

Why Cuba does not have an anti-vaccine movement

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Increasingly, large sectors of the European population, and in the US to a lesser extent, openly express their distrust towards their government's policies to combat COVID-19. The reaction of the traditional policy is one of panic and is characterized by paternalism and repression: general obligation to vaccinate and restricting freedom of movement. This is not the way to build support among the population. This will require, at the very least, listening to the fears and concerns of the

unvaccinated. But there are other elements at play as well. The comparison with Cuba is interesting.

Distrust in the government

Many unvaccinated people rightly doubt the competence and/or good faith of their governments that now want to vaccinate everyone as soon as possible. It is not so incomprehensible.

European countries have been improvising since March 2020. There is no uniformity or logic in policies to attack the COVID-19 pandemic. With similar contagion rates the measures differ greatly from one country to another.

In Belgium, where I live, as in other countries in Europe, the improvisation was incomprehensible. The Belgian government waited until mid-March before taking action. That was a month and a half too late. If they had taken action earlier, the rate of spread would have been much lower and thousands of deaths from COVID-19 would have been avoided. And they don't seem to learn from their mistakes. The response to each new wave of COVID-19 comes too late.

Although experts had been warning about it for years, the Belgian government was not prepared for a pandemic. At first it said that the masks were useless, because they were not (yet) available due to mismanagement. Then, suddenly, they became mandatory.

In September 2021 the measures were relaxed in Belgium with worse figures, while in the Netherlands they were tightened with better figures. How does one explain that? In Belgium seven health ministers have to agree in order to implement a new policy. At the same time, governors and mayors introduce stricter or more permissive rules and party presidents polish their image at the expense of public health.

When that distrust reaches the streets and social networks, the far right just has to stick the ball upside down. They attract to their side those who are legitimately disgruntled just by showing empathy with their distrust of the government. Their goal, of course, is not to demand more democracy for the voiceless. History teaches us why the goal of the far right is to hasten the formation of an authoritarian regime that will completely shut out these people and push to the extreme the exploitation of everything and everyone by the 1%.

The anti-COVID-19 measures in many European countries were and still are a huge chaos. But, in reality, the distrust is much deeper. In the previous big crisis, the banking crisis of 2008, it was also the citizens who paid the price. The banks that had speculated with our money got away with it and were saved. And we ordinary people paid the bill. It is obvious, and for good reason, there is such distrust in the government's ability to manage a crisis.

And in Cuba?

As early as January 2020, almost two months before the politicians in Europe got into action, the Cuban government launched a national plan to combat the coronavirus. Massive information campaigns were launched in working-class neighborhoods and on television. There were no contradictory governments, no seven health ministers who had to agree, and no discussions about mandatory masks.

The government acted decisively and did everything possible to nip the virus in the bud. No easy promises saying that we were going to regain the 'kingdom of freedom' thanks to vaccines, no letting go of the reins too quickly, due to electoral motives or lack of political courage, but firm measures. Here are some examples. Tourism, the main source of income but also of contagion, was stopped immediately. Children from the age of six are obliged to wear masks. When it became clear that schools were also important foci of contagion, Cuba switched to home education, with very

good support from school television, among other things.

“By properly informing the population about health risks, Cubans understand the importance of staying at home. They know how the disease is transmitted, and they take responsibility for their own health and that of their relatives and neighbors,” says Aissa Naranjo, a physician in Havana.

Health care in Cuba focuses mainly on prevention and is highly decentralized. Each neighborhood has its own polyclinic and there is a strong bond of trust between the local population and health personnel. Since March 2020 almost 30,000 ‘contact tracers’ have gone door to door, to the farthest corners of the island, to check each family to see if one of its members was infected. University students were mobilized to assist in this screening. In Belgium, the detection was carried out by anonymous people in call centers, which does not exactly inspire confidence.

In the meantime, everything was focused on the development of vaccines against the coronavirus. In March 2021, three vaccines were already in the testing phase. Cuba currently has five vaccines of its own, one of them for children as young as two years old.

The differences in COVID policies between Cuba and Belgium are also reflected in the figures. In Cuba there were 146 COVID-19 deaths at the end of 2020. In Belgium, with the same number of inhabitants, the figure was almost 20,000. That was before the Delta variant. Cuba did not arrive in time. Its own vaccines were only finished three months after the Delta variant began to proliferate. Rapid vaccination in Belgium, starting in late 2020, has significantly reduced the number of deaths caused by the Delta variant, at least in the early stages.

In Cuba the Delta variant actually arrived too early; there were no vaccines at the time. The peak of infection occurred in July. This caused many deaths and shook the health system. This precarious health situation added to the severe economic

problems resulting from the U.S. economic blockade, loss of tourism and rising food prices. As a result, there was much discontent among the people. Through social networks, an attempt was made from the United States to stir up this discontent and channel it into protests. The attempt ended up failing.

Once the vaccination campaign began in Cuba, the results were spectacular. On September 20, at the beginning of the campaign, there were still more than 40,000 new infections and 69 deaths daily. Today there are around 60 new infections and one death per day. In Cuba, children from the age of two are also vaccinated. On December 2, 90% of Cubans had received their first dose. This is the second highest percentage in the world, after the United Arab Emirates, and the highest in Latin America. In Belgium we are at 75%.

Distrust of big pharma

Many unvaccinated people in Europe find it suspicious that the government provides vaccines free of charge. They have to pay more and more for other drugs. Health care costs patients more and more every year and now suddenly we all “have” to get vaccinated for free. Is there nothing behind it? Does it make you a conspiracy theorist if you ask this question?

People know that big pharma only looks at profits and does not always take people's safety seriously. Between 1940 and 1980 millions of expectant mothers took DES (diethylstilbestrol) against miscarriages and in the 1960s they were prescribed Softenon against the dizziness of pregnancy. These decisions produced thousands of deformed babies. In the United States, Purdue Pharma, owned by the wealthy Sackler family, until recently sold the potent painkiller OxyContin, knowing full well that it is highly addictive.

Purdue is responsible for the deaths of thousands of Americans and the addiction of millions. Fentanyl, invented by Paul Janssen of the Belgian pharmaceutical giant of

the same name (now part of Johnson & Johnson), is also a highly addictive painkiller that was freely available in the United States and heavily promoted. Johnson&Johnson was convicted of liability in this case.

People also know that pharmaceutical companies are charging too high prices for their COVID-19 vaccines and are heavily subsidized by the government, but are allowed to keep billions in profits. When these same companies then say that another booster shot is needed, this understandably arouses suspicion, even if the need is scientifically correct.

What about Cuba?

There is no private pharmaceutical industry in Cuba. All vaccines against COVID-19 are manufactured by government-owned biomedical laboratories. Eighty percent of the vaccines used in the country's vaccination programs are manufactured domestically. You won't find outrageous prices or usurious profits there

From infancy, the entire population is vaccinated against a range of diseases, just as here in Europe. This is one of the main factors behind the very rapid increase in life expectancy in Cuba in recent decades. Life expectancy in Cuba is higher than in the United States and infant mortality is lower. In recent months it has been shown that vaccines are also very effective. So it is not surprising that any Cuban person not only trusts his or her national pharmaceutical companies, but is proud of them.

Distrust in science

Real science and pseudoscience are often used to advertise all sorts of things here in Europe: food supplements, perfect diapers, hair growth products, supersonic cell phones.... As a result science has lost much of its status for many people. Frequent research and large-scale frauds (think dieselgate) make people even more suspicious.

In addition, many people leave secondary or higher education without being able to understand statistics or their representation in articles. “There are as many vaccinated people as unvaccinated people in the hospital, aren’t there?” All this explains why large groups of people are attracted to obscure theories or at least want to take them seriously because they think “they” are trying to make us believe something. That “they” want to force us to comply with a number of things: COVID passport, vaccinations, etc. “They” is, then, an amalgam of politicians, experts and the media.

And in Cuba?

In Cuba people face professional publicity only very sporadically. Science reaches people through education -of high quality- and non-commercial media. Even before the first infection, it was explained to all Cubans on television what COVID-19 is, how the pandemic developed worldwide, what can be done about it and, consequently, what measures were to be taken.

The Cuban population knows that their scientists are working for the common good of their country. The population sees it almost every year, for example, in the preventive evacuations of towns and cities in hurricane paths, drawn by the best meteorologists in the world. It saw how HIV was quickly contained with a strong commitment to prevention, how dengue and Zika are treated in a scientific, efficient and transparent manner, resulting in a minimum number of victims.

Distrust in solidarity

Effective pandemic management presupposes solidarity. The majority of the population, who personally have little to fear from the disease, must show solidarity with minorities of (very) old and physically weak people. Vaccination is important for a normal man or woman, and also for children, to reduce the circulation of the virus in the community as soon as possible in favor of the weakest. Most people – also in

Europe – consider that a sufficient reason to participate. This also applies to compliance with safety measures.

It is really surprising that there are not more people in Europe saying, “I am healthy and strong enough, I don’t need a vaccine, the rest has to do their own thing.” The whole commercial and neoliberal culture here reminds people on a daily basis of their duty to develop, to do better and better in life, i.e. to

become richer. The ideal is absolute autonomy, not to depend on others; much less on the ‘State’, otherwise one is a freeloader. The unions are then seen as the protectors of these ‘freeloaders’. The State must be degreased, social and health care must be cut back. This is not exactly a culture that fosters solidarity.

And in Cuba?

Cubans are not in a situation of competition or ‘every man for himself’. The Cuban population knows from experience that only together can they face the country’s great challenges. Overcoming problems together is what they are used to, unfortunately today more than ever. Helping neighbors, cleaning the neighborhood together, holding meetings and making decisions together in the workplace, etc., is their way of life.

Solidarity is part of their DNA. For decades they have been sending doctors, nurses and teachers to the rest of the world. A small country of eleven million inhabitants, with ten times less resources than Belgium, sent doctors to fight COVID as far away as Italy.

This attitude and way of life is another reason why there are few or no anti vaccine people in Cuba.`

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