

## INTRODUCTION

1. While Vancouver Communities in Solidarity with Cuba (VCSC) has been sending members and organizers to learn first-hand from Cuba since 2005, this document will focus on the eyewitness accounts from recent trips to Cuba by some of our central organizers, specifically around PEDAGOGÍA 2023 (2023 Pedagogy Conference) which was held in Havana in January 30-February 3, 2023. Along with visits and meetings which took place surrounding this conference and another trip to the International Havana Book Fair February 9-19, 2023.

## ACCESS INFORMATION AND IDEAS & FREDDOM OF OPINION AND EXPRESSION IN CUBA

2. In relation to article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."<sup>i</sup> We note the following observations of the Cuban government's commitment to uphold and advance these fundamental human rights.
3. Since previous visits to Cuba one major improvement noticed in 2023, is access to information and communication technologies. Many Cubans have their own personal cellular phones where they can communicate with the world. Wi-Fi parks are available in many communities, and cellular data packages are also available and affordable for most Cubans.
4. While in Cuba we were able to use Cuban SIM cards which allow affordable access to data plans for Cubans and visitors to the island.
5. Since returning from recent trips to Cuba we have connected with hundreds of Cuban friends through internet-based apps and websites such as: WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Telegram. Cubans can reach out to inform the world about personal milestones, share news articles, political views, photos, videos, and much more.
6. It is clear that Cuba has strengthened internet access both for Cubans and those visiting the island nation. Cubans have access to information from around the world. Speaking with Cubans at the PEDAGOGÍA 2023 conference many were integrating new technologies into their classrooms. Educators presented videos and audio visuals to show the work their students are involved in. These were shared with other Cuban educators, as well as international educators at the conference.
7. Many international delegations attending PEDAGOGÍA 2023 brought audiovisual equipment, laptops, and other technologies to donate to their Cuban counterparts in Cuban labor unions and to Cuban educators. This equipment will be used to enhance the work of educators and prepare their students for work with technological equipment. All the Cubans we spoke with were very excited about these new opportunities in their workplaces. This relates to article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states, "Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit."<sup>ii</sup> Our eyewitness accounts show that Cuba is working to uphold and advance these fundamental human rights.
8. With the above paragraphs (#2-7) it is clear to us from our first-hand experience that Cuba is in a continuous process to implement the following recommendations from the 3rd cycle of the UPR (under the theme "D43 Freedom of opinion and expression"):
  - a. 24.180 Ensure Internet accessibility with the aim of improving the quality of education and social development (Japan); Source of position: A/HRC/39/16/Add.1 - Para. 7
  - b. 24.157 Continue to expand Internet services throughout the country, especially in households (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela); Source of position: A/HRC/39/16/Add.1 -

Para. 7

- c. 24.244 Pursue its efforts and achievements to broaden the application of information and communication technologies to activities in various sectors of economic and social life (Benin); Source of position: A/HRC/39/16/Add.1 - Para. 7

## **U.S. BLOCKADE ON CUBA LIMITING ACCESS INFORMATION AND IDEAS & FREEDOM OF OPINION AND EXPRESSION IN CUBA**

9. During the PEDAGOGÍA 2023 conference Cuban leaders and thinkers discussed the “internationalization of education.”<sup>iii</sup> We heard many Cubans discuss the importance of Cuban academic exchanges and projects, especially at a secondary and post=secondary level. In 2023, Cuba is working to pass new laws around higher education through its national parliament<sup>iv</sup>. This demonstrates Cuba’s commitment to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (quoted above in paragraph #2). In our exchanged with Cuban educators one of the main challenges to this internationalization of education, and international collaboration within the education sector, is the U.S. government’s blockade which is limiting the right of Cubans to participate in the global exchange of information and ideas.
10. The U.S. blockade on Cuba limits Cuban’s access to communication technologies such as Zoom. WeTransfer, PayPal, Eventbrite, Google Apps for Education, and GoFundMe, all of which are widely used in the United States and Canada for political organizing, cultural events, education, and academic exchanges. These companies are known to exclude Cubans from accessing their services due to U.S. government sanctions on Cuba.
11. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, one challenge to connecting with Cuba friends and allowing them to participate in our webinars and online events has been their lack of access to Zoom. This barrier is not because of the Cuban government, it is because Zoom is an U.S.-based technology which is participating in the U.S. government’s cruel and unjust blockade on Cuba. This has meant that rather than being able to participate live in webinars and meetings and to answer participants’ questions, Cuban’s have had to send pre-recorded videos. This limited their freedom of expression and ability to communicate Cuban realities with the world.
12. After years of using Eventbrite for ticketing our events, Vancouver Communities in Solidarity with Cuba had to stop using this service in 2015 because they added Cuba to their list of countries excluded from their “terms of service.”<sup>v</sup> Here we see limits on our ability to fundraise both for much needed projects in Cuba (disaster relief, medical aid, education supplies, etc.) and to send our own organizers to Cuba.

## **RIGHT TO EDUCATION IN CUBA**

13. In relation to article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states, “Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.”<sup>vi</sup> We note the following observations of Cuba’s full commitment to uphold and advance these fundamental human rights.
14. From 2017 the 3rd cycle recommendations for the UPR, under the theme “E51 Right to education – General” it is clear to us that Cuba is in a continuous process to implement the following recommendations:
  - a. 24.271 Continue ensuring universal and free access to quality education for all at different levels of education (Brunei Darussalam); Source of position: A/HRC/39/16/Add.1 - Para. 7

- b. 24.275 Continue strengthening the training and qualification of teaching personnel (Congo); Source of position: A/HRC/39/16/Add.1 - Para. 7
  - c. 24.282 Continue to promote the use of information and communications technology penetration at all levels of education and skills developments from the early age (Myanmar); Source of position: A/HRC/39/16/Add.1 - Para. 7
15. On a visit to the Vo Thi Thang primary school in Havana, we visited the computer lab used by students. This reflected other first-hand discussions with Cuban educators about the importance of preparing students for learning with technology in mind. It is clear that even at an elementary level, Cuba is working to ensure Cuban students are prepared for working with computers and understanding the possibilities and challenges it creates.
  16. Visiting with students in Havana primary and secondary schools, students were interested to practice their English and French language skills with foreign visitors. Cuban students and educators also made musical, poetic, and theatrical performances for international guests, show-casing the diversity of talent of students and educators.
  17. During the PEDAGOGÍA 2023 conference Cuban teachers presented videos demonstrating the work in their schools across Cuba to increase student learning in a diverse range of topics including: eating and growing vegetables, creating colorful toys out of recycled items, and teaching students about the importance of Cuba’s new Families Code.
  18. During the 2023 Havana Book Fair all events were freely accessible to the public. Cubans of all ages and backgrounds were welcomed and in attendance. Books ranged from children’s literature, to youth fiction, to research journals, to magazines, to adult novels, and classical novels of the Western cannon. Books were available at reasonable prices for Cuban families to encourage a love of reading. Demonstrating that education is not simply available in schools, but Cubans are encouraged to be lifelong learners.

## SUMMARY

19. Organizers of Vancouver Communities in Solidarity with Cuba (VCSC) who visited Cuba in January and February of 2023 learned through their experiences about Cuba’s full commitment to upholding human rights in their country. This report has specifically focused on the rights to education, access to information and ideas, and freedom of opinion and expression – but other areas could also have been addressed. One of the main challenges Cuban academics and educators are facing to expand their work on an international level is the U.S. blockade on Cuba.

<sup>1</sup> United Nations, “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” n.d., <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” n.d., <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

<sup>3</sup> Villavicencio Plasencia, María Victoria. 2019. «Internacionalización De La Educación Superior En Cuba. Principales Indicadores». *Economía Y Desarrollo* 162 (2). <https://revistas.uh.cu/econdesarrollo/articulo/view/1875>.

<sup>4</sup> Alina Ramos Martin and Alina Ramos Martin, “Cuba Will Have a Law for Higher Education - Prensa Latina,” *Prensa Latina*, January 6, 2023, <https://www.plenglish.com/news/2023/01/06/cuba-will-have-a-law-for-higher-education/>.

<sup>5</sup> Courtney N, “Eventbrite Terms of Service,” EventBrite, January 13, 2023, <https://www.eventbrite.ca/tos>.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations, “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” n.d., <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.