

**Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization - Individual UPR submission -
CUBA - April 2023**



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Founded

1967

The Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization is an interfaith organization founded in 1967 by progressive church leaders and activists. Pursuant to both state and federal laws, the organization is registered as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. For more than six decades, IFCO has assisted hundreds of community organizations and public policy groups by providing technical assistance, training organizers, making and administering grants, and using our global network of grassroots organizers, clergy, and other professionals to advance the struggles of oppressed people for justice and self-determination. This work has included working for decades to put an end to the US government's economic blockade of Cuba while developing strong relations with our ecumenical and interfaith partners in Cuba.

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Introduction:

1. Herewith from The Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO) /Pastors for Peace, to the United Nations Human Rights Commission Universal Periodic Review (UNHRC-UPR), this stakeholder submission represents our collective “Witness” in support of the Sovereign Nation of Cuba.
2. The Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization is an interfaith organization founded in 1967 by progressive church leaders and activists. Pursuant to both state and federal laws, the organization is registered as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. For more than six decades, IFCO has assisted hundreds of community organizations and public policy groups by providing technical assistance, training organizers, making and administering grants, and using our global network of grassroots organizers, clergy, and other professionals to advance the struggles of oppressed people for justice and self-determination. This work has included working for decades to put an end to the US government's economic blockade of Cuba while developing strong relations with our ecumenical partners in Cuba.
3. The subsequent sections are outlined in ***Bold and Italicized font*** according to the Universal Periodic Review Submitted by Cuba in 2018. The Roman Numerals refer to the general section. The Arabic numerals refer to the specific items under the corresponding general section. Any Capitalized Letter sections are subsections of the general sections. Any **bold and non-italicized** font is a section added by IFCO. Under that, the Arabic numerals refer to the specific witness examples by IFCO.

II. Legal and institutional framework for the promotion and protection of human rights

(3) During the period covered, the economic, commercial and financial blockade imposed by the United States against Cuba continued, and its extraterritorial application was reinforced, especially in the financial sector. This policy is the main obstacle to the development of Cuba and constitutes a flagrant violation of the human rights of its people. In this difficult context, the country has continued to make progress in the process of updating its model of economic and social development.

4. For 30 years IFCO has facilitated the shipment of hundreds of tons of material aid (including old school buses) to offset the economic effects and hardships of the sanctions on the Cuban people caused by the economic blockade. IFCO has organized numerous material aid caravans to the island. Donated supplies included:
 - a. Food (powdered milk which was distributed in children’s hospitals).
 - b. Donated vehicles; old school buses, ambulances, automobile tires, and an assortment of spare auto parts and mechanic tools.
 - c. Durable medical supplies and other equipment such as prosthetics, orthotics and supplies (DMEPOS). Assistive Devices (AD).

- d. Electronic equipment and educational materials for school children and more.
5. This humanitarian aid is acquired by mobilizing public opinion and grassroots organizing resulting in monetary donations where more than 1500 US citizens have traveled on IFCO's annual Friendshipment Caravans. In addition to the material aid distributed by our organization in Cuba, participants have donated personal items to Cuban families in presentations at ecumenical centers, private enterprises, maternity hospitals and cultural institutions. Through first-hand observations our supporters witness the impact of the blockade on the Cuban people. We can attest to the difficulties posed by the economic embargo especially related to the acquisition of funds from U.S. citizens who want to give towards alleviating the harsh conditions of the Cuban people.
6. Overall, Pastors for Peace's efforts to deliver aid to Cuba represents an important example of how grassroots organizations can work to promote social justice and human rights in the face of the embargo that results in great harm to Cuba's vulnerable communities. These policies also demonstrate the precarious position that face humanitarian projects like ours which encounters both legal and logistical reasons stateside that are designed to economically have a chilling and paralyzing effect on our work.

(8) The country continues to strengthen and refine its institutional framework and its legal system, with amendments and proposals that meet the needs of Cuban society and the relevant international standards. As part of the process of modernizing the Cuban model of economic and social development, a considerable number of laws and regulations have been revised, updated and amended, while others are under review.

7. On July 23, 2022, an IFCO-Pastors for Peace delegation met with Yamila Gonzalez Ferrer, Vice President of the Cuban National Union of Jurists on July 23, 2022, after the most recent revisions of the 1975 Cuban Family Code. This meeting provided our delegation with first-hand information that explained how Cuba has been working to strengthen and refine its institutional framework and legal system in recent years. We engaged in frank discussions that resulted in ordinary lay people understanding how the updated laws and regulations were implemented to better meet the needs of Cuban society and to bring them in line with relevant international standards.
8. The new legislation moved the country into the 21st century with regard to family law, reproductive rights, domestic violence, children's rights, maternity and paternity, old age, people with disabilities. These changes to the Family Code represent much broader efforts by the Cuban government to modernize its legal system and make it more responsive to the needs of the Cuban people. We personally know same gender loving couples who have had the opportunity to exercise their rights and get married. We have also been witness to mainline denominations under the Cuban Council of Churches participating in the democratic process of making these constitutional amendments.

9. A community actor that served as a gathering place for some of these collective deliberations on the Family Code was the Martin Luther King Center. We observed; open discussions & debates; witnessed proceedings and suggestions integrated to the work of the National Working Group. We discussed how these efforts are an important step toward building a more equitable and inclusive society, and they represented a positive example, where in our opinion, these efforts could serve as a blueprint for other countries seeking to improve their legal systems and promote greater social justice.

(10) The new Labour Code strengthens legal protection of the principle of equality and non-discrimination in the workplace and reaffirms Cuba's commitment to freedom of association and collective bargaining. The Code confirms recognition of the right of workers to voluntarily organize and form trade unions, regardless of the terms of their employment, in accordance with the principle of unity advocated historically by Cuban workers.

10. In July. 2022, on a delegation with IFCO Pastors for Peace, which included US trade unionists and union organizers, we spoke directly with labor unions in Cuba and learned about the impact made by these amendments to the new Labour Codes. One of the key changes introduced by the new labor code was a greater emphasis on the rights and protections of workers, including new provisions for workplace safety and health, maternity and paternity leave, and protection against discrimination and harassment. The code also introduced new mechanisms for resolving labor disputes, including the establishment of labor courts to handle disputes between employers and employees.
11. In July 2022, we visited Matanzas, Cuba, and spoke directly to workers of the Scaffolders Cooperative. The new labor code promotes greater flexibility and innovation in the Cuban labor market, with new provisions for part-time work, telecommuting, and other forms of flexible employment. We talked to Cubans in the private sector, representing owners and workers in various industries.

III. Achievements and challenges in the promotion and protection of human rights in Cuba since the previous review

(A) Civil and political rights

12. May 2022, an IFCO/Pastors for Peace delegation of 4 people led by Rev. Dorlimar Lebrón, Associate Director of IFCO/Pastors for Peace, participated in the VII INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR FOR PEACE AND THE ABOLITION OF FOREIGN MILITARY BASES in Guantanamo Cuba. One major impact of the occupation of the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base (GBNB), has been the loss of sovereignty over their own territory. As US citizens this visit was an eye opener because we witnessed first-hand why the Cuban government has long called for the return of the base to Cuban control. Cuba is a signatory to both the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. The Cuban government has taken seriously their commitment to prevent acts forbidden under these conventions,

and to ensure that all persons within its jurisdiction are protected against torture, arbitrary detention, and other forms of abuse.

13. We spoke to ordinary Cubans who are outraged by the fact that in the US occupied Guantanamo base, humans are being tortured and abused in buildings that are visible from their free territory. This significant portion of land surrounding the base which the US military occupies has limited the ability of local communities to use this land for economic or social development. From our vantage point, we witnessed how the base is impacting the environment and natural resources surrounding the base.

(26) Not only does Cuba protect the lives of its own citizens, it has also helped to improve the living conditions and health of other peoples and nations through international cooperation projects and assistance.

14. Since 2001, IFCO/ Pastors for Peace has been facilitating a full six-year scholarship program in the United States in cooperation with the Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM).
15. Dr. Samira Addrey is a 2020 graduate of the Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM). Dr. Addrey currently serves as the IFCO-ELAM Program Coordinator. As a result of her training learned from professors who finished medical missions in Venezuela, Brazil, Tanzania, Angola, South Africa, Ghana, Kuwait, Algeria and Bolivia. During her studies at ELAM, her final practical & theoretical state exam in July 2020, was evaluated by three Afro-Cuban obstetricians who had completed missions in Angola and Kuwait and were specialists in managing high risk pregnancies, particularly related to Hypertension and Diabetes.
16. Dr. Addrey is among the almost 300 United States citizens who have received full scholarships to study at ELAM. Their training has resulted in 130 graduates who are either working as attending physicians or have completed residency training in various cities throughout the United States. An additional 87 U.S. ELAM graduates work in different capacities in research, public health, and in the education sectors. These physicians work in under-resourced communities throughout the United States in inner-city and rural settings. These Cuban trained-US citizens health professionals now comprise part of the statistics which US health Professional Shortage Area (HPSAs), have recorded that 89% work in medically - underserved areas/populations (MUAs).
17. Overall, ELAM's scholarship program and its graduates are direct recipients, who demonstrate the importance of solidarity and cooperation in promoting access to education and healthcare for all, regardless of nationality. This represents a powerful example of Cuba's internationalism where the country views international cooperation as a way to help other nations achieve their own development goals and to promote greater equality and justice around the world.

(54) The first workshop on combating racial discrimination, promoted by the Cuban chapter of the Articulaci3n Regional de Afrodescendientes de Latinoam3rica y el Caribe (Regional Network of People of African Descent in Latin America and the Caribbean), was held in November 2014.

18. The Articulaci3n Regional de Afrodescendientes de Latinoam3rica y el Caribe (AFRODESC) of which Cuba is represented is an organization that works to promote the rights and interests of Afrodescendants in Latin America and the Caribbean. The first workshop on combating racial discrimination, promoted by the Cuban chapter of the Articulaci3n Regional de Afrodescendientes de Latinoam3rica y el Caribe (Regional Network of People of African Descent in Latin America and the Caribbean), was held in November 2014.
19. On October 6, 2022, IFCO Board Member, Dr. Rosemari Mealy met with leaders of Cuba's National Articulation Afrofeministas and Afrodiverso. This group is national and represents all sectors within Cuban society. The participants explained how they address issues of Cuba's racially marginalized groups. Activist-scholar leadership employs the specialties of Cubans who identify as African descendants. incorporating Sociological intervention, Youth Study Centers and has access to all of Cuba's media including the Study Center of the Cuban Institute of Radio and Television (ICRT). The Afro-descendants are carrying out actions in conjunction with the LGBTQ or Afrodiverso projects for inclusion and to combat homophobia and violence against the LGBTQ communities.
20. Between 2014-2019, Cuban scholars were granted more freely visas to travel in the United States, IFCO was a part of the many universities and grassroots organizations that assisted in sponsoring Cuban scholars, LGBTQ activists, authors and researchers. This included Dr. Gisela Arandia Covarrubia, executive head of Articulacion Regional Afrodescendiente de America Latina y el Caribe.
21. In May 2014, IFCO hosted AFRODESC founding member, Social Psychologist, Dr. Norma Guillard Limonta, who discussed with our members and supporters how Afro-Cubana feminist see themselves as a transnational phenomenon for the rights of Black Cuban Women leading the way in anti-racist and anti-sexist movements in Cuba.
22. July 19-23, 2023, IFCO will be leading a delegation of African Diasporic women in a program celebrating the second encounter of Cuba's National Articulation Afrofeministas and Afrodiverso. The program will include the participation of activists, feminists, LGBTQ, anti-racists, and academics from Cuba and other countries.
23. Moving forward, National Articulation Afrofeministas and Afrodiverso will continue to work with IFCO/Pastors for Peace to advance their shared goals. This may involve collaborating on initiatives to address issues such as racial discrimination, poverty, social inequality and advance the interests of marginalized communities in the region and our

unequivocal support for Cuba.

(56) The National Sexual Health and Education Programme, which is coordinated by the National Sex Education Centre of the Ministry of Public Health, has made it possible to develop an ongoing educational strategy to promote respect for freedom of sexual orientation and gender identity.

(57) The actions planned include educational strategies, promotion of academic work and scientific research, legal orientation services, sex therapy, care for LGBTI persons and victims of gender violence and child sexual abuse, development of community programmes and production of publications and audiovisual materials, as well as coordination of social networks, online discussions, campaigns to promote respect for freedom of sexual orientation.

24. 2020, Dr. Alex Ruiz (2021 ELAM graduate), conducted workshops promoting global solidarity and cooperation through education. ELAM students, with the support of the school, partnered with the National Center for Sex Education (CENESEX) to provide workshops focusing on LGBTQ health.

25. Dr. Ruiz described the workshops as having covered a range of topics including: sexual health, gender identity, and HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. The workshops included discussions, case studies, and role-playing exercises, raising the bar on how to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to provide culturally sensitive care to the LGBTQ who may face discrimination and marginalization.

Freedom of Religion

26. The 2019 Constitution of the Cuba sets forth the principles in relations with religions and believers and states in Article 15:

The State recognizes, respects and guarantees religious freedom. The Cuban state is secular. In the Republic of Cuba, religious institutions and fraternal associations are separate from the State and all have the same rights and duties. Different beliefs and religions enjoy equal consideration.

And in Article 57 it states:

Every person has the right to profess religious beliefs or not, to change them and to practice the religion of their choice, with due respect for others and in accordance with the law.

27. For 30+ years, IFCO/Pastors for Peace, has served as partners with Cuba's renowned Martin Luther King Center. We have been first-hand witnesses to the practice and outreach of this faith & community-based organization. We have led thousands of U.S. citizens through visits to several faith-based institutions on the Island, many of whom are active participants in Cuba's Council of Churches as well as non-Christian faith

communities such as the Jewish Temple, Muslim League of Cuba, and the Quisicuba Afro-Cuban Traditional Religious Center.

28. Associate Director of IFCO, Reverend Dorlimar Lebron Malave, led various church worship services during these caravan trips throughout the country. On a separate trip in January 2023, Executive Director, Gail Walker and Reverend Dorlimar Lebron Malave participated in the delivery of humanitarian aid to families that were displaced in the western province of Pinar del Rio by Hurricane Ian. This collection and delivery of humanitarian aid was coordinated by the Cuban Council of Churches and the Martin Luther King Center who have a network of faith-based organizations throughout the island.

Conclusions

29. Herewith we, The Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO) /Pastors for Peace, confirm with this submission to the United Nations Human Rights Commission Universal Periodic Review (UNHRC-UPR), our collective “Witness” in support of the Sovereign Nation of Cuba.