

Ford Foundation Grants During Transitions to Democracy

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The Ford Foundation grant-making during transitions to democracy has not traditionally supported social justice.

Through its offices in Mexico, Santiago, Rio de Janeiro, New York, Johannesburg, Moscow, Beijing, and Hanoi since the 1980's The Ford Foundation has played an important, albeit, modest role in transitions to democratic rule in South and Central America, South Africa and Eastern Europe and is now working to advance democratic ideals in China and Vietnam.

From 1980-1995 the most important years of the third democratization wave, the international side of the Ford Foundation did not address issues of social justice except those relating to higher education, population, reproductive and women rights and natural resources management.

Its international programs in those areas going through liberalization and transition to democracy processes, the Foundation pursued five basic strategies:

- Human Rights and rule of law promotion
- Strengthening local capacities and civil society
- Fellowships and scholarships to study social sciences broadly defined
- Academic exchanges
- Participation of foreign academics in area studies research projects

Examples of specific actions:

1. During the military coups in Brazil in 1964 and Chile in 1973 coup Foundation staff was instrumental helping its grantees flee the country and put together a scholarship program that allowed many Latin American intellectuals to pursue graduate studies. In one way or another public intellectuals such as Fernando Henrique Cardoso two term Brazilian President, José Miguel Insulza, currently OAS Secretary General, and Heraldo Muñoz, Chile's Ambassador to the UN.
2. Supporting Vicaría de la Solidaridad in Chile, Oficina de Tutela Legal in El Salvador, the the Archbishop's Human Rights Office in Guatemala. The Helsinki Committees began as Helsinki Watch groups. The first one was founded in the Soviet Union in 1976 the second in 1977 in Czechoslovakia, the third in 1979 in Poland. In 1982, representatives of several of these committees held an International Citizens Helsinki Watch Conference and founded the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights headquartered in Vienna. The IHF was forced to close last year, as a result of a massive fraud.

3. Support for the first public opinion surveys carried out at the Jesuit Universities in El Salvador (UCA) on electoral preferences, support for different types of institutions, threat perceptions, etc. Father Ignacio Martín Baró IUDOP's founder and first director was one of the five Jesuits murdered by the Salvadoran Armed Forces in the early morning hours on November 16, 1989.
4. Funding research on public policies, local government, microenterprise, at Nitlapán a research center of the Jesuit University in Nicaragua
5. Establishing graduate scholarships for black South Africans
6. Supporting transitional justice projects and supporting truth commissions.
7. Training Chinese, Vietnamese decision makers in market economies, international relations, negotiations, etc.

Concerning Cuba more specifically, the grant making has been a combination of opportunities and programs.

From 1975 to 1996 the Foundation grant making relating to Cuba had two legs:

- Supporting advocacy efforts aimed at ending the economic embargo until the Helm Burton Act was voted following the downing of the Brothers for the rescue planes allegedly overflying illegally Cuban airspace. Clearly not a very successful line of work.
- The other leg of the grant making was supporting “academic exchanges” between the University of Havana, the Cuban Academy of Science, and U.S. higher education institutions –Johns Hopkins, Georgetown, City University of New York, Latin American Studies Association, and the Social Science Research Council. A few joint research projects in marine biology were developed with U.S. based environmental organizations.

Concerning social justice, in 1995 adopted a world wide double prang strategy to promote social justice:

- Through the promotion of human rights in its broadest definition (civil political, economic, social and cultural) and strengthening civil society organizations particularly at the grass roots level.
- Building assets among underprivileged communities: micro finance, access to credit, natural resource management, cooperatives.

Not lines of work traditionally favored by the Cuba authorities.

In recent years as the philanthropic sector in the U.S. --and international cooperation in general-- has become more strategic by focusing resources in predetermined lines of work and establishing priorities, it has by the same token lost flexibility. Additionally, respect for human rights has become a sine qua non condition for aid and cooperation.

The main challenge to create a body of work has been to avoid as far as possible the pitfalls of the U.S.-Cuba “dialogue of the deaf” by developing pragmatic strategies that would be in line with Foundation priorities, but would at the same time acceptable for the Cuban authorities:

- be very careful with “coded” language such as civil society, third sector, NGOs, human rights; etc;
- put Cuba’s problems within a regional framework and encourage comparative approaches as often as possible;
- and seek collaboration with institutions in countries that have better relationships with Cuba (e.g. Canada, Spain, and Sweden).
- It was assumed that dialogue through the cultural and scientific realms would be easier and would also provide a useful channel to advance freedom of expression on the island.
- Finally, it was also assumed that the reconciliation within the Cuban community would allow for the constructive participation of the Cuban American community in future Cuban life which is desirable.

Conclusion:

The U.S. economic embargo, the end of soviet subsidies, the establishment of two economies one based on the Cuban peso and the other on the dollar or the current convertible CUC, and specific political choices made by the Cuban authorities such as the implementation of an aggressive medical diplomacy, have seriously deteriorated the safety net that had become the trade mark of the Revolution’s commitment to social justice:

- Teachers are scarce –the teachers prefer to work in the dollar economy
- Doctors and other health care personnel are abroad—most of them in Venezuela, but also in Bolivia, all of Central America, Mexico, Haiti, South Africa and many other places
- While the number of older people increases rapidly, pensions are paid in pesos and very poor

- The food acquired under the libreta does not cover the minimum nutritional requirements, anemia is rampant and malnutrition is increasing among the youngest and the oldest
- Social and economic inequality is increasing rapidly

Cuba most likely will not have to go through the trauma of economic shock therapy (for those not familiar with the term, shock therapy refers to the sudden release of price and currency controls, withdrawal of state subsidies, and immediate trade liberalization within a country, usually also including large scale privatization of previously public owned assets), but through a more gradual reconversion from a state run economy towards a market economy, however it is safe to assume that the Cuban safety net will continue to deteriorate, and that the economy will take several years to grow enough to support an advanced one. Massive amounts of international cooperation will be needed in order to maintain the standards of living that the Cuban population aspires to.