

A CUBAN EXPERIMENT: THE PEOPLE AND THE MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS MANAGE THEIR OWN DEVELOPMENT



“To dream and realize the neighbourhood we want is a task for all of us” – residents of Old Havana.

One of the central aspects of the reforms that the Cuban government is driving is decentralisation, devolving more powers to the local level. Initiatives are taking off in neighbourhoods and municipalities nationwide – in the towns and in the country – promoting a new kind of citizens’ participation: decisions are being made from the bottom up. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) is supporting a range of experiments using this innovative process in Cuba, which until very recently was predominantly a centrally planned system.

“Participatory culture in Cuba is not based on people making decisions for themselves. It’s a culture based on mobilisation. People don’t get involved in order to propose things,” says Maidolys Iglesias, a sociologist with the social research group working on the complete revitalisation of Old Havana. “I think that participation enables people to feel more included in the projects, in the little scrap of land where they live and work. Without the active participation of the people, the process of developing a community will soon run out of steam.”

Old Havana – a laboratory: The Cuban sociologist knows what she is talking about. In 2011 she took part in a public consultation in Old Havana. This was the first time that the citizens were given the opportunity to express their views on the

full development plan for the historic centre of Havana. What they were trying to achieve was “produce a shared vision, to a high standard and true to reality, that would enable us to fulfil our goal of reclaiming our extraordinary cultural heritage and at the same time build a city that’s better to live in.” The public consultation was supported by the SDC through the **Local participatory management in the rehabilitation of the historic centre of Havana (GEPAC)** project. It provided the people with an opportunity to talk, to express their needs and propose solutions with the means at their disposal, thereby complementing the ideas put forward by the political authorities and experts in town planning and local development. The consultation is part of a learning process and seeks to find new ways of includ-

ing the local population and getting them to participate in their communities.

Rural municipalities – a better way of life: It is not only historical centres that are looking to manage their own affairs. A similar process, promoting more participatory development at the local level, is under way in 26 municipalities across the length and breadth of the island where the population is largely rural. The National Assembly of People’s Power (unicameral parliament) selected these municipalities for the experiment, based on a range of criteria. The state-run Centre for Local Development (CEDEL) was given the mandate of activating the process and proposing methodologies that could be replicated in different contexts. To support that initiative, the Cuban authorities, CEDEL and the SDC set up the **PRODEL** project, aimed at strengthening the capacities of municipalities through local development. It makes for a different kind of management, whereby the people themselves lay down the priorities, leaving the public administration and civil society to identify a development model which through the municipal governments has a direct impact on the quality of life of the citizens. It is in the municipalities that the growing non-state sector can play a significant role in stimulating the local economy.



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AGUADA DE PASAJEROS

A rural municipality seeks out its own development strategy

Aguada de Pasajeros, a rural municipality in the province of Cienfuegos with a population of 32,000, is one of the 26 municipalities involved in the experiment to find new ways of managing things at the local level with a view to achieving greater decentralisation of the country. Together with the municipal authorities, the PRODEL project, which is supported by the SDC, led to the creation of a local development strategy that included the updating of the municipal management plan as one of its central planks. The tools for analysis and process planning were made available by CEDEL. The main tasks were: an analysis of the situation in the area, an assessment of the true potential of local communities and of the barriers holding them back, as well as local demands, and – in a second phase – approval by the council of the municipal administration and the municipal assembly of People's Power as a precursor to the implementation of the above through specific programmes and projects.



"The municipality feels pressure from below, from the people in need, and from above, from a political class that is unable to change."
Arnaldo Cruz, Coordinator of PRODEL in Aguada de Pasajeros,

Arnaldo Cruz, PRODEL coordinator in Aguada de Pasajeros and member of the municipal management plan team:

"Aguada de Pasajeros is one of the municipalities in the country that has seen its number of settlements drop most in the past few years: 25 years ago it had more than 80; now only 19 remain. We can't lose sight of the fact that the Cuban development policy model operates at the national level. But national development policy priorities don't necessarily coincide with local priorities. In the 90s, the state was unable to meet all of the needs of the municipalities. Agricultural production, which was a national priority at the time to make up the shortfall from imports, was in difficulty. For a long time municipal governments hadn't needed to bother about

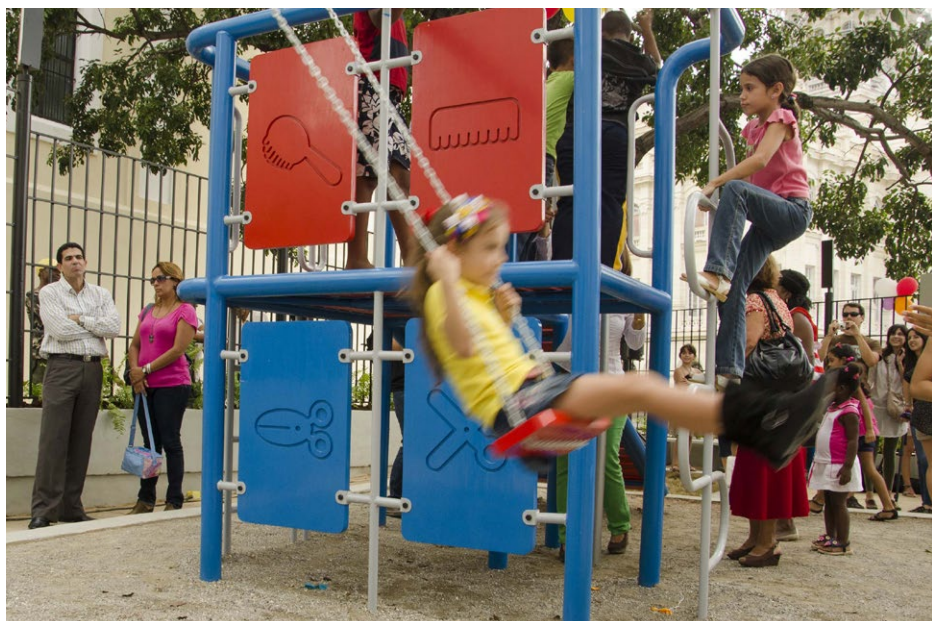
such things because decisions to resolve problems were always taken centrally. Now we had a situation where local governments were in charge of land which in economic terms was basically dependent on agriculture and wasn't exploiting all of its potential. The development strategy adopted forced us to change our way of thinking and acting with regard to these problems."

Francisco Rodríguez, head of the team updating the municipal management plan:

"The technology that CEDEL provided us with has enabled us to create a strategy that considers the municipality as a whole, based on an updating of the management plan. Thanks to that, today we have a field study at our disposal that we didn't have before: we were working with next to no information whatsoever. Once you've got your management plan more or less right, you can find the answers to all of your municipality's problems. In it you will find the positions of the population with regard to housing, transport and technical infrastructure. The development of the plan began using participatory methodology with a series of workshops. That was followed by various exchanges with the municipal administrative board, draft versions of the plan, and finally approval by the municipal assembly. It was a long, complicated process."



A house recently constructed using local resources within the framework of the PRODEL project, Aguada de Pasajeros.



"You can't just restore the buildings and not also invest in the people".



Activities for the elderly organised by the Casa del Abuelo home for the elderly and the Artecorte project in Havana.

OLD HAVANA – A LABORATORY FOR LOCAL MANAGEMENT

The dream of a neighbourhood for everyone

Every day, thousands upon thousands of tourists stroll through the cobbled streets of Havana's old town, sharing as they go the rich heritage of this densely populated part of the Cuban capital with the people who live there. More than twenty years ago, the Office of the Historian of the City of Havana (OHCH) kicked off the regeneration of an area of architectural significance which had been declared a World Heritage Site in 1982. But the work of the OHCH went far beyond the restoration of palaces, churches and squares, and the opening of hotels, bars and restaurants: it brought together all of these actions under a banner of integrated local development.

The SDC supports the OHCH through the **GEPAC** project (Local participatory management in the rehabilitation of the historic centre of Havana). The goal is to fine-tune the management model so that it takes on board economic sustainability, integrated urban planning and socio-political action, always taking into account the most vulnerable from a perspective of equality. For the Cuban authorities and for the SDC, Old Havana constitutes a veritable laboratory for testing municipal management practices. The results are to be used as a model for other municipalities across the island that have historical centres to administer. The contribution

of international cooperation enables exchanges to take place, for example, with similar cities abroad whose experiences might be replicated in Cuba.

Keeping alive the residential spirit of Old Havana is a challenge shared by the population and authorities alike. "Havana is consumed by outsiders and not by the people who live there," warns Gilberto Valladares, a community leader known as Papito. "The tourists don't just come to see the houses, but the people too," declares Frank Volta, a Cuban lawyer who is a member of the social research group working on the complete revitalisation of Old Havana. He believes that housing cooperatives could be an antidote to the gentrification that also threatens this historic site.

For many inhabitants of Old Havana, tourists are increasingly becoming their main source of income. The OHCH's social programmes take this new reality on board, suggesting alternative types of employment for locals. Supporting small private ventures and the growing number of requests for the creation of non-agricultural cooperatives has become a major part of the rehabilitation of the old town. It is with this objective in mind that the SDC helps create favourable conditions for these local economic actors to get their businesses off the ground. This contribution takes two forms: creating opportunities for training and for technical and legal support for entrepreneurs and cooperatives; and providing support with technical teams, premises, raw materials

and other means, in order to get these initiatives started.

The Artecorte local development project, in the Santo Ángel neighbourhood, is a flagship project. It is based on the initiative by Gilberto "Papito" Valladares, a dynamic self-employed member of the community who has lived in the same neighbourhood since his childhood (see his testimonial on page 4). Since 1999 he has been running his barber shop in what is known today as the Callejón de los Peluqueros (Barbershop Alley). It was under his leadership that a small museum was founded, where barbers' chairs and historical tools of the trade are on display, along with a community barber school. Thanks to the efforts of the neighbouring community and the OHCH, the whole alley has been brought back to life. A range of other independent businesses – paladares (as small privately run restaurants are commonly referred to in Havana) and art galleries – have since set up shop there. What is more, the Artecorte project also organises a whole series of activities with the local home for the elderly.

Pavel García, coordinator of the Artecorte project, recounts how the barber school came about: "The OHCH gave its authorisation to use the building for that purpose, and once Papito had put down the floor and the mezzanine, when the OHCH saw that he was taking the job seriously, they provided help with the air conditioning, the computer, the blackboard and other materials." The school is now supported by Artecorte. Classes are held and the young apprentices are able to practise their trade on members of the local community. The service is provided free of charge.

Sociologist Maidolys Iglesias from the OHCH comments: "The Artecorte project began with an initiative by a private individual working with other entrepreneurs from the area together with state institutions. It wasn't an institution or state organisation that came along and told them what to do. The locals told us about the project they had started and we provided them with theoretical know-how, follow-up and technical support. A particular aspect here is that we are in a historical centre, where you have to take into account the protection of the tangible and intangible heritage. The public sector working together with the private sector is one of the things that we are trying to encourage."



Gilberto Valladares in his barber shop in the Callejón de los Peluqueros: "In general, our heritage benefits from entrepreneurship."

TESTIMONIAL FROM A COMMUNITY LEADER

Gilberto "Papito" Valladares, 43, barber, self-employed, leader of the Artecorte project, Santo Ángel, neighbourhood of Old Havana:

"In the beginning, being self-employed was very hard. It was frowned upon, politically and socially speaking. This is a key time for Cuba, as a new private sector is starting to emerge. Now is the time to make a social commitment to this sector. Weaving together is my strategy: I want to show to both sectors – though mainly to the private sector – that the social and cultural benefits are just as important as the economic benefits. In general, our heritage benefits from entrepreneurship. It is a good thing to arouse in the new private sector this concern for our heritage."

TESTIMONIAL FROM A SOCIAL INVESTIGATOR

Niurka Cruz, in charge of economic and financial studies of the GEPAC social research group working on the complete revitalisation of Old Havana:

"GEPAC views the OHCH's experiment as important, as its guidelines state that local governments should be able to find a way to decentralise their activities, and should be able to take decisions and work within a budget.

It is vital that local governments study the OHCH's experiment in working with other actors: to know the pros and cons, and see what worked and what didn't, so as to show others how best to proceed in future."

TESTIMONIAL FROM A FARMER

Pavel Cuellar, chairman of the Patricio Lumumba credit and service cooperative, Aguada de Pasajeros:

The project didn't only provide us with tools for carpentry, but also artisan workshops for communal work. With the project we also wanted to build farms to keep breeding stock and the males that will be used to build up the herds. These five farms are going to be multiplier centres for producing seed stock. This will enable goats to yield more milk than they need to feed their young, for example.

TESTIMONIAL FROM A CUBAN MOTHER

María Caridad Pérez beneficiary of the PRODEL project in Aguada de Pasajeros:

"My little boy was born with infantile paralysis, as a result of hypoxia during the delivery. He is 11 years old now and has acquired a number of abilities. He has special dietary needs and, as he has a lot of

different illnesses, none of the official diets designed for sick children was really suitable for him.

That's when PRODEL came into my life. A diagnosis was done by the municipality and they decided to give us assistance in the form of dietary supplements. These are allocated to me by the Cuban state and are provided through the Patricio Lumumba cooperative. It ensures that my son gets the food he needs. And I can count on them for any other problem as well."



El Callejón de los Peluqueros (Barbershop Alley) in Old Havana has been revitalised thanks to the joint efforts of local self-employed residents and the support of the OHCH.

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