digital inclusion, and social and economic sustainability. The upcoming resolution in the United Nations General Assembly on the need to end the US embargo against Cuba is an opportunity to create spaces for dialogue between the parties, which the EU should facilitate, along with other governments.

Furthermore, it is important to continue informing analysis and discussion in the public arena and at international fora on the damage the blockade has caused for people on the island, including the effects on international organizations that provide aid to Cuba.

SUMMARY

OXFAM ENCOURAGES INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS, NETWORKS, AND ACTORS

To speak out for ending the blockade. We also encourage Cuban and US organizations to work towards a joint agenda that fosters “people-to-people” engagement and exchange around common challenges, such as the current health crisis and the identification of effective treatments for COVID-19 and other advancements in medicine, climate change adaptation, renewed cultural and academic cooperation, and new business strategies.


Oxfam calls on US civil society groups to advocate firmly and persistently to lift the blockade and expand exchanges with Cuba through collaboration and travel, recognizing common ground and areas for learning. We encourage Cuban civil society to undertake joint initiatives to document the impact of the blockade on the sectors it targets and affects, especially the communities in Cuba facing the greatest social vulnerability.

It is essential to broadly disseminate this evidence within US society and take action in Cuba to address inequalities and promote the realization of all human rights, with an emphasis on the rights of women.

Ending the blockade, an unjust policy that has spanned nearly six decades, will further a constructive dialogue that engages diverse voices, fosters transformations on the island, and contributes to resilient, rights-based development with social justice.

CUBA HAS A WEALTH OF EXPERIENCE IN INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL COOPERATION AND HAS ITS OWN VACCINES FOR COVID-19. ENCOURAGING RATHER THAN RESTRICTING CUBA’S CAPACITY TO CONTRIBUTE ITS EXPERIENCE, KNOWLEDGE, AND SPECIALIZED STAFF TO THE GLOBAL RESPONSE TO THE HEALTH CRISIS IS A MORAL DUTY FOR HUMANITY AND PART OF THE COMMITMENT TO A MORE EQUAL WORLD, WITH GREATER OPPORTUNITIES AND FULL RIGHTS FOR ALL.

SUMMARY

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a black face mask, a white lab coat over a black top, and a colorful necklace. She is standing in a pharmacy with wooden shelves in the background. The image is partially overlaid by a pink text box on the right and a dark purple text box at the bottom left.

We suffer because of medicine shortages. The pharmacies are empty because it's hard for our country to get the raw materials. For example, the materials used to make sanitary napkins aren't good quality, and that causes problems for women during their menstrual cycles.

Indira Pino
(26 years old)

Photo: Claudio Peláez

SUMMARY

60 YEARS OF US SANCTIONS AGAINST CUBA

**IMPOSSIBLE TO
QUANTIFY**

**ONGOING STRESS +
UNMET NEEDS + LIMITED
FAMILY CONTACT + MATERIAL
SHORTAGES + OBSTACLES
TO ACADEMIC, SCIENTIFIC,
AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE
+ OBSTACLES TO THE FULL
ENJOYMENT OF RIGHTS +
+ LIMITING OPPORTUNITIES
FOR AUTONOMY AND OPTIMAL
DEVELOPMENT + REINFORCING
PREEXISTING INEQUALITIES
+ IMPEDING LIFE GOALS
AND PLANS + TIME INVESTED
IN FINDING SOLUTIONS
TO PROBLEMS CAUSED BY
THE BLOCKADE = **LOWER
QUALITY OF LIFE****



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Oxfam is an international confederation of 21 organizations networked together in 67 countries, as part of a global movement for change, to build a future free from the injustice of poverty. Oxfam began working in Cuba in 1993 and has since collaborated with many actors at different levels working together to build a more just, inclusive, sustainable and resilient society. The primary focus of Oxfam's work in Cuba has been to contribute to citizen participation and local development, food security and sovereignty, gender justice and women's rights, inclusive disaster risk management and humanitarian response. Please write to any of the agencies for further information, or visit www.oxfam.org.

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