

## **Oxfam International in Cuba**

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Oxfam International began working in Cuba in 1993, in response to the Cuban government call for international assistance after the crisis caused by the fall of the Soviet Union. Oxfam is currently implementing a program with a budget of approximately US\$1.4 Million per year. We have projects in nine provinces, primarily located in the eastern part of the country focused on four priority areas: sustainable agricultural production, capacity-building for emergency situations, participation and active citizenship, and gender equality. As in most countries where we work, Oxfam works through local partner organizations in Cuba.

Oxfam uses a rights-based framework for all of our programming and campaigning around the world. In 2000, we adopted 5 overarching aims to express these rights in practical terms through our work. These aims are: the right to a sustainable livelihood, the right to basic social services, the right to life and security, the right to be heard, and the right to an identity. The rights-based approach is rooted in our belief that social justice can be obtained by human action and political will. Poverty and powerlessness result from structural conditions that inhibit people from the ability to exercise their basic human rights. Our work, therefore, is centered on creating opportunities and strengthening capacities for people to participate in decision making on the political, economic, social and cultural practices that affect their lives. We carry this out through programming that supports grassroots change, political advocacy, and public education campaigning. All of this work seeks to link local initiatives to national and international efforts for long-term, sustainable change.

Cuba offers unique lessons and opportunities for strengthening social justice and welfare. It provides exemplary models in several of Oxfam's strategic goals, most notably on emergency preparedness and the provision of essential social services. We recognize the advancements made in working toward food sovereignty, in developing strong emergency prevention, preparedness and mitigation systems, and in passing policies that promote gender and racial equality. We remain concerned, however, by limits in people's rights of association, by the blurry line between state actor and non-governmental organization. Civil society is a key change agent in any country. Independent NGO status in Cuba is a variety of shades of gray, raising questions as to how effectively NGOs can push an autonomous agenda. As change gradually takes place in Cuba, it will be important for new thought to emerge on local development. NGOs should have a role in shaping changes in economic policy, decentralization, and sustainability. They can provide insight into challenges of growing inequality and instability. In order to do this, they need to be able to strengthen their capacity to produce and communicate independent thought. This can happen by increased contact internationally to exchange learning, by improving organizational development including funding diversification, and by carrying out a more rigorous research and proposal design agenda.

Oxfam and other international NGOs have an important role in strengthening Cuban voices working for change, and providing links to learning opportunities outside the island. In other

countries of the Central America, Mexico and Caribbean region, our overall strategy is based on movement building. We support local organizations with both an insider and outsider approach to maintain open dialogue with decision makers, while promoting a rights-based agenda. It is at times supportive and at times confrontational. We should continue this strategy of critical allies in Cuba now more than ever.