



**Community Service and Civil Society Development
Through Faith-Based Organizations in Cuba**

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Introduction

Outreach Aid to the Americas (OAA) has built a strong network of time-tested faith-based and development partners in Latin America and the Caribbean. For 24 years OAA has worked closely with its partners to strengthen civil society organizations so they can effectively manage humanitarian aid and development initiatives for vulnerable populations, including those in countries with authoritarian governments such as Cuba.

The value of faith-based organization (FBO) networks as a platform for dialogue, advocacy, and action becomes increasingly significant as the democratic space for civil society in Cuba continues to be constrained by government repression. OAA's humanitarian and relief work with FBO partners ensures that the most disadvantaged Cubans receive basic human needs assistance. OAA helps strengthen its partners to be more effective humanitarian service providers and nascent civil society organizations by building their technical capacity and providing material resources. By working with some of the most marginalized and disadvantaged FBOs in Cuba, OAA supports peaceful and positive change for a more democratic and free Cuba.

Because the Government of Cuba (GoC) suppresses civil society development, Cuban FBOs serve as one of the only links between development and relief service organizations (such as OAA and its U.S.-based FBO development partners) and Cuban communities and individuals most in need. Often these needs arise because individuals or groups encounter severe government repression when they simply attempt to practice universally recognized freedoms of expression, religion, belief, and assembly. OAA's FBO partners have proven to be dedicated and trustworthy service organizations within their communities. They have fairly and efficiently implemented OAA programs and effectively managed relief distribution financed by the USG and other donors.

The Role of FBOs in Leading Change

The religious community forms Cuba's largest and most cohesive network of independent organizations. Their size, scope, and influence give them an influential position in civil society. FBOs are trusted and respected sources of moral, intellectual, and democratic leadership able to carry out activities on a wide geographic scope, reaching populations and individuals that other groups cannot (e.g. political prisoners). Around the world, communities view FBOs as conveners capable of gathering large numbers of people from a cross section of society, and churches as platforms for meaningful discussion.

With their religious mission and organizational capability, churches and FBOs promote and advocate for human rights, freedom of religion, freedom of expression, and democratic values. They lead and facilitate dialogue for constructive, peaceful, and reconciliatory reform. These values increase their credibility with authoritarian governments such as the GoC that might otherwise feel threatened by political activists and calls for reform.

As organizations, churches and FBOs build capacity and develop skills such as leadership, communication, relationship building, organizational development, accountability, and strategic planning through capacity development programs. In addition, churches work within collaborative networks to deliver social services to at-risk vulnerable and marginalized populations that often cannot be adequately reached by the government.

As the Cuban government continues to discourage civil society NGOs and independent media through direct and indirect repression, marginalized civil society actors find they can fall back on their church affiliations as a base for solidarity and action. In the face of official GoC repression, FBOs represent the most viable civil society platform for citizens to engage in dialogue, advocacy, and social and political mobilization in Cuba today.

The Role of FBOs in Civil Society Formation

In Cuba, as in other countries where democracy is under attack, the first and last stronghold for civil society is often the religious community. In a country where the majority of citizens are people of faith, the importance of the church in the voluntary sphere is even more pronounced. According to Austen Ivereigh, “Networks of participation deepen involvement with others: most people get involved because someone they trust suggests it. While this is as true of religious as non-religious people, it is a simple fact that religion generates networks of participation that are far stronger, more lasting, and more committed than non-secular organizations are capable of.”

As such, FBO leaders--armed with their faith and trusted by their followers--are often the most outspoken and respected leaders when a government suppresses the voice of civil society. According to the UN, “Faith-based groups also have the potential to represent and reach out to those from diverse communities, including those most vulnerable to HIV, through the prism of humanity and compassion that all religions advocate. Faith, government, and civil society come together to uphold human rights and access to health for sexual minorities.”

Religion reinforces tolerance and moral discernment and highlights critical themes, such as peaceful dialogue and reconciliation, when civil society actors take on authoritarian governments. In “Civil Society and the Church,” the Mormon Church observes,

One of the great tests of a civil society is to include the unpopular, the disenfranchised, those who look or act differently. This inclusive approach requires hard work; only respectful dialogue and constructive conversations can realize the common good.... Society is knit together with strands too diverse for any one entity to manage. It takes a multitude of associations to care for a multitude. But churches bring people together in ways no other organization can. They are close to the people they serve and foster committed relationships.

FBOs often serve as a platform for social mobilization, as seen in Nicaragua’s grassroots backlash to proposed changes to the government pension scheme. Similarly, beginning in 2017, Catholic and Episcopal leaders openly supported the *movimiento campesino* against the construction of the Chinese-financed canal project that would displace up to 400,000 people. Evangelical churches in Nicaragua have also spoken out against government restrictions on their operations and ability to function as service deliverers, on electoral abuse, and on a variety of issues including the environment and advocacy for women and other vulnerable communities.

The Political Status of FBOs in Cuba

OAA has worked with Protestant and Catholic Church partners to implement development and humanitarian activities, many of which were funded by the U.S. Government (notably USAID, DRL, and NED). Certain FBOs are selected as partners, depending on the project, for strategic reasons. For

example, OAA's current USAID humanitarian project network of Baptist Convention partners (estimated to be the largest Protestant denomination) was chosen because it is completely independent from the government.

Cuban churches fall into three categories based on their relationship with the GoC:

- 1) The most politically privileged category of churches includes those registered by the GoC and members of the Cuba Council of Churches (CCC). They consist of 51 smaller churches and centers, including, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Orthodox, Yogas, and break-offs of the Protestant, Reformed, and Evangelical denominations. The CCC is managed by the GoC. While its claimed intent is to support freedom of religion, in reality it serves to monitor and repress its members and other churches. The council's ties to the GoC, the Communist Party, and the GoC Office of Religious Affairs (recently renamed the Department of Religious Affairs) give its members relatively more flexibility to carry out religious activities and church-sponsored community services without complete government interference when compared to non-CCC churches. The GoC often allows members' social service programs to receive educational, financial, and material support from sister organizations in the U.S.
- 2) The second category consists of 24 non-CCC member denominations registered with the government, such as the Catholic Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Jewish community. In general, these churches are more scrutinized and repressed than CCC members, but they do benefit from registration.
- 3) The third category, the most repressed by the government, is comprised of unregistered churches and denominations, all considered illegal by the GoC. It includes Evangelical churches and non-Christian faiths (such as Muslim and Buddhist) and Santeria syncretic faiths. Churches in this category, including Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Latter Day Saints (the Mormon Church), and the Assemblies of God, are subject to extreme repressive government interference, church closings and destruction, confiscation of goods, and detention and imprisonment of leaders and members.

After years of repression, expropriation of properties and expulsion of clergy, the Catholic Church (category 2) is now considered Cuba's strongest institution after the government itself. The estimated number of Cubans who identify as Catholic range from 40 to 60 percent, while about 5 percent identify as Protestants. The strength of the Catholic Church has been evident in the visits of the last three popes and their influence on Fidel and Raul Castro that facilitated a number of key reforms. Today, the Catholic Church is allowed to operate a national network of schools, childcare centers, and hospitals. The leading Catholic charity in Cuba, Caritas, operates from a national office in Havana and through 11 dioceses and 600 parish and community centers. With over 40 full-time staff and a network of 12,000 volunteers providing community services, it receives support through the international NGO Catholic Relief Services, which has distributed over \$32 million in relief and medical assistance since 1993.

OAA has partnered with several churches in Cuba over the last 24 years, including Catholic and Protestant churches. However, OAA's current USG-funded humanitarian relief program is implemented through its large network of independent Baptist churches and a Cuban Evangelical denomination called Los Pinos Nuevos, which are, due to the repressive environment, among the most disadvantaged and needy of churches (category 3). All members of OAA's network are independent of the CCC and represent about 70% of the protestant community. OAA also works with various Catholic bishops in five provinces as well as the Pentecostal persecuted churches.

The GoC and the Communist Party, which for decades espoused atheism as official government policy for all Cubans, continue to maintain a façade of religious freedom while controlling religious belief and

practice through bureaucratic manipulation and extra-legal administrative instructions to police and courts that usurp constitutional law.

USG Policy regarding Freedom of Religion in Cuba

Current U.S. Government policy regarding religious freedom in Cuba is broadly based. The overall mission is to promote peaceful, democratic changes and respect for human rights, including freedom of religion, and encourage the development of civil society, including strengthening religious institutions. The U.S. Embassy in Havana maintains regular contact with various religious leaders and communities in the country and supports nongovernmental organization initiatives that aid religious groups. The USG regularly facilitates the issuance of licenses for travel by religious persons and permits for donated goods and materials provided to religious institutions. The U.S. Embassy voices concerns about human rights, including religious discrimination and harassment, to Cuban government officials (such concerns are routinely dismissed). The U.S. Embassy reports on cases of religious discrimination and harassment, and the USG continues to put international pressure on the Cuban government to cease its repressive practices.

USG Strategy and Rules for FBO Involvement

OAA's objective in Cuba is to provide humanitarian relief and development assistance to all needy individuals, regardless of religious affiliation. OAA both supports and is guided by the USG Strategy on Religious Leaders and Faith Community Involvement that outlines three key objectives regarding foreign assistance:

- 1) *"Promote sustainable development and more effective humanitarian assistance.* Religious leaders and FBOs often serve as decision-makers at the community level and oversee development and humanitarian efforts in their communities. By working in partnership with such leaders and designing programs with the religious context in mind, U.S. foreign assistance efforts can become more effective and sustainable.
- 2) *Advance pluralism and human rights, including the protection of religious freedom.* Building on current initiatives, the Administration will increase efforts to engage a diverse spectrum of religious leaders on the advancement of universal human rights, promoting core U.S. values like respect for the human rights of members of minority and marginalized groups, pluralism, tolerance, and sensitivity to and respect for the beliefs and traditions of others; and
- 3) *Prevent, mitigate, and resolve violent conflict and contribute to local and regional stability and security.* In its efforts to break cycles of violent conflict and mitigate crises, the USG will work with religious leaders to address both religious and non-religious causes of violence and support their ongoing initiatives to build peaceful societies."

The Strategy on Religious Leaders and Faith Community Involvement also states that "the USG will: (1) build USG capacity and the capacity of international partners to engage religious leaders and faith communities through increased guidance and training; (2) institutionalize USG efforts by embedding religious leader engagement in policy and practice; and (3) further develop and improve USG exchanges and dialogues with religious leaders. U.S. officials will ensure that engagement efforts are: consistent with the U.S. Constitution and other laws; sensitive to local culture and beliefs; inclusive of a wide range of religious and non-religious actors; and mindful of the independence and credibility of the counterparts that are engaged."

To meet these requirements under its USG-funded projects, OAA and its sub-partners comply with USAID guidance referred to as the Rule for Participation by Religious Organizations first issued in 2004 and amended in 2016. The Rule implements USAID regulations in furtherance of Executive Order 13279, Equal Protection of the Laws for Faith-Based and Community Organizations (FBCOs) and Executive Order 13559, Fundamental Principles and Policymaking Criteria for Partnerships with Faith-Based and Other Neighborhood Organizations. EO 13279 is a guide for all federal agencies in formulating and developing policies with implications for faith-based organizations and other community organizations to ensure equal protection under the law.

The Rule generally ensures that FBCOs can compete fairly for USAID funding, and that USAID programming decisions are based on the program eligibility criteria without regard to the religious character or affiliation of applicants. Moreover, although FBOs may not use direct USAID funds for explicitly religious activities, including activities such as worship, religious instruction, or proselytizing, they may continue to engage in religious activities if the activities are separate in time or location from the USAID programs or services. Participation must be voluntary for beneficiaries of the programs or services funded with such assistance. OAA routinely reviews its FBO sub-partner implementation to ensure full compliance with this legal guidance.

Examples of Successful FBO initiatives in Cuba

Cuban FBOs have carved out a constructive space in Cuban society and exhibit a reliable convening capacity with promising results. FBOs demonstrate day-to-day commitment to a wide array of social service projects; this steadfast work grants them respect and recognition as a positive force in Cuban society.

The religious community represents the largest, most cohesive independent network of organizations in Cuba. FBOs have the capacity to:

- Carry out activities in a wide geographic scope
- Exercise the convening power to reach and gather large numbers of people
- Directly reach populations and groups that other organizations cannot access (e.g. prisoners)
- Support and rely on capable professionals within different spheres of society such as the arts, academia, journalism, the media, medicine, the law, etc.

Current and proposed Cuban FBOs initiatives aim to accomplish goals and objectives such as the following:

- ✓ Provide social services and humanitarian aid programs to at-risk vulnerable and marginalized populations:
 - Distribute post-hurricane and other disaster relief assistance
 - Operate community kitchens
 - Distribute food door-to-door to elderly people
 - Provide nursery programs for working mothers
 - Provide transportation for elderly and disabled people
 - Obtain medical supplies and operate private pharmacies
 - Operate first aid facilities (*consultorios*)

- ✓ Build capacity and develop skills:
 - Conduct after-school ethics, civic, and moral values programs for youth
 - Conduct night courses for adults in language and history
 - Provide training for self-employment
 - Offer seminary courses on democracy, freedom of religion, and social responsibility
 - Hold after-school enrichment programs for children
 - Implement entrepreneurial initiatives to generate economic opportunity (*Cuentrapropistas*)
 - Operate libraries and book exchanges

- ✓ Promote and advocate for human rights, freedom of religion, freedom of expression, and democratic values:
 - Publish and distribute newsletters, blogs, and other publications to foster freedom of expression and religious freedom
 - Screen films exploring complex moral and ethical issues and conduct post-film discussions
 - Facilitate freedom advocate projects, including dialogue, debate, forums
 - Provide guest speakers for forums and international events
 - Deliver journalism training and activities (*Reporteros Comunitarios*)
 - Monitor and report religious freedom violations

- ✓ Promote networking and collaboration:
 - Sponsor and conduct competitive sporting events
 - Conduct music concerts and events
 - Provide clowns and mimes for parks
 - Support university student clubs in the arts, culture, and history
 - Support arts and festival projects to foster free expression such as public mural painting
 - Produce and distribute films, videos, and other multi-media projects to develop individual and community values

Conclusion

Faith-Based Organizations play a crucial role in community service delivery, civil society development, and political reform that advances democracy in Cuba. With deep roots in their communities, local FBOs distribute relief (often provided by U.S. FBOs), advocate for marginalized people, and build community. U.S. government policy recognizes, validates, and utilizes these strengths and supports U.S. and Cuban FBO involvement in USG aid programs without discrimination. Developing long-term partnerships with FBOs is a highly effective strategy for championing basic human rights in an oppressive environment.

Continued engagement with FBOs is essential to the future of freedom in Cuba. With a solid foundation of faith-based values, FBOs demonstrate a strong commitment to integrity, inclusion, outreach, and service. Their proven track record demonstrates their capability to facilitate social service programs, community building programs, and democracy and human rights programs in a sphere totally separate from their own religious activities. FBOs provide a vital civil society platform for Cuban citizens to engage in dialogue, advocacy, and social and political mobilization. Supporting FBOs fundamentally supports the ultimate agents of grassroots change: the people, families, and communities of Cuba.