‘Cuban - European NGO collaboration: international cooperation with the island during the Special Period,’

By Alexander I. Gray

Introduction

1. Background
   1.1 The 1990s Economic Crisis
   1.2 External Dimension Affecting Cuba

2. Traditional Priorities, New Approaches
   2.1 The Traditional Actors: Mass Organisations
   2.2 The New Actors: NGOs
   2.3 Factors Shaping the Evolution of Cuban Civil Society

3. Concluding Remarks

References
Interviews
Appendix I

---

1 An earlier version of this article was previously published in Spanish as, ‘¿Solidaridad o Cooperación?: Vínculos entre ONGs cubanas y europeas, prioridades tradicionales y nuevos enfoques,’ in Inés Gómez and Julia González (editors), Latinoamérica y Europa: La Educación superior ante los retos de la Cooperación internacional. EDIW, Brussels, Belgium (2005).

2 Marie Curie Intra-European Post-Doctorate Fellow, affiliated with the European Doctoral Programme ‘Migration and Conflict in the Global Society,’ Area of Anthropology, Universidad de Deusto, Spain. Email: aian@fice.deusto.es.
Introduction
The purpose of this article is to achieve an understanding of the nature of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Cuba and to highlight aspects of the collaboration that has occurred between Cuban and European NGOs. The motivation for undertaking this study is to begin the process of filling the gap in information with respect to Cuba's NGO community and to get a sense of the circumstances under which international cooperation is carried out on the island. This article constitutes the preliminary findings of an interdisciplinary study of the role of NGOs operating within the context of a revolutionary socialist society. The article begins with essential background to understanding the reasons European NGOs entered Cuba in the 1990s.

1. Background
1.1 The 1990s Economic Crisis
The economic crisis of the 1990s changed Cuba fundamentally. Taking a general view of the scale of the crisis reveals the extent to which society had to adapt to accommodate to adverse and sweeping economic transformations. Accompanying these were the visible tensions and competition between government policies and the requirements of market forces. In the absence of trade with the Soviets, Cuba was suddenly more vulnerable than ever before to international neoliberal market forces. Trade with the Soviets, which accounted for eighty percent of all Cuban trade, disappeared, practically overnight. The implications of the loss of such trade were extremely unfavourable for the Cuban economy. As a result, GDP plummeted by about one third, personal consumption declined rapidly, and black market, employment, and emigration problems escalated. Issues of ideological, economic, and security concern became particularly vulnerable. Castro announced that the country would experience an adjustment period that was 'special in a time of peace.' This came to be popularly known as the Special Period. There was a call for public support in implementing austerity measures, such as rationing, in an effort to maintain Cuba's egalitarian division of (now scarce) resources. Castro and ordinary Cubans alike had little choice but to put ideology aside while searching out solutions to immediate problems. The 1990s were not to be a time for the continued 'building of the Revolution,' rather they would be dedicated to protecting the 'gains of the Revolution,' so as to ensure the continued survival of social advances, especially in the fundamental pillars of the Revolution: education, nutrition and healthcare. In all of this, civil society would play a fundamental role, the grassroots reaction of Cubans, and
their individual and organised forms to combat the island’s new difficulties. This article deals with civil society and reactions to the tumultuous 1990s, and it does this in such a way as to highlight the dynamism and versatility of the (often authoritative) state and the creativity (and not always subordinate attitudes) of ordinary Cubans.

The economic reforms put into place to deal with larger economic transformations brought about a ‘crisis of change’ felt at all levels of society from the state down to the individual. The sudden and unexpected nature of the reforms caught the country by surprise and left many reeling as they struggled to comprehend the significance of the country’s new economic condition. At the macro level, there was the rapid emergence of mixed and private enterprise, and at both the macro and micro levels the dollar became the most significant currency for everyday transactions. This period ushered in Cuba’s reinsertion into the world economy and the adoption of certain market mechanisms in the national economy, mechanisms that might well have been previously avoided due to their association with market-led economies. The emergence of a layer of petty entrepreneurs in an otherwise state-led economy, and the activities, economic dynamics and social objectives associated with this layer, contradict the socialist direction in which the Cuban economy is still firmly steered towards. This brings to the forefront the tensions between an economy based on mercantilist principles of personal gain and one based on socialist principles of solidarity and the greater good of society as a whole. At the same time, the dollarization of the Cuban economy, and the ensuing inequalities in and importance of access to the dollar became more and more apparent. Purchasing power became the decisive factor in the acquisition of goods and services, providing increased social influence, and arguably importance, to those who excelled in the newly emerging economy.

What have such strong economic changes meant at the local level? In short, the significance of the formal economy, which has been historically important to the individual, was replaced by the informal economy. The state’s inability to satisfy the needs of the population, through rationing or otherwise, resulted in a mushrooming of black market and other related informal or ‘illegal’ activities. Cubans quickly became accustomed to what became commonly known as resolviendo, or resolving shortages or a lack of goods or services through means outside the state apparatus. The patterns of local economic life were altered. Some opted to take advantage of the opportunities
offered by the new economy and opened paladares (private restaurants) or casas particulares (guest houses). It might be noted that both of these options work at the formal and informal levels as license and taxation requirements for these private sector activities are stringent and costly. Others chose to engage in jineterismo or hustling to resolve their daily needs. Covering a broad spectrum of activity, and being carried out by both men and women, jineterismo may involve anything from hustling tourists to outright prostitution. While the presence of jineteros has been exaggerated by some media and academics, it is unquestionable that their presence grew significantly throughout the Special Period. This growth was especially noticeable as Cuba boasted a near absence of hustling during the pre-1990 period.

In 1985 Cuba might have been one of the most egalitarian societies in the world. Nonetheless, by the 1990s the State found it increasingly difficult to maintain this policy and inequalities started to re-emerge for the first time since the beginning of the Revolution. This situation was particularly unsettling for Cuban youth as for three generations they had grown up under the watchful eye of the state, and the idea of the state no longer being able to respond to their needs seemed for them an impossibility. The state legalised the holding of foreign currencies and soon access to the dollar became an important method of solving daily needs. All Cubans were now permitted, and arguably encouraged, to shop at the state-run diplotiendas where all products are sold in dollars. As the quantity of goods available on the libreta (ration book) began to diminish those without access to dollars found their standard of living diminish. This was especially true for the vulnerable segment of the population, including the elderly who became reliant on the assistance of family and friends as state provisions could no longer cover all their needs.

1.2 External Dimension Affecting Cuba

Prior to the 1990s the external context defined Cuba. Cold War politics and the increasing drive of European governments towards neoliberal social, economic, and political policies were factors with which the island had to come to terms. The ongoing struggle against aggressive US imperialism and Gorbachev's moves to put Cuba's relations with the Soviet Bloc on commercial footings were particularly deterministic in prescribing the country's behaviour. Cuba previously enjoyed a special relationship with the Soviets due to its geo-strategic importance. The strong link between the two helped
create in the international community’s psyche an image of Cuba, a perception from outside that played a major role in how Cuba was perceived and how it perceived itself within the context of, inter alia, international affairs. To a large extent, the success of the Revolution was circumscribed by the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the US. Nonetheless, by the mid-1980s this and other aspects of the traditionally close relationship between the two ideologically aligned nations were on the downturn.

The disintegration of the Soviet Bloc and the simultaneous tightening of the US embargo combined to create unfavourable conditions for the prospects of the Revolution’s survival. The role of these two actors is especially relevant as before the 1990s the external context, that is, relations with the Soviet Union and the constant fight against US imperialism, defined Cuba, and afterwards the absence of the Soviet relationship and the heightening of US pressures combined to bring about fundamental internal changes. Much energy went into resisting pressure from without. Economic alliances aside, the dissolution of the Soviet Bloc signalled the loss of an ideological ally, not so much a point of reference as a companion in solidarity.

Identifying Cuba’s economic weakness in the 1990s, the US moved quickly and decisively to increase its stranglehold over the island’s economy. Some examples include: the so-called Cuban Democracy Act (1992), the main element of which made it illegal for foreign subsidiaries of US firms to trade with Cuba; the Helms-Burton Act (1996), the most controversial aspect of which is a provision which allows US citizens to sue foreign firms and individuals who ‘traffic’ in their properties which were nationalised by the Cuban government; USAID’s 1997 report, Support for Democratic Transition in Cuba, offers provision of financial and other assistance to the dissident elements of civil society; and more recently the US President’s Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, headed by Secretary of State, Colin Powell, issued a 500 page report containing harsh recommendations that were immediately (June 2004) adopted as official US policy. Support for the “pro-democracy” movement (i.e., forces trying to undermine the Revolution) increased from seven million to thirty-six million dollars. Funding will go towards the training, development and empowerment of a Cuban “democratic opposition and civil society.” The island’s leading dissident, Osvaldo Payá, met this particular measure with disappointment on the basis that this ‘support’ went too far and will only make their work more difficult.
Usually the new context is seen in terms of pressure on Cuba to change, which in turn has the effect of leading to Cuban resistance to change. However, it is more complex than this; we might consider the example of civil society and the notion of working with one another, and in particular, the idea of working in cooperation versus working in solidarity. While internationalist solidarity brigades have been visiting the island since the beginnings of the Revolution, the relationship between Cuban and foreign NGOs is still relatively new, with most of them starting around 1995. The formation of these relationships has been a complex affair. The concept of working in cooperation rather than in solidarity is a concept that has yet to find firm ground among Cuban organisations.

There is an essential difference between solidarity and cooperation. Solidarity involves shared ideology, and cooperation involves shared objectives. Cubans are well used to engaging in solidarity with foreign actors as demonstrated by the country’s impressive history of receiving and sending internationalist missions. For anyone who has an understanding of Cuba’s efforts at solidarity, in many countries all over the world, it would seem ironic that they would be suspicious of foreigners who wished to cooperate with Cuba. On the other hand, there have been so many genuine attempts by USAID and others to subvert the Revolution through civil society that it is understandable that Cubans come by their suspicion honestly.

This confusion between solidarity and cooperation can be related to the normative language of the Revolution, in particular the idea that words have different and sometimes stronger meaning in Cuba than elsewhere. Cooperation is new territory for Cubans as they seek to work with those who may not necessarily share the same ideology but are interested in the same objectives. As a result of Cuba’s experience, many Cuban NGOs view their relationship with foreign NGOs as one of solidarity, while foreign NGOs view their relationship with Cuban NGOs as one of cooperation. The result is often a certain awkwardness or difficulty, as NGOs are used to operating in one way but have to find a new modus operandi in Cuba. Ultimately, despite differing agendas these two entities are working alongside one another and successfully completing projects. Whether their agenda is solidarity or cooperation, Cuban and foreign NGOs are working together and developing methods for carrying out social development projects if often
Most European countries maintain an approach to relations with Cuba based on what the Canadians term ‘constructive engagement.’ This is an interactive approach, as opposed to exclusionary, which allows for dialogue and exchange in commercial and public spheres. Spain has traditionally followed this approach. However, during the Aznar administration Spain actively sought European consensus towards dismantling this approach. More recently, and under the leadership of new Spanish President Zapatero, efforts are being made towards re-establishing constructive engagement with Cuba. In fact, Spain and Cuba are currently holding bilateral discussions in this respect. One way this constructive approach displays itself is through governmental and non-governmental co-operation with the island’s civil society sector in the form of projects with international donor agencies and NGOs. Participation of foreign actors in Cuba’s social development has added a dimension that was largely absent during the Cold War. It is recognised that foreign NGO participation is not entirely conducive to maintaining the status quo in terms of the Revolution’s approach to social development, and that a combination of events has prevailed, necessitating Cuba’s consideration of distinct approaches to social development. This poses certain difficulties for the State and its bureaucracy, as evidenced in the emergence of opposing opinions in the Consejo del Estado (Council of State) and the Comité Central del Partido (Central Committee of the Party).

International donor agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) entered Cuba at the height of the economic crisis. These interventions have brought about a social context where the revolutionary socialist view of civil society comes into close contact with a more European conception. Their participation has contributed to altering the make-up of Cuban civil society. The mechanisms through which international actors have altered civil society will be discussed in this article.

In approximating a study of civil society it becomes obvious that what is really at stake is the model for constructing society itself. It may be a debate about the present social order and our individual role in it, how we interact with one another to design the type of

---

3 This information obtained from a question posed by the author to Ricardo Alarcón, President of the Cuban National Assembly, during a round table discussion held at the XII International Conference on European Studies, Havana, Cuba, 29 September 2004.

society in which we wish to live. In turn, this raises the question of whether societal order is determined or deterministic, and this would depend on perception. Societal order might be viewed as resulting from the preconceived notions of a given society, or it might be viewed as constructed from lessons learned by a given society. Following this latter view, post-1989 changes in Eastern Europe and elsewhere have had the result of reviving debate, whether “in terms of private individuals or of a shared public sphere.” Ultimately, renewed usage of the concept of civil society, by many actors including governments, civil associations, non-governmental organisations, academics, and so on, is leading to closer examination of the idea of civil society and its contemporary meaning. For those who follow events on the island it is obvious that today’s civil society is distinct from that which previously existed. The extent to which the prevailing conception of civil society is a revolutionary socialist one is difficult to answer. What can be said, though, is that revolutionary socialist and European approaches to social development are simultaneously working together, creating a new Cuban model for social development, one in which the state is relinquishing its monopolistic management and allowing for the participation of non-state actors in solving the country’s social development challenges. Foreign NGOs are working in partnership with Cuban NGOs in proposing new solutions and implementing them relatively independent of the state.

2. Traditional Priorities, New Approaches

2.1 The Traditional Actors: Mass Organisations

To judge from certain successful experiences, a guerrilla unit leaves something – or at least someone – behind it...for the purpose of organising what is to become a base of solid support...to explain the new organisation to the populace. This quote illustrates the phenomenon that mass organisations are supposed to occur naturally following a revolution; they are what revolutionaries leave in their wake. Such organisations arise following the success of guerrilla warfare and are made up of the people, fuelled by popular support, and carry on the implementation of the revolutionary cause. In Cuba, the traditional mass organisations, otherwise known as the Big Seven,  

---

7 Cuban mass organisations include: *Comités en Defensa de la Revolución* (CDRs – Committees in Defence of the Revolution), *Central de Trabajadores Cubanos* (CTC – Cuban Workers Union), *Asociación Nacional de Agricultores Pequeños* (ANAP – National Association of Small Cultivators, *Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas* (UJC – Communist Youth Union), *Federación Estudiantil de la Enseñanza Media* (FEEM – Federation of Middle Level Students), *Federación de Mujeres Cubanas*
play this administrative role and “have historically been utilised by the government to convey instructions, report citizens’ opinion, and rally support for government policies.”

Theoretically, the future success of the Revolution rides on the peoples’ involvement in the new society through active participation in mass organisations. This reality has occurred in Cuba as evidenced by the participation of the majority in the undertakings of the Big Seven. For example, membership of the Cuban Federation of Women comprises 85% of all women over the age of fourteen. This gives an impression of not only the size of mass organisations, but also of their voluntary nature. Mobilising the population, the Big Seven are the instruments through which the state has directed the growth of Cuban civil society.

Since 1989 there has been a change in the identity of Cuba’s mass organisations. This change may only have been of a semantic nature, as some of these groups were simply re-labelled as NGOs. In many cases, the bureaucracy-cum-staff remains unchanged. One obvious reason for this change in nomenclature was to acquire funds from foreign NGOs and governments who were encouraging European-style social development in Cuba following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, given their former association with the Central Committee, and inclusion in the Cuban Constitution, it is questionable whether these re-labelled mass organisations and think tanks are now autonomous. For the most part they continue to employ top-down approaches to development, passing the requests of the state down to the people.

There have been examples of mass organisations representing the demands of the people to the state, as in the case of the Central de Trabajadores Cubanos (CTC – Cuban Workers Union). In 1994, the CTC had a significant impact on national policy when it impeded the government from imposing a personal income tax that was to go into effect that year. Trade unions can exert direct influence on high level decision-making, in this case by allowing individuals to organise in defiance of a government decision. This example demonstrates that trade union members sometimes act independently of the state and can be successful when doing so. By responding to their members’ needs, the CTC put itself into the position where it was not merely executing tasks as determined by the

(FMC – Federation of Cuban Women), Federación Estudiantil Universitaria (FEU – Federation of University Students).

Gillian Gunn, “Cuba’s NGOs: Government Puppets or Seeds of Civil Society?” A publication of The Caribbean Project, Center for Latin American Studies (Georgetown University, 1995).
government, rather it was entering into the arena of formulating state policies. This is the proclivity, if not the duty, of civil society, to ensure that the activity of the state creates a social setting that reflects the desires of the general population.

This example might quickly be undermined if one looks at the overall relationship between the state and labour. According to the internationally recognised agency, Human Rights Watch, labour rights continue to be abused in Cuba, this stemming from the reality that there is only one official confederation of state-run unions, namely the CTC. Unofficial independent unions are appearing across the island; however, none has yet achieved legal status. In limiting the role they can exercise, the state effectively excludes these unions from participation in official civil society. Independent labour activists have been known to come into direct confrontation with state security forces, thus frustrating the emergence of labour organisation outside of the confines of state sponsorship. As the above income tax example demonstrates, the mass organisation in charge of labour has acted in defiance of the state, instead deferring to the will of its members. If independent trade unions are permitted to form outside the confines of the CTC, workers will likely experience increased bargaining power vis-à-vis the state.

2.2 The New Actors: NGOs

Debate surrounding the topic of non-governmental participation in the country’s social development was virtually absent from public debate throughout the Cold War. It was not until Castro’s introduction of the topic during a speech at the 1992 Rio Summit that Cubans felt they had been given the signal to not only open public debate on the subject but also engage in non-governmental activity. Over the past decade, there has been provocative discussion within Cuba regarding the appropriateness of NGO participation in a revolutionary culture. Nonetheless, the Cuban government is evidently no closer to solidifying consensus regarding its approach to dealing with NGOs than it was ten years ago, this despite the substantial NGO contribution to the country’s social development. The genesis of NGO participation merits further inquiry as these new actors have arguably acted to alter the conception of civil society on the island.

Adapting to the context of the Special Period, a 1996 public declaration of the Central Committee of Cuba’s Communist Party defined civil society as a ‘socialist’ construct, which included the official mass organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) “that acted within the law, did not attempt to undermine the system and... together with the revolutionary state, pursued the common objective of constructing socialism.” Inherent to the Party’s definition is the contention that civil society represents the collective face of society and works to ensure that the rights of a society are protected. In putting the rights of a society before the individual this definition is in keeping with the conception of society that the Castro government has projected, one of equality and solidarity. What is most striking about this definition is the implicit declaration that civil society is necessarily a ‘socialist’ construct. This betrays a not so subtle warning that the state remains cautious about the active involvement of non-governmental actors in the country’s social development. Thus, while the Party’s definition of civil society now includes NGOs, it still promotes mass organisations as the most appropriate and relevant for Cuba’s socialist system. While recognising that mass organisations continue to be the major actors in Cuban civil society, NGOs have begun to play a significant role and can be used as a mechanism to assess the new context of Cuban civil society.

Cubans’ growing interest in civil society participation may be evidenced by the significant increase in civil society organisations throughout the Special Period. The Ministry of Justice currently has a total of 2,200 legally registered civil associations or NGOs. Theoretically, a list of these organisations is a matter of public record; in reality the Ministry is unwilling to part with this information, ignoring the requests of both Cubans and foreigners. Examining these organisations from a critical perspective demonstrates that the majority are sports, cultural, or social organisations that have little influence outside of their membership. Looking specifically at developmental NGOs, some observers put their number at around 50, while in reality there is probably only half this figure. At the same time, there are other more publicly active groups, such as the

---

10 Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the simultaneous tightening of the US economic blockade of Cuba, Cuban President, Dr. Fidel Castro, declared that the country would go through a “period special in peacetime.” This period has come to be popularly known as the Special Period.


12 Dilla, “The Virtues and Misfortunes of Civil Society” and Gunn, “Cuba’s NGOs: Government Puppets or Seeds of Civil Society?”

13 Dilla, “The Virtues and Misfortunes of Civil Society.”
Masons and Caritas Cubana, that are not legally registered with the Ministry of Justice, yet contribute significantly to the country’s social development.\textsuperscript{14}

When they arrived in the early 1990s foreign NGOs were a novelty. The country was not prepared for this type of actor, with its independent behaviour and different modus operandi. There was a stage of mutual recognition between the state and NGOs, characterized by caution, reservations, and doubts in the face of new proposals and fresh approaches. Working with the grassroots, bottom-up approach to social development continues to be a learning process for the state and its mass organisations, which are more familiar with a top-down approach. From installing rural irrigation systems to conducting seminars on popular education, Cuban-foreign partnerships have experienced some success and continue to grow accustomed to distinct operational methods.

Cuba’s NGO community grew into the mid-1990s, as international developmental organisations, donor agencies, and foreign governments became willing to fund their activities (see Appendix I for list of European NGOs with representatives in Cuba). A simplified view of how NGOs operate in Cuba might be described in the following way: The foreign NGO comes to Cuba and contacts either the state through Minvex (Ministerio para la Inversion Extranjera y Colaboración Económica, Ministry of Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation) or more often a Cuban NGO directly; the foreign NGO cannot engage in any activities of its own, it has to have a Cuban counterpart (partner); the Cuban NGO proposes a project to the foreign NGO; the foreign NGO brings the finance and technical assistance in the form of a field representative; the Cuban NGO offers the people and expertise to carry out the project; the Cuban NGO goes to the state to get what are known as the ‘terms of reference’ for the project; once the state gives the terms of reference, the project can start. The Cuban NGO is supposed to go to Minvex with a project proposal and secured funding from a foreign NGO. Minvex will judge the project and give its criteria, that is, the conditions under which permission for the project will be given. Determining the terms of reference for a project is the state’s way of getting involved in the direction a project will take. Once the project is approved,

the Cuban NGO can interact with all the local actors, including the Consejo Popular, people in the municipality, various government agencies, and so on.\textsuperscript{15}

In theory, this would seem to be a good model. There is central management of scarce resources, which in the case of foreign NGOs means state supervision of foreign cooperation with Cuban NGOs. The state keeps an inventory of, and administers, the use of all available resources, eliminating waste and overlapping of scarce resources. In practice, this means that neither foreign nor Cuban NGOs act independently; the state is always close by, monitoring and managing the use of all resources that come into the country. A particular area of controversy arises in state appropriation of donations addressed to NGOs. Foreign NGOs are more accustomed to acting autonomously and therefore find it difficult when the state dictates how their resources are to be used. The argument is that the revolutionary government is in closer touch with the country’s needs and can therefore divert donations in a more appropriate manner than can NGOs.

The above is a simplification of the way NGOs function in Cuba. In reality, there are exceptions to this model. For example, a major stumbling block is that state approval for a project comes easily for some Cuban NGOs and with more difficulty for others. Some NGOs report waiting only a few weeks to get their terms of reference from the state, others report waiting up to one year without getting their terms of reference. Evidently, the state is cautious in approving certain social development projects, taking all the time necessary to ensure that the project is in keeping with the overall goals of the revolutionary socialist project. Those that contribute in this manner are approved more quickly than those that raise new initiatives.

Foreign NGOs first entered Cuba in response to the economic crisis on the island. At that time, they were embraced by the state. However, now that time has passed and the economic situation is much improved, the continued presence of NGOs is being questioned. To complicate this situation, it appears that there are differing opinions within the state and its bureaucracy on how the relationship between the state and NGOs ought to be approached. There are state functionaries who believe that NGOs ought to be completely controlled, as they are incompatible with socialism. These functionaries believe this because socialism assures everything, there is no place for

\textsuperscript{15} Gray, \textit{Deconstructing Civil Society in a Revolutionary Socialist State}. 
organisations that operate outside of the structures and apparatuses that the state has for answering the peoples’ needs. There are also state functionaries who perceive NGOs as a necessary evil and that the presence of NGOs can potentially answer the needs of the people. These functionaries believe that NGOs have some positive value and can aid in the development and strengthening of socialism. They perceive that the presence of NGOs can potentially answer the short- to medium-term needs of the people, but that NGOs should not remain in the long-term. Then there are state functionaries who believe that socialism and NGOs are compatible and complimentary. They believe that NGOs can help to preserve and to build upon the gains of the Revolution. A lack of consensus within the state regarding the usefulness of NGOs results in the state having no clear policy for their management. Those currently working within Cuban civil society identify this as a major source of aggravation.16

2.3 Factors Shaping the Evolution of Cuban Civil Society
The Cuban government’s continued non-committal attitude towards the country’s new civil society, this mixture of state-directed mass organisations and relatively independent NGOs, results in the reality that the population perceives the state’s message as confusing, mixed, and unclear. Expansion in the number and independence of Cuban NGOs, the entrance of international donor agencies and foreign NGOs, and continued US efforts to infiltrate civil society all contribute to state concerns about the present condition of Cuban civil society. On the one hand, the government urges all citizens to get involved in the shaping of the nation, as the goal of the Party is to achieve a socialist democracy, one capable of increasing both participation and equality of all people in social and political matters.17 This official position encourages all to take a role in the shaping of the nation. On the other hand, following the introduction of the Helms-Burton Act in 1996, some Cuban politicians voiced strong negative opinions regarding civil society. This was most clearly evidenced in an article published in Granma, the national newspaper and organ of the Cuban Communist Party, in which civil society was denounced as a “neoliberal excrescence.”18 To both internal and external observers the national newspaper’s published attack against civil society might be viewed as a clear indication of government intolerance.

16 Gray, Deconstructing Civil Society in a Revolutionary Socialist State.
18 Dilla, “The Virtues and Misfortunes of Civil Society.”
If the increase in the number of NGOs is not indicative of the strength of civil society, it may highlight citizens’ interest in private participation. In the case of Cuba, many ‘NGOs’ are merely extensions of the state and therefore have little decision-making autonomy, while a few NGOs apparently act quite independently, if under strained conditions. Examining the scant literature on contemporary Cuban civil society does not clarify this issue. Looking at the link between an organisation’s financing and its autonomy may prove useful. Cuban developmental NGOs with foreign funding from Canadian, European, and Latin American counterparts have been very successful in their contribution to Cuban society. However, it has been noticed that as Cuban NGOs become more financially autonomous, through the contribution of foreign funding, they tend to experience more frequent confrontations with local authorities. Confrontations increase because the question of what is and what is not considered permissible by the state remains unanswered; the boundaries of acceptable behaviour are unknown. This is a vital point, and one which arises repeatedly. Those currently working within Cuban civil society are unaware of the limits of permissibility and are continuously breaking new ground in trying to discover the yet unwritten regulations regarding the conduct of NGOs.

The situation in Cuba is unusual, as it is a centrally controlled revolutionary socialist state that is attempting to engage in cooperation with foreign organisations and governments. Most of the foreign actors that are offering assistance to Cuba are from the Europe and have grassroots conceptions of civil society participation. They tend to arrive in Cuba with this view and come into direct contact with a state that employs a tightly managed approach to social development. As mentioned previously, the concept of working in cooperation rather than in solidarity is a concept that has yet to find firm ground among Cuban organisations.

The result of this contact has been that contemporary Cuban civil society is based on a mixture of bottom-up and top-down conceptions. While the behaviour and activities of NGOs remains mostly managed by the state, many concessions have been made in order to facilitate the assistance being offered by Europe. Contact and cooperation between foreign NGOs and their Cuban counterparts (Cuban NGOs, mass organisations, the

---

19 Dilla, “The Virtues and Misfortunes of Civil Society.”
state) has naturally created a contextually different environment, one in which the state has somewhat shrunk away from civil society. It is not then surprising to learn that the majority of developmental NGOs in Cuba agree that civil society lies outside of the state, but that there is ambiguity with respect to further defining civil society. This is in keeping with the notion that people themselves define, redefine and utilise concepts in their own social practice; over time concepts evolve according to the people using the concept, the environment it is used in, and so on. Cuban NGOs have embraced and internalised some European practices, mixed these with their own methods, and have come up with unique approaches to resolving the developmental challenges of the Special Period. They believe civil society to be theoretically removed from the state, but are conscious that in Cuba the state maintains management of civil society. That is, there is a recognition that Cuba is still far away from the Marxist ideal of the state fading-away as civil society grows stronger.

While some NGOs are uncomfortable with Cuba's political system, the majority seemingly support the revolutionary project and are pressing for social space where they can contribute to the country's social development. Notwithstanding, NGOs have indicated that they would like to make their contribution outside of the confines of state-directed programmes; specifically, they seek more autonomy in terms of daily operations and in decision-making related to areas of programming.  

Reconciling differences in approach to development is the challenge facing both the state and NGOs. In the early 1990s, the state opened a window of opportunity, inviting change in the approaches to social development. Many Cuban and foreign organisations embraced this opportunity, engaging in a wide variety of joint programmes. The state has now to contend with this change, and will have to do so in a manner consistent with the new conception of Cuban civil society, one that includes non-governmental organisations.

3. Concluding Remarks
In terms of the evolving role of NGOs in Cuba there must be some deregulation of their actions. NGOs must be allowed to operate, but from a realistic perspective they must continue to be directed in terms of areas in which they can work. This is not the ideal option, but because Cuba has traditionally aspired to a top-down approach to social development, NGOs must be managed carefully, while being permitted, little by little, to

---

20 Gray, *Deconstructing Civil Society in a Revolutionary Socialist State.*
work more independently. To allow NGOs complete freedom to operate in any area of social development would invite much social disruption, not to mention facilitate the subversive efforts of the US. If the state does not monitor and manage NGOs there exists the possibility that Cuba’s NGO community as a whole will move towards a concept of civil society that is based more on European rather than on revolutionary socialist conceptions. If this were to happen, NGOs would push for full independence from state management and the state would lose its influence over the approach to social development in the country. Notwithstanding, the state must act prudently in the management of its relationship with NGOs; ideology aside, there is mutual advantage when NGOs and the state work towards shared objectives.

In the absence of open domestic discourse it is difficult to be certain of the true opinions of those working within civil society, however, one generalisation can be proposed: Cubans have a genuine interest in maintaining the achievements of the Revolution, and it increasingly appears that they are voluntarily organising to protect these achievements, as might be witnessed by increased participation in NGOs. To this end, those currently working within civil society may serve a useful purpose in terms of checking government moves to open certain civil society activities. Cubans who grew up in the egalitarian environment brought about by the Revolution are unlikely to favour the social divisions that are resulting from current economic conditions. Cuba’s new civil society might function to support the socialist ideals and basic human rights that the Revolution has guaranteed, while permitting Cubans increased scope to initiate social development activities outside the confines of state structures. It is difficult to predict how future changes will affect Cuban society. Employing a strategy of constructive engagement, the task of European NGOs is to cooperate in shaping the country’s new civil society. Through a process of actively engaging in public debate on issues affecting social development, NGOs are accompanying Cubans with common concerns and have the opportunity to become increasingly unified with the people. The role of the Cuban people, their degree of participation and enthusiasm, will ultimately determine the influence yielded by civil society.

21 Gray, Deconstructing Civil Society in a Revolutionary Socialist State.
While the political and economic systems of Europe and Cuba remain quite different, common objectives in terms of human development are shared, these forming a positive bridge between our societies.

References


Gunn, Gillian, "Cuba's NGOs: Government Puppets or Seeds of Civil Society?" A publication of The Caribbean Project, Center for Latin American Studies (Georgetown University, 1995).


USAID, 'Support for Democratic Transition in Cuba.'

**Interviews**

Alarcón, Ricardo. President of the Cuban National Assembly, round table discussion held at the XII International Conference on European Studies, Havana, Cuba (2004).

Azahares Espinal, Dr. Juan, Research Professor, History Department, University of Havana (2004).


Hernández, Rafael, Temas magazine (2001).


Roca Rivas, José Eugenio, ECHO, European Commission Humanitarian Office (2001).

Rojas, Daisy, Centro Memorial Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (2001).
Appendix I

European NGOs with representatives in Cuba:

**Spain:**
- PTM
- Entrepueblos
- Asociación Navarra Nuevo Futuro
- MPDL
- Médicos del Mundo
- Intermon Oxfam, joint program with Oxfam International

**France:**
- Medicos del Mundo
- Care, represented by Care Canada

**Germany:**
- Agro Accion Alemana

**Netherlands:**
- Novib Oxfam, joint program with Oxfam International

**Italy:**
- GVC
- CISP
- CISS
- MLAL
- CRIC

**Belgium:**
- Handicap Internacional
- Oxfam Solidaridad de Bélgica

**Portugal:**
- OIKOS

**Great Britain:**
- Save the Children
- Oxfam GB, joint program with Oxfam International

**Norway:**
- APN

**European Commission:**
- ECHO, European Commission Humanitarian Office (ceased operations in 2002)